Excerpt from *The OMG Chronicles* by Peter Rodger

"When you open your eyes, you believe you can see, but you never really see until you believe."

I flew back to Los Angeles, and Vishnu went home to Acapulco.

Forty-seven hours after waving goodbye to Abdesalam on the tarmac of Tangiers airport, I found myself in a studio in Hollywood shooting 22 girls in bikinis, who were draped over a yacht. I chuckled at the array of bikini bottoms and the memory of my conversation about primary colors at the wrong end of a sub-machine gun in the rain on the road from Rabat to Marrakech. The contrast was wonderful.

But the reality was, despite the Toyota job, I was in trouble. I realized I had bitten off far more than I could chew. I was running out of money, and the amount of ground that still had to be covered was daunting. The more I uncovered, the more I realized I had to cover. At the same time, I felt I was a very lucky human being, so whatever the problems, I just had to soldier on and have faith that everything would work out fine.

The first thing I had to do was to cut some of the footage into a teaser to encourage investors to come in and finish the film. It took seven weeks to achieve that. There was so much footage, it took three weeks just to view and log it. But the reaction to the teaser could not have been better. I put it on the internet and almost instantly, I had e-mails from people contacting me with encouragement about the message of the film and what I was attempting to do. It felt good, and what felt even better was to see some of the images cut together on the screen.

But then there was God: *God himself.* I heard the echo of Rabbi Froman's thick accent churning in my head. *What did I think of God now?* Even to me it was such a charged question. Would people care what I thought? Do *I* care what I thought? Would what I thought help, or hinder the film? I had no idea. I realized the whole concept of God was incredibly convoluted. The word *God* referred to so many different things, from different cultures and belief systems. The three monotheistic religions were the most united, it seemed, in the basis of their beliefs, yet so historically divided that wars had been fought and people killed because they didn't belong to the same *club.* It seemed

clear to me that it was more the word *God* than *what* "God" stood for that was causing all this conflict and pain. Human beings had lost sight of the truth of what they worshipped, and a lot of them were pawns being manipulated by people who had no qualms at all in using God's name to further their political agendas. And the majority of those perpetrators felt they were acting in the best interests of mankind under the banner of the God they worshipped— and around we go.

The only thing I had to do was to remain as objective as possible, and maybe out of all these answers, there would be a basis for my audience to make up their own mind.

The reality was that I was convinced God was an invention of man—a word, a figurehead, to give substance to something that couldn't be seen, yet was probably the motor that drove our world. The scriptures of most religions were all metaphors for this, so I wasn't denying the existence of God, merely concluding that the word used to describe this motor (God) had way too many meanings and was fashionably overused—and that's what made the whole subject complicated.

Is it any surprise, therefore, that people take comfort from someone that never answers back? How many bumper stickers have we seen saying "I love Jesus"? By all accounts, he died approximately 2,000 years ago—how could anyone have a relationship with such a silent ghost? I wondered what the attraction was to an entity—whoever he was— whatever it was—with whom a monologue was the only form of conversation you would ever have. It was so convenient to put your problems in an imaginary box and send them away for God to deal with. So comforting to do it in a nice church with nice music with like-minded individuals lighting candles and burning incense, going on their knees and begging forgiveness for nasty things they've done in their lives; God's silence was deafening.

The religious all told me God spoke to them. How? How did that come about? How do we know that was God? How do we not know that was God, and did it matter? Did they feel it? Did the words creep up from within their souls? If so, how did they know it was God, then? Maybe it was just themselves talking? Maybe we're all collectively God? But then when you read about how George W. Bush told the BBC in 2003 that God told him to invade Iraq, well, ah, isn't that pushing the envelope? God told the most powerful man in the world to create a war? Hmm!

So there I was, nowhere near the end of my journey, and the whole God concept wasn't stacking up for me; it quite frankly made absolutely no sense whatsoever. Out of many reasons to believe in God, there were four that seemed to stick out. One, we had no idea how we got here, therefore God was the *creator*. Two, good deeds bought you a place into heaven; therefore, God was the *policeman*. Three, fear of death; one sure thing happened when we died—our bodies rotted and the rest was speculation; therefore, God was the *giver of eternal life*. Four, when things went wrong, many dismissed horrendous outcomes by saying it was God's will; therefore God was the *scapegoat*.

My father, George Rodger, was a photojournalist for *Life* magazine during the second World War. He had photographed every theater of the conflict from The Blitz in London to Montgomery's campaign in North Africa, to the invasion of Burma by the Japanese, from which he walked out across the Naga Mountains to India—to D-Day, to the liberation of Brussels and Paris and the flooding of Holland. He'd traveled farther than any other photojournalist and had become so well known that *Life* would often publish long essays about him and his adventures. After five-and-a-half years of constant travel and avoiding death, he was the first photojournalist to enter Hitler's den of iniquity when he liberated the Bergen-Belsen Concentration camp on April 15, 1945, with the British army.

Nothing had prepared him for what he found in that camp. Witnessing the evidence of man's inhumanity to man, he vowed to never photograph war again. He dedicated his work to documenting "man" in his ultimate form of existing purity: the rapidly diminishing tribes of Africa. After the war he founded the photo agency Magnum Photos, with Henri Cartier-Bresson, Robert Capa, and Chim Seymour. They divided the world between them, and Africa became my father's hunting ground. There he discovered the Nuba in Kordofan, southern Sudan, and felt that finally he was witnessing "man" in his most basic, pure form. Sixty-two years later, the Nuba were a dispossessed people—just like the Jews in Europe in the last century, and they were the victims of genocide and ethnic cleansing—just like the Jews in Europe. They were in the middle of one of the worst examples of man's inhumanity to man in recent history: the horrors of Darfur. The very people my father had found to balance his sense of despair had now

become victims of the very same traits that had motivated him to discover them in first place. That was the irony of chaos and a facet of life.

The word *holocaust* was banned in our house when I was growing up. It was too painful for my father. Even as an observer it had made him question himself; how could he have been so numb as to find himself making photographic composition out of mounds of dead bodies? What on earth had happened to him, that he had sunk so far? The story he created on Bergen-Belsen had been published all over the world. It was the first real “proof” of the Holocaust.

One of the most famous images of this series was the shot of a small boy called Sieg Montag walking along a path with dead bodies piled up on either side. The expression of stoicism, repulsion, submission, and horror was etched into the child’s face. The power of the image was undeniable and had been printed all over the world. The boy thought his family had all perished. The family thought he had perished. When the photograph came out, his aunt, who had escaped to New York before the war, had seen it and recognized him. She immediately contacted her sister, Sieg’s mother, who was still alive and recovering in a hospital in Amsterdam. She broke the news; Sieg was not dead—he was alive. A multicountry search went out for the tortured little boy. He was found two weeks later in a recovery home one block away from his mother in Amsterdam, and they were reunited. It was probably just one small story of hundreds of thousands from a tumultuous time, but it was a powerfully serendipitous moment for Sieg and his family, and had come from the power of my father’s eye.

But the poignancy of his essay was not just focusing on the horror, but taking portraits of the prison guards and commandant—who were once “normal” people in a civilized world that had been reduced to carrying out heinous acts that even today new generations of human beings have trouble understanding. In a way, there was a lot of guilt and blame my father loaded on himself. It ran very deep. It became like a subconscious snake that would always be there baring its fangs when he was awake, constantly moving and making its presence aware; it was his monster that grew bigger within him as he became older. He felt having a family would send the snake away, but it was evident to me that it was still there, buried not far below the surface, right up until he passed away in 1995. It pained us all who grew up with him—melancholia and

depression are contagious and difficult to deal with in family situations: the continuum of despair. An insipid virus, the guilt, the shame, the hurt, and the pain can jump from human beings to human beings without us even knowing it's there and affect you years later in all sorts of ways: an uncomfortable feeling, a tendency for drugs and alcohol, or just feeling down when the sun disappears on an autumn night.

These feelings in my father elicited enormous compassion from the rest of the family and an unread sense of understanding even from when we were all very small children. We even gave it a name: "The Thing." We could see it in my father's eyes, even when he laughed. He would suffer from intolerable headaches, and it all went back to "The Thing." The guilt, the horror, and the realization that not only was there nasty evil in the world but he had seen it, lived it, been part of it, and smelled it as the British trucks sped towards Bergen-Belsen that April morning; the stench of decay, of death, the very worst of life, in its most ugly, uncensored form. That's why we were forbidden to talk about it. That's why my father never talked about it, with us, or to the press, and shuddered from the images that still haunt us all today.

Once I was with my father at his house. It was in the late 80s. There was an article on the news. A documentary had been uncovered in someone's garage. It was a film edited by Alfred Hitchcock from the footage of the British Military Cameramen that had liberated Bergen-Belsen. The newscaster warned that the content was disturbing and that anyone who felt they couldn't take it should leave the room, or turn off the TV. They cut to a commercial break. My father and I stood in silence staring at the screen as a Heineken advertisement played out "The Worta' in Majorca don't taste like what it oughta'. The water in Majorca doesn't taste quite like it should."

Then the news came back on. It opened with a shot of my father, Rolliflex in hand in Bergen-Belsen surrounded by mounds and mounds of dead bodies, filmed on liberation day, April 15, 1945. The camera lingered on him as he photographed. I inhaled, not knowing what to do. We had just been talking about compost and lettuces, and now this? I looked at my father. He started to shake. He had to sit down. His body convulsed. His eyes were fixated on the image of himself all those years earlier: the bogeyman was there, all right—right in front of him—in front of us. I didn't know what to do. Everything went into slow motion. I had never seen my father cry. He had never raised

his voice. He was Mr. Cool, Mr. Calm, Mr. Collected. Yet here—right now—I was seeing him sob. He squealed in pain. The footage was unrelenting and moved to images of the horror. You could almost smell the stench. The man I had revered as a God all my life, the man who was always right, always so wise, who had been around and always knew what to do; the man who had single-handedly built the house we were standing in, who was larger than life, was reduced to a sobbing, blubbering wreck from a pain too great to bear. I realized my father was not God, but a man—just like me. I had so much love for him it oozed out there and then, but there was nothing I could do to alleviate the pain; nothing. I realized there are some memories in life that will never go away. Bergen-Belsen was one of those for my father, and he wasn't even an inmate—he was a witness. Although many Jewish friends of his had perished, none of our family had been directly involved, but that didn't stop the emotions I witnessed that day. How Godless I felt. How utterly Godless.

Two-and-a-half months after returning from Morocco, I found myself driving along the very same road my father had taken that fateful morning. It was almost exactly 62 years to the day that he had made the journey he would describe by the stench as they made their way unsuspecting toward the camp.

It was not like that for me. I was in a smooth, powerful Volvo accompanied by Andrea Yarach, who was funding a film and had commissioned me to write and direct it. I had been very happy to get away from *Oh My God* for a little while, to work on another project and earn some money. I purposely had not brought the *OMG* cameras with me. It was a field trip—to learn about the Holocaust. My brief was to write a story that had Anne Frank in it somewhere and put across the fact that men don't learn . . . that man's inhumanity to man continues. The aim was to remind "man" of what he is capable of, and hopefully increase awareness so that atrocities don't repeat themselves. Anne Frank had died at Bergen-Belsen. I had been to the *Annex* in Amsterdam, and I wanted to visit her grave, and the ghost of my father's pain.

It was a heady day. Hitler had always hidden away his death camps in the most beautiful of surroundings. Endless bucolic woods with peaceful birdsong and the smell of damp pines probably tortured those poor inmates who were stuck behind barbed fences, denied of dignity, food, identity, and eventually life itself. It was a barbaric contrast. The

insipid stench of intellectually understanding evil made Mr. Chou churn about like the snake in my father's soul.

There's a museum at the camp's entrance. Huge blowups of some of my father's pictures adorned the walls—a portrait of Josef Kramer, camp commander, the piles of dead bodies, the shot of Sieg Montag. They were all there. I was nervous and uncomfortable that I was standing safely looking at the pictures years later in exactly the same place where my father had entered years before to see emaciated inmates in dirty striped uniforms. This was how he described it:

Under the pine trees the scattered dead were lying, not in their twos or threes or dozens, but in their thousands. The living tore ragged clothing from the corpses to build fires, over which they boiled pine needles and roots for soup. Little children rested their heads against the stinking corpses of their mothers, too nearly dead themselves to cry. An emaciated man approached me. "Look, Englishmen," he said. "This is German culture." And he fell down dead in front of me. Bodies with gaping wounds in the region of the kidneys, liver and heart testified to the cannibalism that had been resorted to, degradation begetting degradation.

(George Rodger Humanity and Inhumanity - The Photographic Journey of George Rodger)

It had been hell on earth. There was absolutely no other way to describe it. Mr. Chou fluttered at the contrast. For me, standing in the same spot, it was one of the most beautiful examples of countryside you could imagine—it was paradisiacal. Hell and heaven separated by 62 years. I wondered what my father would think if he was standing beside me now.

I politely asked Andrea if I could be left alone, and I went out exploring. I wanted to find the exact spot where my father had taken the picture of Sieg Montag all those years before. I wanted to smell it, the very physical place on earth where that event had taken place. The day that had taken my father's soul, bored a hole in it and allowed a snake to enter that would be with him for the rest of his life; that had made him cry, and sob and live in melancholia—like someone underground just getting glimpses of the fresh air above, of sunshine, of rest, of peace.

I breathed in the Bergen-Belsen sweet air. Fragrances of tranquility wafted across my path—of mushrooms, damp leaves, sap and moss—I watched the beauty of the ferns moving gracefully in the breeze. How on earth could I be in the same place? I passed the mass graves . . . I recalled the shots my father had taken—of bulldozers shoveling corpses, the drivers with scarves wrapped around their faces to keep out the stench. In my head, I could hear the sound of the 1940s engines and even smell the diesel, but all I could see was a mound under which were tens of thousands of human bones. I sat on a bench and just stared out, trying to feel if there was any residue of the souls who had perished all around me; who had vanished in despair, of shattered dreams; who had died when their faith had finally collapsed and starvation had taken their wretched, malnourished forms—any dignity long gone. Where was that energy? Where were these poor people now? Where was God in all of this?

But I felt nothing but peace. Immense peace . . . and the peace disturbed me. It injected Mr. Chou with a shot of adrenalin, it was such a paradox.

I continued on. I had done lots of research and knew by looking at maps where the shot of Sieg Montag must have been taken. When I got there, I couldn't believe I was in the same place. First of all, the trees were 62 years older and fully grown, so it was a little difficult to pinpoint the exact location, but when I found it, the skin crawled all over me. I remember the day I had watched that news with my father all those years before. "The Worta' in Majorca . . ." The bogeyman who had stared my father in the face was back. I could feel him. I sat down on the edge of the path and just watched. I pulled out a copy of the picture and held it up—comparing yesteryear hell with paradise today. I winced. I was roughly the same age my father was when he was here, but what a difference, and what was I to learn about this? What had this to do with my quest? It was a different chapter, a different day, but was a tent pole in my thinking. There was something I was learning, but I didn't know what it was.

I photographed the location. Spring had not sprung quite yet. There were brown leaves in the lower bushes. It was wintry and stark, the evergreens pushing up to the sky. I stayed there for a while, but soon walked away. I felt very sad and utterly useless. I knew that going there had helped me with what I was doing. I was glad I hadn't brought

my cameras. I didn't want to put this into the film—it didn't seem relevant. It was relevant to me . . . that's all. It was teaching me to see in different ways.