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Eng402A

Roach-Orduna

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East of Omelas

Life was strange for young Charlie Klein. And that alone was strange, considering nothing at all in his life of nineteen years had changed. He still lived in the same three-bedroom, mid-century modern house he had his whole life, in the same suburb of Charleston, West Virginia, with the same bowl cut to his auburn hair, wearing the same graphic t-shirts and loose-fit Levi's, with the same parents, attending the same Pentecostal church. No, what was strange for Charlie was nothing so conveniently tangible as a shift in paradigm. And that was the problem, a lack of tangibility. His once assertive and stalwart Christian faith, largely based on tradition and familial bond, had become increasingly difficult to access.

He sat alone at his desk in his increasingly small room on a Thursday evening, staring at a YouTube video without watching it, and, with glazed eyes and a slight frown, he realized that he hadn't even needed to access his faith at all until the past Sunday. Until then he had assumed it was right beside him, sheltering his mind and soul with affirmation. But four days ago, while at service, he noticed that when he lifted his voice join the hymns, his spirit didn't lift with it. He didn't experience that wonderful lack of shame that comes with professing faith among the faithful. That wonderful release of tension in the muscles and the mind that comes with letting go of responsibility for existence and morality, giving them over to something he would never actually have to engage with.

Before that day he would have never described his experiences at church so clinically, so cynically, but before that day the wonderful feelings found there gave him no reason to do so. He felt differently that day.

Instead he had felt nothing. Nothing in particular, other than the quiet, humming, bored tension of everyday existence. This noticeable absence made Charlie's brow twitch in consternation and his singing smile had become brittle.

And, truth be told, so had his psyche.

Though brittle it was, there was no more stress put on it – his day-to-day life being painfully easy and monotonous as a young, white, middle-class man - so it remained precariously intact. That was the strangest thing of all. The absence had not given way or gotten worse, it had simply remained in him. He was honestly surprised that there was no outrage, no despair, no grief, noting to punctuate this evaporation of faith

That's how it felt. His faith had not been broken, shattered or lost. He had not rejected the doctrines of his congregation due to some unforgivable tragedy a loving God should never allow. He had never rejected his faith at all. It simply was no longer there, because he hadn't checked to make sure it really was. Something he thought was a fundamental part of him, like empathy, had wilted like an unattended house plant without him even noticing. He felt naked and hollow without it, like he had failed to maintain something vital.

Charlie's happy method of maintaining his faith over his formative years had been to glance at it every few years, the reassuring smiles and sermons of those around him, as well as a yearly three-month youth camp, attesting that it was alive and well, nurturing his confidence in the axiom. He had never read the bible, but this didn't bother him.

Or at least it didn't used to. Once in high school, Charlie had stopped going to the camp after his mother lost her job as an instructional assistant at the local elementary school, being a victim of the sweep of layoffs in 2007. Belts were tightened and corners were cut, and pretty soon the weekly trips to Friday church potlucks were forgone in order to save on gas to make it to the Sunday service. Charlie found himself surrounded by his faith less and less. He began to consider his faith less and less. He began to glance at his faith less and less until he hadn't seen it in years.

He hadn't realized any of this until last Sunday, and that's why he sat at his desk, with his eyes glazed over watching nothing. But what made him frown was what he realized there and then. His faith was gone. But he wanted it back. Desperately. How couldn't he? It had been one of the cornerstones of his brief existence, around it was built his family, his circle of friends, and of course, his private Christian education.

So, there he sat, defending his religion to himself in his own mind. Claiming that what is not possible is metaphorical and what is not explained is ineffable, all the while suffering the opposing tension in the neck that comes with lying to oneself.

He was still feeling this way, lost in introspection, when came a soft rapping on his open door. He turned his head sharply to see his mother standing there. He hadn't even heard her approach. "Hey," she greeted happily, smiling brightly. It seemed to Charlie like that smile was always lingering behind her expressions, her lips always curled slightly up, appropriate and self-aware or not. Hardly anything could ever tarnish her mood. "Oh. Hey," he mumbled distractedly. "Are you all set? Got your passport?" she asked excitedly. His mother's blissful attitude towards her religion was what had piqued Charlie's interest in Christianity and sustained it through years of repetitive Sunday school classes. It failed to enchant him this time.

Charlie's family had been one of several from the church to volunteer for the biennial mission. This time they planned to take their sermons, as well as more practical forms of aid, to Nigeria.

Charlie turned with the same blank stare to the modest luggage he had gathered and piled on his bed, and at length responded to his mother with a weak “Yeah.” “Great!” his mother replied briskly. “We're all set to go then, come on downstairs.” Charlie sighed quietly before collecting his luggage and heading downstairs, then out to the family's truck in the driveway. He was greeted promptly by his father, who was finishing loading the bed with their bags when he asked Charlie, “So, are you ready?” He wasn't referring to travel preparations. This was Charlie's first mission, and his father's devotion to the cause of their journey was not as gleeful as his mother's. The question came unsmiling, and his father's gaze did not move from Charlie as he waited for an answer. His father was a serious man, and he took nothing more serious than his faith.

Charlie thought briefly about being honest with the man. He considered, just for a moment, telling him that he didn't know if he was ready, for this or for anything he feared was coming. But his father's dead, uncompromising scrutiny made him think differently. He met his father's stare and put on a smile that made the muscles in his cheeks feel like strings hoisting a puppet too heavy for them. “Absolutely,” he declared with as little hesitation as possible. His father looked on silently for a moment before ratifying the declaration to himself with a single nod. “Good,” he said, turning to open the driver's side door. “We go to do the Lord's work,” he said matter-of-factly. “We have to of one mind, one heart.” He had gotten in the truck by then and waited patiently for his wife and son to do the same.

Most of Charlie's time spent traveling to Lagos was spent staring out of windows, trying to relax and, failing that, ignore the dull ache in his neck, first during the car ride to the airport, then on the plane, and finally on the bus in Lagos. Every time he looked over to see his parents in the seats next to him, going over pamphlets they'd been given to distribute, or when they tapped him arm to go over the basics of answering any theological questions the people might have, the tension got worse, and by the time they had landed, met up with the rest of the mission, and were on a bus headed for their hotel, all of the muscles between his chin and his clavicles were aching.

The sun was setting, and they were still about 20 minutes from the hotel when pastor Tom got up between the aisles to speak. "Alright everyone," he began. His voice rose, calm and level, to a volume that was not offensive, to that sound between speaking and shouting that demands attention. The pitch of a vocational orator. "We'll be at the hotel in about fifteen minutes, we'll get a good night's rest and then head out to the village at eight tomorrow, after breakfast." He wore a smile of such genuine and hopeful excitement, the way it creased his eyes and colored his cheeks made Charlie furrow his brow and look away. That's when something resembling guilt first gripped him. It was an unexpected thing. Charlie couldn't say exactly why he felt it, but there was an unmistakable cold lump in his chest that seemed to suck up any pride he still felt in charitable work like light into a black hole. The mystery of it only adding to his ongoing anxiety. These people were there because they wanted to be. Because they felt compelled to be. He was no longer sure he could say the same, and now his head felt as taught as his neck at this unwelcome admission.

After six fitful hours of sleep and a breakfast of cold eggs and stale pastries, Charlie walked out to the hotel parking and bus being loaded up for the day's mission. Cardboard boxes the size of AC units with labels that read "protein powder" or "wheat flower" or simply "dried/canned rations" were thrown into the large storage areas beneath the seats alongside coolers of generic

bottled water. Charlie strode over to help, hoping that lending some real assistance might take his mind off his own thoughts for a moment.

He noticed that the other members of the mission around the bus already had their new, clean King James bibles in hand, bound in real leather, his father had told him, pressed against Pentecostal pamphlets. Excited smiles were already breaking out across their faces. Someone handed a bible and a few pamphlets to Charlie, and he couldn't help but think they felt heavier than they should have. The thought gave him stiff pause, and he decided not to consider it further. It made the cold lump feel a little colder.

Most of the parishioners, Charlie's parents among them, filed onto the bus chatting politely with one another, going over which bible verses to use during one-on-ones with the locals after the sermon, and deciding which rations to distribute after that was done. Charlie was not among them. Charlie was silent as he got onto the bus and remained so the entire one hour trip out to the village of Ajegunle, and did so almost motionlessly, trying to avoid aggravating his strained muscles, until about twenty minutes in, he looked down at the expensive-looking tome in his lap. He had never read it. And this had never bothered him. He wasn't sure if it did now, but something he didn't want to honestly entertain compelled him to open the book all the same.

At first, Charlie couldn't decide where to start, flipping idly through the pages and skimming a passage or two. He had already heard the epic tales of fame; the Garden and the Flood, the Desert and the Lions, the Prophets and the Virgin, and had been made to understand his church's interpretations of the allegories. But he wanted to delve into heart of the text and really glean it's fundamental message. He recalled a service back home from about two month ago, during which pastor Tom had talked about the importance of practical instruction found in the bible as well as

its metaphysical ideas. Charlie flicked his eyebrows once as a discreet shrug and went to the contents to find the New Testament, Christian as he was. Charlie found a few passages about doubt, not knowing he was looking for them until his eyes lingered on the word.

“But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” James 1:6.

“Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him.” Matthew 21:21.

“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?”: Luke 24:38.

After about twenty minutes, Charlie gently closed the book, set it in his lap, and continued looking out the window. Despite all of the happy declarations of the apostles, Charlie felt no inclination to speak about them to the happy people on the bus around him. He wasn't sure why. He rubbed the back of his neck as he sat in silence.

They arrived at Ajegunle around 9:30 in the morning, but the oppressive heat was already beginning to claim the group's energy, so they set up makeshift pews with haste. They consisted mostly of dragged-over benches and folding chairs, and soon, the small concrete village square they'd been allotted was set. The locals began to file in from the surrounding tenements, apparently having been given word of the mission beforehand. They looked just as sweaty and uncomfortable as the Pentecostals, and Charlie couldn't help but notice that their eyes went straight to the open coolers of bottled water, not to the smiling white faces of the missionaries as they gave enthusiastic greetings. Their smiles were sometimes returned, but usually the arriving attendees just gave a nod or ignored them. The flat, somewhat impatient expressions of the locals as they looked around bothered Charlie, but he didn't mention it to anyone.

After about 20 minutes, it became apparent that no more Ajegunlites were forthcoming, and so pastor Tom took his place in front of the worn seats, standing straight and firm, his hands on his pelvis, wearing the same smile he wore at the church doors every Sunday in Charleston. After waiting a few patient moments for the murmur of the crowd to quiet, he began his sermon.

He spoke of many things. He spoke of the love and comfort that comes with relying on an omnipotent, benevolent being. He spoke of the importance of community, like that of his own church or the village of Ajegunle, and how the strength to be found within can overcome any hardship. And he did speak of hardship. Of the daily struggles of living faced by such an impoverished people, of the emotional burden placed on them by such an existence and when he did, Charlie thought, unbidden, of the three-story house pastor Tom owned in his gated community. He recalled the times he'd been over there for Christmas parties with the rest of the church, admiring the polished stone floors and the pieces of original art, and for a reason he couldn't quite place this made him feel uncomfortable sitting beside the people of Ajegunle in the pews, as he glanced neutrally between pastor Tom to the containers of supplies sat behind him. Charlie reached around and gently rubbed the back of his neck, gritting his teeth behind closed lips.

Pastor Tom went on speaking about struggle, both practical and emotional, until he came to the crux of his message. "And that is why faith, brothers and sisters, is the Lord's greatest gift. Through the hungry, cold nights full of fear and doubt, your faith will feed your soul and warm your heart. It will make the hardest struggles the most rewarding and gives miserable existence true meaning. So remember, even if you've lost everything else, keep the faith. *Keep. The. Faith.*" The force with which he enunciated the last three words made each feel like a knife thrust into Charlie's forehead, and the unrelenting strain within him reached such a point that his ears rang for a moment, and the half-hearted applause of the attendants went unheard to him.

Charlie sat staring at the back of the chair in front of him as the locals formed a line for provisions and the missionaries gathered in small groups to get ready to go and witness to people door-to-door. He didn't hear his parents approach and only looked up when he heard his mother's soft inquiry. "You ready?" she asked tentatively. She had been glancing tentatively at Charlie since she saw him with his head in his hands on the plane, and had been more careful around him. Charlie knew she knew something was up with him, and he also knew that there was no way she'd be imagining what it actually was. Her concern would never be resolved, Charlie knew, and that saddened him. His father's face was as stern as ever. "It's time to go," he stated flatly. With bibles tucked under arms, pamphlets in hand, and Charlie lugging a cooler full of food, they strode out of the small concrete square and into the low maze of plywood and sheet metal housing and were soon out of sight in its winding porches and doorways.

The first person they approached was a young woman by the name of Aisha. She'd stayed home during the service, and that was part of the reason they met. They'd knocked softly on the bare metal door of her modest house, sharing walls with others just like it, and she'd opened the door with a smile of white teeth contrasting with her ebony skin. They gave greetings, the group of petitioners explained why they were there, and Aisha ushered them in with a polite wave of her hand. The first thing Charlie noticed was the smell. It wasn't at all the sour scent of social struggle and human neglect that he'd been expecting. Instead he was treated to the smell of cooked melon and caramelized onion. He looked over to see a pot of something boiling away on a rusty gas stove in the back-left corner of the two-room dwelling, next to a dented refrigerator. He learned later that it was a Nigerian dish called Egusi, a thick soup made with minced meats, fresh produce and spices. It reminded him of gumbo.

Charlie looked down at the cooler of food he still held awkwardly in both hands. "We uh, we're disturbing food to the community..." he trailed off, taking out the four prewrapped

sandwiches and four bottles of water that had been allotted to each household. He handed them to Aisha. "...And to bring the good news," declared his father emphatically, with annoyance subtle enough for only Charlie to detect. "This is wonderful, thank you so much," said Aisha, still smiling. She walked over the fridge and placed everything inside, near the back. While it was open, Charlie saw a small amount of cubed beef piled next to salts and seasonings, as well as what looked like a bag of chicken limbs, with the multihued blurs of produce filling the crispers below. Charlie couldn't help but wonder if the attendants of the sermon had just had a bad month. He looked down at the cooler they'd brought with a curled lip before Aisha stood before them again.

His father went first, as he almost always did, in proselytizing their creed. He spoke passionately and forcefully, yet calmly also, in the of tone of someone who has accepted that there can be no other truth besides that which they profess as he explicated the undeniable truth of his doctrine. Lots of dramatic pauses, emphatic inflection, and a cadence that could easily be likened to a monastic chant. His mother next, speaking at length on the compassion and forgiveness in which she so loved to envelope herself, talking about the emotional benefits of a faithful life with child-like reverence in her voice. Then it was Charlie's turn. He'd been told to speak about what makes his Christianity so important to him, what it really means to him and what it's done for him. So, he talked about the bonds of community, the strength and support to be drawn from it, and the knot of nerves that had overtaken his body over the past few days seemed to loosen as he was finally allowed to be honest. That is, until theistic language could no longer be circumvented.

"Of course, this community would not be possible without, uh, without the uh, love and grace of.. uh..." Chalice trailed off again as he felt the bottom of his stomach suddenly forced to the back of his throat, and before his mother could express concern or his father, outrage, he

turned and ran out the door of Aisha's house and around the corner to a pile of dirt and vegetable skins, where he began to wretch. He kept heaving after breakfast and lunch had already joined the compost. He kept heaving as his body began to shake, and he kept heaving when the tears began. It wasn't until the silent sobs came that he was able to wipe his mouth, though his body though he was still shaking.

He stood there for a few minutes, feeling an aching grief in his back as the only mourner at a wake no one else even knew was happening, until he heard his mother's voice, concerned but not panicked, "Charlie? What's wrong, are you okay?" Charlie had his back to her, standing in the doorway as she was, and quickly wiped his eyes, forced the grief back down into the knotwork of strained strained, conflicting thoughts, and faced his mother. "Yeah, I'm fine, must've been something I ate," he said nonchalantly. "Oh," his mother responded with matronly concern. "We'll have to pick up some Pepto on the way back to the hotel. Are you ready to move on? We're just about done here." "Yeah," Charlie sighed casually, with exasperation subtle enough for only him to hear. "I'm ready to move on," he lied, and felt his neck twitch as he took a step forward.