

The Miracle and the Mission

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“Pedro and Carlos, they won’t do the chapel. I’m sorry boss.”

Krzysztof looked towards the other two laborers. They were sitting away from them, turned away, and he knew that Eddie wasn’t kidding. “Why?”

“You know why.”

Four days earlier:

The phone rang and Krzysztof picked it up.

“Chris! How are you?” boomed a thick, mossy, Irish accent. “You remember that old mission buildin’ the firm bought up in the county last year?”

It was Daniel, the Western Europe Regional Sales Manager.

“Hi Daniel, good to hear from you. Yes, I might’ve heard of it.”

“Well, my friend, we’re going to dice it up aftah’ all. Some boys down in Toledo snatched it up. I need you to ship it to Por-to.”

“That’s not a problem, Daniel.” Krzysztof replied. “My guys working on the Pullman residence down in San Diego. We can start next month.”

“Tonaight, Chris, that’d be best. It’s a tiny, teeny place. I just got off the phone with Jeb, and you know he’s got some Mexicans. They don’t speak English right, so you’ll need to deal with that. They’ll be waitin’ tomorrow morning off the Cabrillo by Palo ‘ave. You think you can make it alright?”

Krzysztof thought about it. “Sure. You can tell Jeb I’ll meet them up there.”

“Knew I could count on you Chris, you’re a good man. When you’re finished with the job, just send it down to Rob’s shop, he’ll freight it over. I’ll e-mail you the manifest and talk to you soon, okay friend?”

“No problem Daniel. Have a good night over there. Good night”

Before the sun rose the following day, Krzysztof had already driven nearly one hundred miles up the coast. He liked this area, he thought to himself, as he saw the sun dimly rising on the horizon. Later in the day, the warm Californian sun would give it a joyous tinge, as though someone had spilled a watery yellow ink across the dry shrubs and flat, trapezoidal trees.

As he approached the intersection, illuminated in artificial orange light, he spotted a rundown tacqueria off to the side of the road, with a gravel parking lot. Whomever these guys were that Jeb had sent his way, there they were. Even in the dark morning light, Krzysztof could easily discern the three Mexicans standing in the lamplight in front of the closed restaurant.

As he pulled off the highway, one of them approached. Krzysztof was happily surprised to hear English.

“You must be Christ-off.” It was a clean English accent.

“Yup. Jeb sent you guys, right?”

“Yes sir. He reached a dusty hand up through Krzysztof’s window, and Krzysztof shook it.

“Eddie. The others don’t speak English. We’ll follow your truck”

Krzysztof watched in the rearview mirror as Eddie and one of the laborers got into the cab of the white pickup. The other man jumped in the back. When he saw their headlights flicker on, he

rumbled back onto the highway and turned away from the coast and headed inland and towards the sun. He had to tilt the visor as a dark ruby of light emerged from over the hills and washed across the empty black coast side of farmland pierced by their rolling trucks.

The drive up to the old Spanish mission was steep and the road was uneven, and Krzysztof could feel the reverberations of each pothole as his equipment was bounced about by the rough terrain. After about ten miles, the road shifted in texture as blocks of old cobblestone intermixed with the dirt. Beside the road, haphazard shards of wood that had once been a fence made an appearance, and behind it, a field of wild oats that kneeled intermittently beneath a warm coastal ocean breeze.

Soon enough, the old Spanish Mission revealed itself from behind a scattering of trees, surrounded by brushes and a wide open mesa that stretched all the way down the hill and to the Pacific. The structure itself, Krzysztof was surprised to see, was in better shape than he'd imagined. And it was indeed small – no more than four or five rooms.

As Krzysztof parked the truck in front of the church, he heard yelling from bed of the truck. Pulling open the window, he saw Eddie laughing with one of the other workers.

“What is it?”

Eddie looked at him surprised. It was clear that the laughter wasn't directed at him, but now Eddie felt the need to explain it. “Pedro thought we were doing a house.”

Krzysztof chuckled but said nothing and got out of the truck. The sky had turned gray and foreboding, but he did not believe it would rain.

While the workers waited, Krzysztof took a walk around the building. The mission itself was L-shaped, nestling a now-empty plaza with a well and a fountain where a stable – now just a broken pile of lumber and crossbeams, stood – the plaza was closed off by an ancient cactus, half-alive and half-dead, that rocked in the ocean air. The buildings walls were made of packed dirt, and the roof was built of a simple triangular wooden scaffolding that would be easy to disassemble. On one end of the building, the missionaries had constructed a simple chimney of a bell tower, where the cast bell still hung, though by its broken angle, Krzysztof would wager that it no longer rang.

Once inside, it became clearer that each arm of the mission served a different purpose. The shorter one existed to serve the missionaries. The first room, at the end of mission, was an entrance, maybe some sort of cloak room. The second had long been cleared out, but by its rectangular shape, Krzysztof guessed it was a dining room. And the third room, with its clean outlines where bolts had been attached to the walls, must have been the sleeping quarters. It looked like the missionaries had hung their beds from the walls. He and his workers could sleep here too, Krzysztof noted, if it became too cold to sleep outside. He preferred sleeping outside, he thought to himself.

The longer leg of the building served God. It was a chapel, and it was also a good several degrees cooler than the rest of the mission. Like the rest of building, it had been gutted by time and passing vagrants, but as Krzysztof entered it, he looked up and his eyes were drawn high above the empty floor where the benches must have been, to an enormous cross hanging on the wall. Though he hadn't been inside a church since he was a young man, his memory proved strong and as he stood in front of the cross, he recalled, for a brief moment, the serenity that must have filled this place when it was inhabited.

By noontime, the equipment from Krzysztof's truck was unpacked and staged in the dining room. Large plastic tables were set against the walls, where Krzysztof laid out his enormous logbook. The project would be simple. The men Jeb had sent had done this before, it turned out, and the simplicity of the structure worked in their favor. Eddie proposed that they start with the shorter portion – roof, walls, and all - first and leave the chapel and the bell tower to the end.

Eddie, Pedro, and Carlos worked quickly. Climbing onto the roof with crowbars, they peeled away the triangular roof piece by piece, marking each slice with a dash of marker that would be dissolved with solvent when the pieces reached Toledo. At first, Krzysztof had to yell for them to be more cautious, and some of the wood broke. When it did, they'd yell to Krzysztof, and he'd do his best to catalog the piece that would need replacing when the mission was re-built. But that happened rarely near the end and by the time the sun had begun to set over the Pacific, the roof had been almost completely removed from the long leg of the mission. With its ancient walls exposed to the orange sky for the first time in centuries, the mission looked like a beached whale, majestic and exposed.

When it was dark, they made a campfire and sat together in a circle in the old courtyard, around a little flame ringed by stones they'd collected from the plaza. Pedro said something to Krzysztof and Eddie translated.

“Do you believe in God, Krzysztof?”

Looking up at Pedro and then Eddie, Krzysztof thought for a moment. He was a straightforward man, but he'd lived long enough to know that certain questions demanded certain answers, and also they had a job to do. “I did once, long ago,” he replied, speaking slowly and hearing his voice echo in Spanish as Eddie translated it over the flames. “My wife was suffering from depression when we moved to this country, and she got sick and she died.” Krzysztof watched as Pedro's eyes widened as he Eddie reached that part of the story. “We got married in a Church, because her family was very Catholic. I didn't believe then. But when she died, for a short time, I was very sad and I thought I believed in God.”

Out in the distance, Krzysztof could hear the waves washing onto the shore as he waited for Eddie's voice to die down. He didn't like the confused, apologetic look that people gave him

when he told this story, so he'd grown used to not looking at them when he finished. Just staring at the distance.

Pedro said nothing for a long time. Soon his gaze joined Krzysztof as the four of them all looked onto darkened horizon.

In broken English, Carlos spoke up for the first time. "She is with God."

"I know," Krzysztof said quickly, turning back to him and nodding.

Pedro said something to Carlos, and Carlos murmured something back.

Loudly, Eddie spoke up.

"What are we doing tomorrow, boss?"

"Tomorrow we slice."

Early the next day, Eddie, and Pedro helped Krzysztof unpack the plastic cases containing the buzzsaws, while Carlos continued working on the roof. Compared to some of the other slicing work he'd done that year, Krzysztof knew immediately that this one would be easy. The walls were built of packed mud, of a dark earthy hue that matched the surrounding landscape and almost certainly once belonged to it.

The three men stood and watched, the generator rumbling behind them, as Eddie pulled awake the buzzsaw and applied it to the first stretch of wall. They watched the mud parted like butter, and then Eddie and the Mexicans stepped back as Krzysztof walked up the incision and looked at it carefully. It was the cleanest of cuts. Minimal abrasion around the edges, and what damage there was could easily be concealed with some patchwork on the surrounding surface. It would be even easier than Krzysztof had planned.

While Carlos worked on the remnants of the roof that were still hanging over the living quarters, Eddie and Pedro cut and disassembled, piece by piece, the East and then the West-facing walls. Once each piece was removed, Krzysztof handled it, marking it with its row and location and jotting quick markings on each exposed surface that would be matched to its neighboring blocks.

The hours passed quickly. As they did, Krzysztof absent-mindedly wondered about his counterpart in Spain – the man who would be reading these letters and numbers and putting it all together. He wondered what that individual looked like, where he lived. He wondered if he was married. If he was happy.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wished the man well. He wished also that the man could see him – his life, this place he was working. He thought of Spain.

Ever since she died, I've been like this, he thought to himself. So uselessly nostalgic. Stop pretending to be a saint.

Again they were sitting around the campfire. Behind Pedro, illuminated by the light gray remnants of the sunset, Krzysztof noted how much they'd done. Just a small elbow of work remained of the long leg of the mission; only the chapel remained. Where once had been the dining and sleeping quarters, only a footprint of stone foundation stood. In certain projects, even that would be dug up. That took more time. This time the manifest asked only for the walls and the ceiling, so it would be easy.

It was Carlos who spoke up first this time. He didn't even try to speak in English – the words tumbled out in Spanish and as soon as he stopped talking, Eddie looked up to see that Carlos was speaking to Krzysztof, and translated.

“He's wondering if you ever heard of the Saint Mary's miracle in Tenochtitlan.”

Krzysztof looked at Carlos, and saw the earnestness in his eyes. “No señor,” he told him.

Carlos spoke quickly and with a disarming earnestness. Krzysztof had heard these stories before, but he was never prepared for that raw conviction that always accompanied them. The certainty with which people wanted to not just believe a story themselves, but have *him* believe as well.

Carlos spoke so frantically that Eddie could barely translate, and by the time he did, Krzysztof could sense that Eddie knew that Krzysztof was not interested in the full story. But he summed up the story nonetheless, and he and Krzysztof knew it was being summed up for Carlos.

“He says, that if you knew this story, you would believe, like he does. There is a poncho near Mexico City that you can see if you visit. It's made of cactus but it's been there 500 years and it's in one piece. The Virgin Mary appeared on it. There is no way to explain that other than God”

Krzysztof looked up at him. “That's incredible” he feigned.

“Es increíble,” Eddie translated.

But somehow the response agitated Carlos. “No, *es imposible*.” He replied, and then, in translation, “how can you not believe in God, when there are so many miracles in the world?” He was shaking with excitement.

Pedro, who had been silent the whole time, put his hands on Carlos' knee to calm him down. Krzysztof caught his eye and saw the other worker was frightened. *He thinks I'm going to fire them for this.*

So Krzysztof smiled at Carlos, to let him know it was okay. “It's a wonder also that I don't see any of these miracles.”

Krzysztof's gentility inspired some sort of bravery in Pedro, and now he spoke up.

“He says that it's because you come from a different place in your life. If you grew up in Mexico, you would think differently.” Eddie translated.

“He's probably right. And If I were in India, I'd be a Hindu.” Krzysztof nodded to let Eddie translate.

But Pedro understood without needing Eddie's translation, but Eddie helped translate when he responded "And because you are in California, you don't believe in God."

A fatigue came over Krzysztof. It had been a long day, and he was surprised that his companions still had energy for metaphysics. "Maybe I'll see a miracle tomorrow" he murmured. Eddie and Pedro chuckled. Pedro translated for Carlos but Carlos sat silently before the fire, his jaw resting against his face.

By noon the next day, what remained of the short end of the mission had been cut up and arranged in four layers. Krzysztof knew that Rob and his men would be coming on the weekend to cart it down to the warehouse.

As the four of them sat eating beneath the cyprus trees, Eddie surprised Krzysztof.

"They won't do the chapel."

"Excuse me?" Krzysztof wiped the crumbs from his mouth.

"Pedro and Carlos, they won't do the chapel. I'm sorry boss."

Krzysztof looked towards the other two laborers. They were sitting away from them, turned away, and he knew that Eddie wasn't kidding. "Why?"

"You know why."

Eddie tone rang with finality and Krzysztof knew that if this even began as an argument, it was now merely a statement of fact. His workers were leaving.

"Since when did you –" Krzysztof stopped and shook his head. It didn't matter. The firm wouldn't be hiring them again, so it didn't matter what they replied. They were bad workers. Bad workers. He would need new people. He dreaded antagonism in general and was suddenly annoyed at the thought of having to wait while these people packed up their tools and left. They hadn't been friends but there had been the camaraderie that always develops when working beside someone on a difficult task, and it bothered him that now it would become what it was.

A half-empty pack of cigarettes kept Krzysztof company as he sat in the truck and stood staring at the overcast ocean while the three laborers packed up their tools. Eddie was apologetic throughout; for a moment, Krzysztof even considered asking him to stay as foreman for whomever Daniel sent next. But in context, there conversations about God seemed unpleasant, even if it wasn't Eddie's doing. Krzysztof now relished the idea of starting from scratch. Keeping it professional. No God. Just sweat, work, and then money at the end.

Out of the corner of his eye, Krzysztof watched the workers throw the last duffel into the pickup. He walked back to the road and the half-gone mission.

"I'm sorry boss" Eddie said, for the fifth or sixth time, and reached out his hand.

Krzysztof shook it without conviction. Pulling the envelope from his back pocket, he counted the bills and placed them in Eddie's outstretched hand. Then he gave the three men a half wave, and waited by the road as they boarded their pickup again, made a five point u-turn, and headed back down the dusty path.

Krzysztof waited for several moments before walking back to his truck. Starting the engine, he reached in between the seats and pulled the car phone out by its cord.

Moments later:

"Daniel?"

"Chris! What's going on owwver there? Done already?"

"No. I'm going to need a new crew, Daniel."

And then, the waiting as they arrived.

The cigarettes were the first to go, and then the sun set. As darkness came, Krzysztof suddenly became more aware of his surroundings. The distant waves, a quiet backdrop during the day, now seemed take over, getting louder and louder in time, it seemed, with the setting sun, until it felt like they were crashing just beyond where the light ended.

And though the breeze proved warm that evening, it gradually gave way to a chill that began seeping from the cold earth. Krzysztof considered starting a fire, but his back hurt and he didn't want to lean down to collect the branches. Eddie and his crew had been the ones who'd put it together earlier, and the thought of doing it himself made Krzysztof tired.

As he walked through the empty shadow of what had previously been the mission, he was surprised to find that the chapel, which had previously proved cooler than the surrounding structure, had now managed to retain some of the day's warmth. It positively radiated with warmth.

Krzysztof told himself that this was the reason that he would stay here tonight. Indeed, opening to the doors to the chapel and walking inside, he tried to convince himself it was so. But as he did, he realized that wasn't exactly true.

The interaction with the three men had left him with a certain frustration, which ached like an unreachable itch. The work was delayed. His paycheck was delayed. His life was delayed, because of their stupid disagreement about God.

He cursed at them. And then he went to and dragged the scraping, metal bed cot into the chapel.

Though the doors at the foot of the chapel had once been fully inside the mission, they were built of enormous wooden slabs that could easily have withstood the elements if the door faced outside, just as it now did in the half-deconstructed mission. As they shut behind Krzysztof with a bang, the sudden onset of complete darkness caught him by surprise; only with time did the ghostly sapphire light emanating through the oily paper windows return. The heaviness of the building, and its earthly walls, gave Krzysztof the distinct impression of being underground, buried.

As he lay down on his cot, though, he soon realized that the fatigue that had been slowly trailing him all day was nowhere to be found. Sitting upright and resting his back against the wall, he waited.

And waited.

He wasn't sure what he was waiting for. Something he could not name. But he wanted to know.

Just as the butcher doesn't name the animals he butchers, Krzysztof never truly admired the buildings he was sent to deconstruct. Yet now, alone in the empty space, he noticed how the missionaries had shaped the ceiling to resemble the churches they must have remembered from their own youth. Though it was dark, he could see a shape of shadows form beneath the cross, where some sort of structure must have stood. He wondered if his counterpart in Toledo would order the new part, maybe have it custom made. Would he have to be religious to order a new – a new what? He wasn't sure it was called. Just that it was made of gold.

Such thoughts ran through Krzysztof's mind as he fell asleep for the first but not last time.

When Krzysztof was young, his grandfather told him stories taken from the Bible; now, as he dreamt, half-formed stories came to him, a medley of religions and thoughts. There was Jesus, a muscled Hercules, knocking down the columns of a temple with a slight nudge. As punishment, he was ordered to walk up a tall hill, and as Krzysztof looked at the journey from the bushes, he saw the hill was his hill – the chapel. A sense of dread filled him. He's dead. He's dead here somewhere, wandering about, this Greek Jesus.

Krzysztof awoke shaking, but only from the cold. Something was shining in his eyes like a spotlight and he cleaned the sleep from his eyes, he saw a pale white orb in the waxy windows. The moon. Somewhere, his mind calculated that it must be so early in the night, and he realized he was cold. The heat of the clay had dissipated through the windows, and outside, the waves were louder than he had remembered. He wrapped the blanket tightly around himself, turned away from the moon, and tried to balance his head on the stuffed knapsack under his head.

This time, the sleep was dreamless. And for two hours, he slept.

But then the temperature fell lower and he woke up. The ocean had grown quiet but the air had grown frigid and he realized he was lying in a draft that had formed between the windows,

rustling the faux windowpanes. Shivering as his bare feet touched the stone floor ground, he pulled the cot towards the front of the chapel, and then collapsed onto it, wrapping himself in the blanket.

But the exercise of moving the cot had stirred him awake, and his eyes had grown adjusted to the darkness. His gaze was drawn again towards the cross, illuminated for a moment in the moonlight beaming from the bell tower. There, he saw something that not seen, even during the day. The cross was not as he had thought. In the moonlight, he noticed an outline on it, as though someone had taken a chip of chalk and sketched out the figure of a man on it.

The cross was not intact. Thieves must have stolen the figure on it way back when. Perhaps it had been valuable, he thought to himself.

Then he turned towards the wall. His head hurt from the cold. He wanted to sun to rise. So his mind turned, as it did in moments of sadness, to memories.

“They want everything to be symbolic” she whispered.

His wife was lying against his arm, her head pressed against his chest, twirling her finger in a light patch of hair growing from it. She was a beautiful, tall, tanned woman.

She had always been the skeptical one, and in that way, the wise one. He wondered – but never said out loud – whether all that skepticism had led to her depression, and to her loneliness. The fact remained, though, that he had merely stopped going to Church out of laziness; she had stopped out of principle. In this memory as in so many of memories, she was convincing him, and he was becoming convinced – at first, for her, then, by her.

He spoke back, agreeing. “The fact that everything is symbolic is evidence that it’s not true. If it were true, some things would just be, but in the Bible, it’s just one symbol after another. What are the odds of that.”

He paused to wait to see if she would agree with his agreement, but she was quiet. “That’s not really what I meant” she whispered.

He squeezed her with his arm, both tenderly and apologetically. “What did you mean?” he whispered.

“The Bible has all these moments that are supposed to be important, like when they throw the money at Judas, or how many times Jesus falls. And you read that Sunday school and it’s important and you discuss it, but then you close the book and difference does it make? It’s just supposed to sound important.”

Krzysztof nodded in such a way that she could feel his chin pressing against her hair in agreement. “Absolutely.”

“It’s just like all bad literature. It throws a bunch of stuff at you that hoity-toity and important sounding but then you put it down and realize none of it really affects you. ”

“Absolutely,” he echoed.

“I love you Krzysztof.”

“I love you Maria.”

He whispered the words to himself as he fell asleep.

When he woke again, the sun had finally risen, but in the dark chapel, he could only see shadows of orange light inching their way past the windowsills. The ocean too had awoken, sending wet ocean breezes out past the window. He could see the early morning rays illuminating the morning mist floating in the air.

And yet, somehow – he sensed disappointment. Every muscle ached; its utter emptiness impressed even him. The cross, barren and desecrated, hanging on the wall like a loose nail with no frame on it.

It was a room. He, Krzysztof, was right. Carlos was wrong. This was not the house of God.

It was a room adorned with two pieces of wood.

His legs burned from the lack of sleep. As he arose, he could feel the air cutting against his skin, and he felt small and cold. Draping his coat over his frame and watching his breathe evaporate into the air, he walked to the door, and pushed it open.

A thick curtain of light rushed over him as he stepped outside and felt the sunlight bathe his skin and thick stench of barnacles and charcoal waft through the air. The dark stone of the chapel disappeared; now, as he walked forth, he could feel the dirt squirm against his feet. And he looked up.

On the horizon, the ocean shone like an undulating sheet of silver in the sunlight, as its waves passed over the sand like oil on a pan. They left behind jagged wet streaks that shone like veins of golden ore, shining blindingly underneath the morning sun.

Instinctively, Krzysztof walked around the bluffs overlooking the ocean, one hand blocking the sun as it rose above the flat Pacific. All around him, he began to see things he’d never seen before; little oceanside plants, standing tall like green crystals cast hundreds of individual shadows that swamped around him like cartoon creatures. The triangle of a bird’s shadow raced across them as it flew toward the horizon.

To his left and to his right, he saw the empty hills extending like infinity into the horizon. Savannahs of yellow grasses buoyed atop those cliffs, standing gleefully against the ocean breeze. Lone trees here and there looked expectantly down at the ocean.

When he reached the edge of the sheer cliff. Here, the ocean became louder than the sun; its golden form stretched a long oval of sunlight over the waves. There was a small tree, gripping the dry ground tightly by its roots.

Krzysztof sat down underneath and looked out at the ocean.

And sat.

And sat.

And he saw the world around him, imbued with light.

And finally, he smiled, as the sun lulled him to sleep.

“I love you Maria.”

When Krzysztof awoke again beneath the tree, the sun had reached high noon and hung in the center of the sky like a big clock. As his eyes opened, he heard repeated the booming British voice that had earlier woken him.

Yes, I think that’s him, tight there, under that tree. Yes, there he is. Is that you, Krzysztof?”

Krzysztof looked up and saw one man standing before him beside the tree and the other trailing behind him carrying a box of tools.

“Daniel sent us” the foreman said. “Looks like your old guys did most of the work already. We’ll finish the job though. My name’s Jeff”

“And I’m Earl.”

“We’re your assistants. Let’s get her done, shall we?”

Krzysztof watched as the workers unpacked their saws and placed their ladders against the dark, cold chapel. Piece by piece, they disassembled the old, cold bell tower, then the shingles on the roof, and finally, the brick walls. When nighttime came, they didn’t speak to him. Each man unfurled a small olive tent fit for one man, set it on opposite sides of their grey truck, and went to sleep. When Krzysztof awoke, they would already be cooking beans for the day.

From the moment the assistants arrived, the sunlight Krzysztof saw that morning began to dissipate into a cloudy, overcast, mirage. By the second day, the sun was gone, and the chapel had been disassembled, its components stacked in a neat pile on the wooden stands by the side of the road. All the while, Krzysztof spent hours staring out at the sunlit ocean.

On the final day they packed and Krzysztof shifted his truck into gear, following them down the mesa. As he went, it did not even cross his mind to look back at the lonely stone footprint where, for three hundred years, the old mission had stood.

One year later Krzysztof was lying in bed beside his fiancé, stroking her raven hair and watching the wrinkles that her mouth made as she smiled.

“Krzysztof?”

“Hmm?” he replied.

“Where will we do it?”

He thought for a short while. “I want what you want.”

He could feel her hesitating, sensing her consternation. “I want to do it at a Church, but is that okay? I know you don’t believe.”

“Of course,” he said, pulling her tight.

“So easy?”

“Yes.” He smiled.

She propped herself up on her elbows and looked down at him quizzically.

“I guess there is one thing” he said, looking up at her.

“And what’s that?”

“Big stained glass windows.”

“Big windows?” she repeated.

“Yes,” he whispered up at her. “I just want to see the sun.”