

The Abandoned Church

The church door was open.

I'd made a point to visit these grounds every time I came back to visit family, which admittedly, was fewer and farther between over the years... the door was never open.

The church itself had fallen into disuse before I was born, but had been constructed somewhere in the early seventeenth century. I knew the exact date at some point – perhaps some general knowledge I'd imbibed through school - but it'd fell out my mind to make room for more useful information.

I never knew why it still stood here, though.

Perhaps superstition? The act of digging up and relocating the graves must have been a morbid prospect – times now pay less heed to the fantastical or supernatural, but I imagine back in the eighties when religion had a much stronger hold on thought and actions, people would rather just leave it be than disturb the resting dead.

Maybe it was left because they considered it blasphemy to deconstruct a venue that was built for god. Though, I didn't see much of a difference between active demolition and abandoned dilapidation.

Or, maybe the reason was purely fiscal? Maybe the governing bodies wouldn't siphon any of their budget – our town was hardly a jewel in the country - in to hiring a firm to raze the church, level the ground, agree on what should be erected in its stead, so on, so forth.

All conjecture, of course, but it wasn't my place to dwell on – I just liked to come by here and think. It was surrounded by fields that rolled and melded in to one another so perfectly it almost seemed serendipitous. A lake coursed through the centre of the vast green in a meandering journey, and three metal bridges had been placed equidistant to join both side of the green that the river innocently sundered. This all, as if wishing to be kept a secret, was enshrouded in a bosky wilderness that could be home to anything from mites to the homeless, for all I knew. I'd never venture in to there, neither from want or need.

To get to the church, there was a little path, wide enough for one car, that cut off from the main road (which lead from the train station to the quaint town centre) and entertained a gentle curve before re-joining a smaller road, which in turn led back in to the main one. The path had a canopy of trees towering above it, so even in the day time, it would appear dusk – and I loved it. I always felt like, religious or not aside, that veering off in to this path was like stepping foot in to the past, a different, simpler world. It was wonderfully romantic, and always put my mind at ease. In essence, this place was quite sequestered from the complications of modernity.

I'd walk through, make my way in to the church grounds and find a place to sit; the stairs leading up to the main church entrance, an indent in the church's structure itself (though, it was usually mossy and muddy, or littered with burnouts' trash) or fight my way through the thicket of trees, and place myself on one of the small shrine-like structures, their aesthetic tainted and marred by unceasing seasons.

Once seated, I'd read a new poem from a book of poetry my grandfather gave me before he passed (always kept it, never read it, until the idea came on my first trip back when I found it sitting in my bookshelf), before going on to reading whatever novel had won my fancy. Just a chapter, just an hour. That's all I needed.

It rejuvenated me on a level, that it almost felt as if it was calling me. And I was happy to heed that call; a developed symbiosis.

Though I'd been swimming in my ocean of neutral, half-lazy agnosticism (I believed there must be something, but what the thing may be, I couldn't even hazard a guess) for nigh on a decade, I didn't come to the church for any religious reason – but mostly because I, well, I enjoyed the different world I'd created on the canvas it presented.

There was a newer building, should I have been seeking some enlightenment or forgiveness, in which for some reason, the powers that be – divine or not – had decided to transfer the holiness of this place to. It was smaller, true, and staggeringly less impressive, but it was clearly much cheaper to upkeep, to hire, to heat in the winters.

I found that bewildering. I'd been brought up to believe that god, the very power this church was erected for, had commanded absolute, unquestionable omnipotence. Yet with all that possibility at his behest – with the philanthropic wonders or devastating judgements the bible claimed he had committed – he couldn't extend any of his unlimited might to keep one building safe, warm, steady?

And so, a building that had boasted over three hundred years of joining lovers in holy matrimony, and comforting them in grief decades later when one of them were lost. *Forgotten.*

Welcoming new-borns in to the very faith it existed for, and healing the heartache of any stricken by the cruelties of the world. *Abandoned.*

A wonder that was constructed by our ancestors long gone – who were buried in these very graves, and though their blood ran through us they were as good as strangers... *Betrayed.*

I didn't realise until the door that had transfixed my gaze began to shimmer, but I had been crying as my mind wondered. There was no logic behind the forming of my tears. It was just an open door. But it seemed so tragic, so awful. It was all I could do keep my mind wandering about how many tears that others had shed here – from either despair or delight; enough for an ocean, I'd wager.

The eroding gravestones didn't escape the plummet in to irrelevance. As if tiny static planets dotted about the sun, when it dies, they too, cease to matter. The etched names and messages of love had been nihilistically effaced, so that all that remained were crude dents. The names the stones once displayed had families, somewhere in the haze of history. Emotions, likes, wants, aspirations, and now... a worn-down stone whose only job was to remember them, had forgotten them, too.

The grass, wild and unruly, swayed without resistance in the sporadic zephyrs. It covered the entire grounds, clumping in mounds here and there, and lapped up against the gravestones, the church, and the myriad trees. Light and weedy as it was, I imagined with a stronger gale, it would swish and sway like turbulent waves.

Speaking of the trees, the mighty soldier oaks who accepted the duty of shading the graves from harsh summers had now crept in to their twilight; their leaves bushy and unkempt, and donning a crisp autumn red. They stood guard, in their final years, watching over the saplings and younger trees who would, as is the circle of life for all living things, soon stand in their stead.

Vines of ivy crept up and around the church. Their thick girth sniffing, searching and finding nooks that my eyes could not. They would latch in to it, anchor a support, weave an ostentatious loop before catapulting off, scaling further up the wall like expert climbers, and reaching such a height that they had knit a blanket over the slated roof, permitting only small patches of evidence for what lay beneath. Nature tending to what humanity shrugged off.

The Church, in turn for the patronage of the vines, had permitted them entrance through the stone window frames in which the stained glass had either been carefully removed and reused, or cruelly smashed and shattered. Either way, the vines cared not – they gushed over the base

of the frames, grabbed and pulled from the sides, and ducked under the tops – pouring inside like a bizarre waterfall of tangles.

And so too, did my tears still pour. I felt a profound pain ebbing at my heart, crying for attention, crying for me to recognise it, but I couldn't understand. It didn't make sense to me what was happening.

I found the entire idea of religion had been humbled in one scene. This whole acceptance by millions that religion was, is and always will be the be all and end all... this very sight offered challenge to it. It disclosed the truth that god, gods, any divine being is only powerful and relevant when people decide it to be the case. A montage of images through my travels took precedence, and flitted by so quickly it was difficult for me to process. Ancient temples I'd visited, old shrines, statues that had survived the ages, monuments carefully transported from consecrated grounds to the entrance of museums, war-damaged cathedrals, carvings or halls hewn in to mountains, tales and traditions, soul and superstition half-remembered. These weren't the produce of gods, but the invention of humans.

In the very absence of pious care and reverent footfall... nature, without doubt, would always win out. Should we all die right at this second, the gods that we decided had shaped our world – wonders and sunders – would all die with us. And in our absence, the fields we guarded, the forests we fought back, the parks we tamed, they would grow, encroach, venture forth and assimilate without mercy, but so too, without malice.

I shuddered a deep, sorrowful sob.

These gods. We homed them in our minds, not these manifestations of faith. Our thought was their pantheons. To the gods we were born in to, and the gods we learned about from dead civilisations – they died with them. And the books. And the garments. Commandments. Rules. Pious practices and prayers and parables... All had been wrought and cooled within the furnace of human thought.

As I watched a bird – a crow, if the glimpse I managed was to be believed – fly in to the open window, and settle on the vines before dancing from foot to foot, and hopping within. As I realised this collection of stone and wood had now been claimed by 'lesser creatures' as a home, I felt a change within.

A gust of wind rattled at the bleeding leaves of the elder trees, and they hissed their vehemence to my change, or perhaps they were whispering their agreement. But, as they fell to the floor, and plummeted from the safety of lofty heights to the wilderness below, so too, did the remnants of my wavering faith.

I felt compelled to walk up to the door, and peer within. It lured me in like a silent siren, as if offering to satisfy this void. I wished to bear witness to what had become of such a place. The door itself shifted and blurred, still, through my bleary, teary eyes.

Each step I felt colder – more alone. I'd never experienced such a sensation in my entire experience of life.

I glanced back to see the main road in the distance, with cars drifting up and down like ants in their hill – nary a care in the world for the macro scale. Each caring only about their own minor lives, trivial issues and goals. As if one day they, too, won't grind to dust – the quintessence of us – and be forgotten by all living, and existing. I couldn't return to that now. Not with such a queer loss stemming from the very place that I would come to mourn, or cling on to it.

I climbed the last of the few steps and realised the inside of the door had a series of queer patterns around it. *Vandals*, I assumed. Stars, and circles, triangles and strange symbols that looked as if they could be Norse, or Greek, a form of hieroglyphics or from some strange language.

And all around these markings, as if framed in lacerations, a series of sharp concise scratchings, cut deep in to the rotting wood.

For a second, I thought I felt another gust of wind conjure an army of goose pimples upon my flesh, but I soon realised this chill came from within.

I took a step inside the vestibule and could see all the way up to the sanctuary.

There was no-one giving a sermon, yet a congregation of detritus held attendance in vain anticipation. Weeds had commissioned emissaries to spread their influence wherever possible; crawling through every crack the stone base had conceded over time – ubiquitous, unruly, merciless.

Of the wooden pews that remained, all of them were rotting away in soft white blooms, or had become a banquet for undiscerning termites and woodlice. I felt a sardonic smile curl at my lips, *God in all his providence...*

Most of the pews, like everything else, were completely broken – whether by time or human, it was unclear.

About the old walls, there were some slight, faint discolorations. All were so similar in the likeness that I deduced they must have had fixtures bolted down, which had evidently found patronage elsewhere – one way or another.

Wind burst in from the empty window frames, and worried at my hair seeing as there were no candle flames to flutter and gutter.

An immense loneliness had all but stolen me, and embraced me to the point of constriction. Being the only human to walk within, and even then, feeling like a trespasser. Yet, I walked on, up to the crumbled, chipped and podium; lacking finery and rife with graffiti.

It was odd to look back from this vantage point, to see rubble and dust, planks and splinters, rubbish and faeces. All that rather than divinity and order, perhaps a reflection of the tatters my own faith had been left in.

I could hear the scuttled patter of scrabbling rodent foot and nail on stone, rather than the hushed whispers of a pious audience in waiting.

Unsure as to why, I laid my bare hands on the stone before me, feeling an inherent chill below the layer of dust and dirt. And like a pretender, a tourist to a land I once had a home in, I crossed myself, and I spoke.

“The Lord be with you,” I said.

Strange, there was no echo as would be expected, which I assumed must have been due to my voice fleeing through the windows rather than rebounding about the bare, cavernous wall and arched ceiling. Though, in answer, a series of startled darting took place, from the hidden animals I heard before.

I smiled wanly, in spite of all, and made to step down.

“And with you,” I heard a muffled, subdued chorus respond. A collection of disembodied voices, each barely more than a whisper.

I stood rooted in my advance. Frozen in terror-stricken paralysis. After a godless epoch, my wits returned to me and I tore my eyes from the ground, so as to discern where in this echo of a once great building, the sound could have emanated from – but was offered no explanation. No answer.

I felt an overwhelming sense of dread and anxiety, clawing within and without, trying to steal what was left of my hope.

Everything within was telling me to cease, but I wanted to speak on. To check. But whether I would have or not, the voice had diminished in shock, and only hushed squeaks could be heard. The squawk of a crow broke the spell, and relinquished me from the ethereal, or panicked hold. I fled, sprinting straight down the aisle and feeling the irony of a hundred unseen eyes on me. Whether conjured from my own thought, or evident in devout spectres I was uncertain. To further my panic, I heard concerned mutterings as I sped.

Twice I stumbled in my haste, first kicking a rock I hadn't seen and second, after my footfall landed upon a loose piece of wood that rocked and jolted under my weight. Both times, I heard a cry of panic, a yelp of shock – perhaps in echo to my own, or something more sinister. Otherworldly.

I didn't pause my flight until I was down the stairs, out the grounds past the graves – the image of an army of spirits standing, watching beneath that crimson canopy, judging me in my madness roared at my peripherals, but my tears and desperation blurred and distorted them. I scaled the small wall, and didn't slow my pace until I was on the aforementioned main road.

My muscles were complaining, my lungs stinging, my heart stabbing at me.

I dared a glance back toward the church, and to my surprise, I could see that the door was now closed. Though, it was clear I hadn't paused in my flight for such a consideration.

Though I hadn't quite recovered, though my fear and spontaneous exhaustion had not been remedied by this rest, nor quelled by any logic I grasped for, I heard, like the faint wisps of dusk, the distant and harrowing melody of a church organ.

And thus, I turned to resume my retreat.

I may have lost my religion, but thereon, an afterlife seemed an inescapable doom.

Yet I ran. Godless. Hopeless. Confused.