

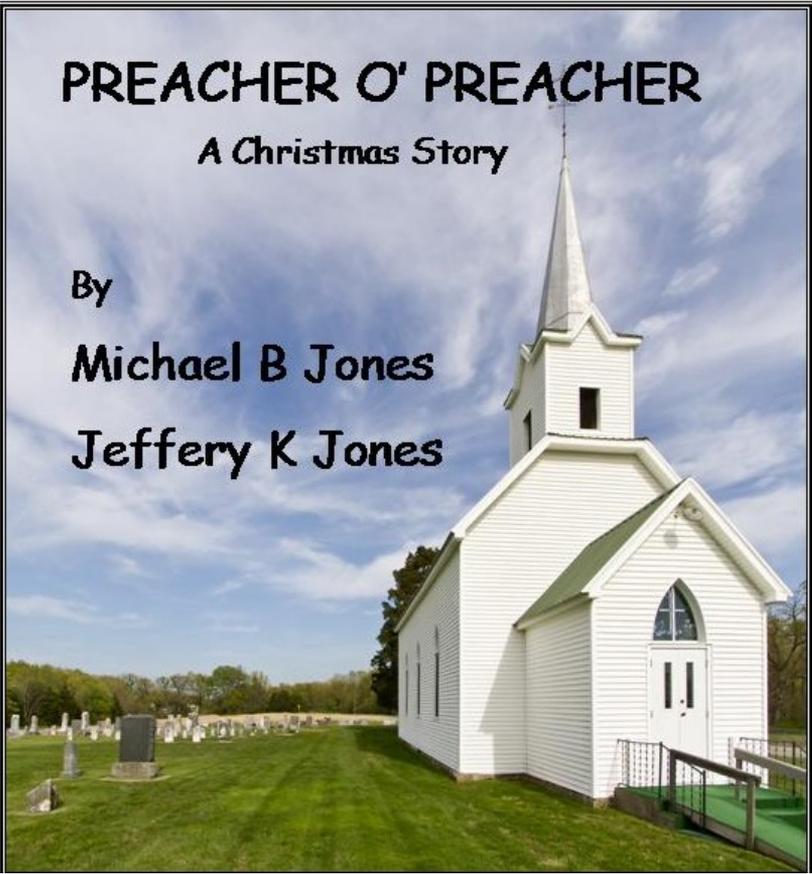
PREACHER O' PREACHER

A Christmas Story

By

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The air had a cold bite to it; significant proof of the season now arrived. Each new day was a bit cooler than the last, each night longer as well. Old man winter had come at last to this small community of believers and bitterly imposed his will upon it. If not for the guest speaker featured at church this morning, a soul might be inclined to stay nestled up at home this Sunday rather than brave the elements. Today though the

seasoned old chapel would be full, as a particularly special Christmas service lay just ahead.

As Pastor Ward Donaldson approached the church driveway he could see that most of the available parking spots had already been filled. Of course, the space reserved for him as pastor was open as was the space just to the right of his. The later identified by a bright orange traffic cone with a “Reserved for Guest” sign affixed to it. As he turned off the paved road into the gravel lot, he glanced briefly into the rearview mirror where he saw the image of the large black sedan that had been following him from the small town’s only café that both had just left. In that vehicle was today’s special guest. As pastor Donaldson parked, a dutiful church deacon removed the cone from the adjoining space while simultaneously guiding the guest into it. “Good morning Grey,” he said to the deacon. “Morning Pastor,” came the reply. Both men now met at the front of the pastor’s car with a friendly handshake. “Good to see you Grey, now let’s greet our guest.”

Pastor Donaldson was now coaxing Grey towards the driver’s door of the guest’s car. As the door began to open, pastor Donaldson reached for the handle to offer his assistance, Grey just to his left. The door opened, and for the first time fully exposed their guest to the loosely assembled crowd of deacons and other congregants gathered along the front walk. As others watched from near the sanctuary building, Captain C.S. Williams emerged from the sedan, stood erect and smoothed the wrinkles from the U.S. Army dress uniform. A tall figure with impressive features and fit body, she presented herself respectfully.

“Well here we are at last,” Pastor Donaldson said as he reached to shake the extended hand of the captain, “Welcome to Pierce Chapel.” “Thank you, it’s so nice to be here,” she

replied. Turning to his left, the kindly old pastor said “Grey, I would like you to meet Captain Williams. Captain Cecily Shelia Williams.” “Captain Williams, Grey Morris, our head deacon.” “Good morning Captain Williams,” Grey said as he shook the hand of this notable woman, “It’s so nice to have you here.” “Good morning to you too Grey, so good to finally meet you.” “I think we should move the rest of the introductions inside where it’s a little warmer,” Pastor Ward suggested.

They turned toward the chapel entrance and followed the crowd of other church goers as they made their way inside, the breeze stiffening a little as they did. Quick introductions were made to the remaining six deacons in the small vestibule, and then the pastor suggested that the formalities begin. Because this was a Christmas service, and in honor of the special guest, today the ceremonies were going to be a little more formal than what was usual for this small country church. Four of the deacons stood in loose formation at the foot of the alter, two held open the small French doors as Grey and Pastor Donaldson escorted Captain Williams to her seat of honor in the front pew. Once the captain was seated, the deacons went to sit with their families, while Grey and Ward retreated to the sanctum to await the pianist cue to start the service.

Cheryl Watson, the capable long-time pianist rose from her seat in the opposite front pew and approached the captain to make welcome and introductions before proceeding to the piano. Once seated, she started softly playing the opening notes to one of her Christmas favorites, “Hark, The Herald Angles Sing” as the muffled conversations of the congregation quieted. She continued, gradually raising the volume as she reached the peak of the stanza upon which Grey and Ward emerged from the sanctum and took their seats on the alter, Ward to the left and Grey to the right. Cheryl slowly lowered

the volume as the song finished, ending in her usual sparkle of subtlety. Grey stood to take the pulpit.

“Good morning everybody, glad to see so many here today, especially considering how cold it is outside,” he started. “As you know we have a special guest here today,” turning toward Ward he continued, “and I might add that Ward you’ve done a good job of keeping us in suspense as to the message from our guest.” “But I’m sure that it will be inspirational and a real blessing.” “Welcome Captain Williams to our little church.” “We are going to speed up our usual church business a little so that we can get right to it.” Grey continued through the checklist including general announcements, birthdays, upcoming events and the prayer list. As he finished, he asked the congregation for any announcements that they might have. Janice Morris, Grey’s mother, rose from her usual position to the far right of the third pew back, a position that her family had occupied for generations. Janice, an atypical wife, mother and grandmother was the matriarch of the Morris family. Raised pure country, she was kind, gracious and always enthusiastic about meeting and greeting new people, especially during the holidays when her natural southern charm shined more brilliantly than most. “Grey, I’d like to say something. Captain Williams, I would like to officially welcome you on behalf of the entire congregation. I’d like to tell you that Ward has been saying that today’s message is going to be real special. Although he hasn’t told a lot about what you’re going to say, he did say that your message was probably one of the best and most inspirational that he has ever heard, and I for one am looking forward to hearing it.” As Janice spoke, Captain Williams had been looking directly at her as was her custom when being addressed. When Janice finished, the captain nodded an acknowledgement in her direction and softly said “Thank you.”

“Thank you for those kind words momma, I’m sure that everyone feels the same,” Grey said. “Is there anything else?” he said as he scanned the crowd. None answering, he continued, “let’s turn in our hymnal to number 297 and stand while we sing “Hark, The Herald Angles Sing,” which will also be our offertory song this morning.” At the conclusion of the offering, Grey took his seat with his family and Pastor Ward rose to approach the pulpit.

“Thank you Grey,” he started. “Friends, my dear, dear friends. As you remember I stood before you several weeks ago and said that I had just been told one of the most inspirational stories that I have ever heard. I asked your permission to bring that person, our speaker, here to tell again this story to you, as I could never retell it as beautifully.” “I thank you for your indulgence. I know that you will be as personally touched as I was.” “I know that I have been a little secretive toward the details,” he continued, “but once you listen to this remarkable story I think that you will understand why I couldn’t reveal too much.” “Thank you for your trust.” “So, with that, it gives me great pleasure to formally introduce you to our very special guest, Pastor, Captain Cicely Shelia Williams, United States Army.”

“Good morning, and Merry Christmas,” she started. “Thank you all for such a warm welcome, and thank you Pastor Donaldson for the invitation and the opportunity to be here today.” “As Grey and Ward have told you, my name is Captain Cicely Williams. I am a captain in the United States Army Chaplain Corp.” “But please, you may call me Pastor Sassy, or better yet, my friends just call me Sassy. I know that may sound a little unusual, but it’s a name given to me by a friend, a fellow soldier a long time ago, and it just kind of stuck.” “My career didn’t start in the Chaplain Corp. In fact, growing up as a poor girl around Macon, Georgia, that was the farthest thing from my mind. My career started as an ordinary

grunt in the infantry, The Big Red One as it's known, the 1st Infantry Division. I was part of a support company, as was the friend that ultimately brought me here today. We trained together, and we deployed together to Iraq in August of 2006."

As she was giving her opening remarks, there were some in the congregation that recognized the similarities of her Army background to that of a former member of their little church community, a member who had not survived a deployment to Iraq. Wondering if this could be the as yet unnamed friend, they continued to listen with growing interest. The muffled sniffing from this departed girl's parents, lent more credence to this possibility. Several of the church members would occasionally chance a fleeting look in their direction, emotions wearing heavy for their renewed bereavement.

Sassy continued, "My friend's name was Specialist Kate Thomas, but everyone in the unit called her Preacher." The question of her friend's name now answered, the congregation had confirmation of the earlier suspicion. Recognizing the significance of her revelation, Sassy paused a moment and looked lovingly at her parents. "Mr. and Mrs. Thomas, Marie and Joe," she said, "I am here to tell you and your church family how special your Katie, our Preacher, was to me and how she impacted my life." "She always told all of us how much this little chapel meant to her, and how she was blessed to have such a large and caring family." "Because I was recovering from my wounds at Walter Reed Army hospital, I was not able to attend Preacher's memorial service here in North Carolina. You all know where and how she died, but there is more to the story, and this is what I want to tell." As Sassy finished her sentence, she raised her face toward Heaven, a tear escaped from her closed eyes and slowly rolled down her ebony cheek. Through her powerful recollections and descriptive words, Sassy transported the congregation with her to another time, a much more painful time. Because

of the insights she told of Katie's love for Pierce Chapel, they too became a part of the story...

“PREACHER, QUIT DRAGGING YOUR FEET!” “THESE SUPPLIES AREN'T GONNA LOAD THEMSELVES!” Sassy was yelling as usual at not only Preacher but everyone in her squad. She always singled out Preacher though, seeming to have a disdain for her, and Katie not really knowing why. Somehow, it seemed that Sassy was better at exploiting the differences between them rather than to try and find the commonalities that they shared.

As Preacher reached down and grabbed her end of a supply container, her friend and fellow soldier Liz grabbed the other end. “Yo Preacher, how's about a special little prayer this morning?” “Sure Liz, what's the occasion?” Preacher asked. “Our Tails!” was Liz's emphatic reply. “Our tails...really? What do you mean Liz?” “I mean when Sassy gets done with us today, that prayer might come in handy.” “OK, bow your head, but for heaven's sake, don't stop walking!” “Please Lord look after mine and Liz's tails today, and all my fellow soldier's tails...” Liz was beginning to chuckle a little as Preacher continued... “and please my Lord protect us from any savagery and pain we may experience in our endeavors today. And... and Lord protect and bless our friend and Squad Leader Sassy.” Although her prayer had started as a kind of joke for Liz, Preacher had realized that it was a little disrespectful of Sassy, and that made her uncomfortable. She had no intention of demeaning Sassy, and in fact had a soft spot in her heart for her.

“Alright people, only two more trucks to go now. Perhaps you can get them loaded a bit faster than the last two” Sassy said in her finest sarcastic tone. “WHERE IS RODGERS AND THE FORKLIFT?” Sassy barked. Just then, Private Rodgers came zooming around the corner of the staging hut with a large

pallet of MRE's balanced low to the ground on the forks of the lift truck. "Come on Rodgers, get it up there" Sassy sneered, "we've been waiting on your slow butt!" "It was now 1100 hours, or 11:00AM civilian time, and the Sun it seemed had intensified five-fold since they began this morning at 0700 hours."

"The last truck of the resupply convoy had finished loading and they were all ready to roll from the relative safety of this "Green Zone" base onto the more dangerous supply route. A route that would take them some ninety miles through the Iraqi desert to a forward base in a much more hostile area." "With the possibility of roadside bombs in the form of IED's, and hostile forces trying to infiltrate the area, the round trip was always stressful on the drivers and the accompanying protection force. But the gratefulness of the resupplied soldiers made the trip worth the risk."

"Christmas season in Iraq is much different than it is Stateside. In the Green Zone it would not be unusual to see Santa Claus, a Christmas tree, or even mistletoe hung somewhere inconspicuously." A "Zone" basically being a town within a city, in this case an Americanized town, there are of course a whole host of different types of people within the zone. Most of the civilians are Muslim, not Christian, but there are a few. It seemed that the children enjoyed the candy canes, even if they did come from a Christmas tree."

"It always fascinated Katie to see these two religions interacting. Sometimes there would be no sense of tolerance between them, and then other times a real effort of understanding. Mix into this a Western army of occupation, or liberation depending on who you ask, and the recipe for disaster is set."

Sassy paused a moment, and glancing heavenward, sighed a deep breath as if fighting against the growing lump in her throat.

The congregation was taken in by the heartfelt manner in which Sassy told her tale. The initial formality of their meeting had melted away. She was now as much a part of their church family as Katie had been, and still was. As Sassy continued, they couldn't help but notice the glister in her eyes, and what seemed to be a heaviness in her shoulders. Janice Morris felt compassion for this woman, and wished so much that she could offer her a warm hug of support.

Sassy returned to the story, again with the whole congregation in tow...

“After we got all those supplies loaded up and the convoy on its way, we had our midday chow, and after that a few hours off until our second shift would begin at 1600 hours, that's 4:00PM regular time.” “Soldiers mostly used their off time to catch some shuteye or hangout at the Rec Center.” “At the rec center, we could use the arcade to play video games, shoot pool, play darts or table tennis. The hot spot though was at the SAT terminals.” “There one could use the computers for personal email, or the satellite phones to call home, all under strict military security and protocol of course.” “That area of the rec center was always busy, due mainly to the limited number of terminals available. There was always a line of people waiting their turn.” “As you can imagine, Christmas would be even busier than normal. The Officers in charge knew this as well and had devised a plan to alleviate some of the anticipated congestion.” “Each soldier would be allotted seven and one-half minutes of precious SAT time to call whomever they wished.”

“We got to the center about 1:30 that afternoon, thirty minutes earlier than we needed to be. But, every one of us were just so excited for the opportunity to call home you see.” “You should have seen us! Giddy and so cheerful.” With a wide toothy smile, and a twinkle in her bright brown eyes, Sassy continued. “We were having so much fun!” “It’s funny how an hour or two can change one’s perspective. You know what it was? The Christmas Spirit got us, that’s the plain truth!” “Being that it was Christmas Eve for us, in no time at all the rec center turned into an impromptu Christmas party of sorts. Christmas music was playing from a CD player in the corner, Privates Rodgers and Winston had switched out their Berets for Santa hats, and Staff Sergeant Collins even brought out a big pot from the kitchen filled with his favorite punch mix; Ice, 7-UP and cranberry juice cocktail.” “Of course, no alcohol was allowed, but we didn’t need any.”

“As the soldiers from the First Squad completed their calls, they joined us in the main area of the rec center, growing the increasingly joyful party.” “Each one excitedly described their own calls home. Upon completing his call, one Corporal ran to the center of the room where he jumped up on an empty table and gave us an announcement.” “ATTENTION... ATTENTION EVERYBODY!” “Once we all quieted down, he continued.” “For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Corporal John Davis. For those of you who do know me... I’m sorry,” he said with a chuckle. “Seriously folks, I know I’ve been a pain during this deployment, but I’ll tell you why.” “I just spoke to my wife on her cell phone back home in Michigan. Right now she is in the hospital, in labor with our first child!” A loud “WHOOYA” arose from the crowd of soldiers. “I’m not wanting my wife to endure any more agony that she has to, but if she can hold out about eighteen more hours, we’ll have the greatest gift a man could ever ask for... A CHRISTMAS BABY!” “It was perhaps a coincidence, but at that very moment “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”

started playing from the CD player, and every soldier in the rec center joined in singing the song, and in wishing Corporal John Davis his Christmas wish.” There was a slight pause before Sassy continued. “My God, thank you for that moment!” This last sentence had been spoken with a deep reverence, as if speaking the closing line of a prayer. Her voice soft, deliberate, but a bit shaky. An Amen or two could be heard from the pews. Sassy spoke again... “And then it happened.”

Her voice now reflecting the emotions of an event almost too horrific to describe, Sassy took another slow, deep breath before continuing...

“First came a bright flash of orange and blue light visible through the windows and on the walls nearby. Then we heard an explosion and the sound of small arms fire coming from the direction of the main gate guardhouse about two-hundred meters away.” “We all ran toward the windows where our second-floor vantage point would give a clear view of the main gate. What was once the guardhouse, was now a burning heap of crumpled debris.” “I found out later that the first blast had come from an RPG fired by a lone terrorist hiding amongst the local population from a hundred or more meters away. The guards inside never knew what had hit them, and they died instantly.” “It was immediately clear that this was some sort of attack on the entire complex.” “Although it was only seconds, time seemed to move at half-speed as we watched three or four large trucks barrel through the gates and over the debris of the demolished guardhouse.” “The surviving contingency of guards were pouring fire non-stop into the lead truck as they had been trained to do, and were successful in immobilizing it.” “As soon as that truck stopped and the troops turned to fire at the next one in line, it erupted in a large fireball of an explosion which killed the remaining guards.” “By this time, it had only been ten or fifteen seconds since the

first explosion, and while we were still trying to process what was happening, our training and instincts were beginning to kick in as well.” “We knew, especially us Non-Coms that we had to organize an effective defensive posture.”

“Just then I saw through the windows an even more horrific scene unfolding; The two remaining trucks emerged from the cloud of black smoke left by the burning first truck.” “They were heading straight for our building which housed not only the recreation center on the second floor, but an assortment of command and supply offices. At this time of day, there were probably at least four hundred or more soldiers in the building.” “It was clear that we were the intended target!” “CLEAR OUT, CLEAR OUT! I yelled to the soldiers now scrambling for the exits.” “EVERYONE OUT, HUSTLE IT UP! I screamed. “I knew it would only be a matter of seconds until impact. To tell you the truth, I was scared and wanted to run.” “But, I had a duty to get my people out first. As I herded the crowd toward the double doors, I noticed that it was Katie holding them open for the fleeing troops.” “She could have run... she should have run, but she too was heeding a higher calling.”

Again, Sassy paused so that she could gather her emotions. Even though it had been almost nine years since that tragic day, the truly horrific nature of the attack and ensuing sights weighed heavy in her heart. She also knew that the gravity of what she was about to relate would come as a shock to this small gathering. These were peaceful people living far from the violence that was, and is real for their children, and those of their friends and neighbors. But Marie had asked her to tell the truth about what happened... the whole, terrible, truth. With another deep breath, she continued to speak to the silent audience.

“The large room was almost empty when the trucks hit. Most of the troops had already evacuated into the corridor.” “The hallway was about eight feet wide and ran the entire width of the building, perhaps two-hundred feet.” “There was a set of elevators at the midway point, and a stairway exit on either end of the corridor about a hundred feet in either direction. Of course, everyone was scrambling for the stairs with about an equal number going toward each one.” “It’s crazy how things had changed in less than a minute! Still so unbelievable.” “Most of the troops got caught in the open hallway, but a few made it to the stairs, very few. The ones that made it into the stairway on the left, well, they were the ones closest to the blast.” “The explosion was so massive that it totally vaporized the stairwell, and everyone in it.” These words struck dramatically. Suddenly like a thief in the night, the horrible hand of terror reached out and grabbed the congregation, leaving not one of them untouched. The violence now uncomfortably real, they sighed a collective sigh of shock and grief as Sassy finished the sentence, “It was mercifully quick.”

“It was almost immediately behind that one when the third and final truck struck at the main entrance and tunneled its way deep inside, erupting in a fireball just below the Rec Center. The blast careened through the lower level corridors like the funneled concentration of a bazooka, exploding the walls outward and dealing our building the fatal blow.” “It shuddered a second or two before collapsing and plunging us, the survivors of the stairwell blast, into a realm of darkness and uncertainty.”

“The next moment that I had any awareness of, was when I opened my eyes. I don’t know how long I had been unconscious, it could have been hours.” “At first it was totally black, no light at all, and the only way that I knew I had even opened my eyes was because I felt the movement of my eyelids rubbing against the dry orbs that were my eyeballs.”

“Scratching up and down, feeling like sandpaper rubbing against the grain of a rough board. I couldn’t hear anything, nor could I feel or move any other part of my body.” “Perhaps I thought, there isn’t anything else to move! Am I dead I wondered? Is this what death is like? Is this my eternity?!” “As I continued to blink, a little faster now because of the panic beginning to assault my mind, the blackness started to fade into something more akin to a smoky, murky kind of visualization. Still too dark to see more than four or five feet, in my peripheral vision I zeroed in on a scene of annihilation that words cannot adequately describe.”

As the dramatic words of the horror sunk in, the congregation was now fully immersed in this mortifying experience. Each member, in their own minds eye, reliving the pain and agony with Sassy. Her illustrative descriptions making them feel as if they were there too, in what seemed like real time. Pastor Donaldson sitting in the front pew as was customary when there was a guest speaker, reached for the breast pocket of his jacket retrieving a large white handkerchief. Removing his gold-rimmed glasses, he wiped away the moisture that spilled onto his cheeks in the form of gently cascading teardrops. Replacing the glasses on his face, he started to return the hankie to his pocket as well, but then knowing he would need it again, decided instead to keep it clutched in his hand.

“Now you know what happened to us that Christmas Eve day,” Sassy began again, “and how it happened.” “You have also heard in painfully vivid detail how one man’s evil can manifest itself onto other men. So now I want to share with you the other part of the story, the part that you didn’t get from any news account.” “The part that includes you, the fine people of Pierce Chapel, and our beloved Katie.” Sassy had been looking squarely into the faces of Joe and Marie as she finished the opening thought of this next chapter, and they

traded reassuring smiles. Once again Sassy's eyes glazed over as she continued.

“At first it came as an unrecognizable far-away muffled sound, a sound that I thought was in my head. I presumed that it was the sound of death approaching, coming to claim his reward for the wickedness that he had helped wrought.” “Kind of like a character's dying scene in a Hollywood movie, the last thing you hear, sort of...” “But then it stopped, complete silence for a few seconds, before repeating again and again, maybe two or three times.” “Each time a little closer than the last, and more clear.” “I felt my vision which had only just returned start to fade, and as I drifted back into the total blackness of unconsciousness I thought, “This must be the end...””

“Sassy... Sassy...” “I struggled to open my eyes to this new perceived sound that seemed to emanate from all around me. It echoed through my mind with a strange reverberating effect, competing with the high pitch humming that I hadn't noticed before.” “SASSY!, SERGEANT, CAN YOU HEAR ME?” “I felt a hand on my shoulder, shaking gently, but firmly in an attempt to rouse me. I also felt a sudden shock of intense pain shoot through my entire body from bottom to top, contracting the muscles in my back, causing it to arch against the weight of the other hand on my abdomen.” “Sassy, it's Specialist Thomas, can you hear me?” “The voice was clear now and I fought harder to open my still rough and dry eyes. Prea... Preacher... is that you?” “As my eyes tentatively responded and slowly opened, the blurred silhouette of her figure started to emerge and began to clear.” “Preacher is it really you?” “Yeah Sassy, its really me, and I'm right here with you,” she said soothingly. “I could see her more distinctly now, the features of her face well-defined even in the dim light.” “Preacher, are we... are we dead? I struggled to get the question out, partly because of the pain, and partly because I

was afraid of the answer.” “Preacher looking me directly in the eyes responded, “No Sassy, you’re not dead. You are very much alive.”” “Her words where accompanied by a slight encouraging smile, and a soft diffused glow that seemed to surround her.” “It had a calming effect on me, and I surprisingly felt somewhat safe.” Another jolt of intensifying pain also served as inexplicable proof of life.”

“Katie then removed her jacket, rolled it into a makeshift cushion and placed it under my head.” “Ok, lets have a look at you,” she said as she began a triage of my condition, touching and prodding my battered body as gently as possible.” “With my head now elevated a little, I was able to make a better assessment of our situation. I guess my Non-Com training and experience was beginning to return.” “It wasn’t as dark as it seemed to be before. I could actually see some small fissures of light trickling through various gaps in the now crumpled debris.” “The area we were in was about the size of a large bathroom. A cavern of sorts formed by the crossing of two steel beams which had prevented heavier rubble from covering us.” “Strewn among the craggy remains of the walls and ceilings were dozens of broken electrical conduits, HVAC ducts and other pipes, some dangling just a foot or two from the floor on which I lay.” “Out of one of the pipes there was a small but steady trickle of water. This reminded me of how thirsty I was.” “It didn’t matter if it was a sprinkler or clean water pipe, we were going to need water to survive this ordeal.” “Just as I was trying to formulate a plan to recover some of the water, Preachers hands discovered my most serious injury causing me to scream out loudly in agony!” “Arrgh! I screamed again, only this time almost to myself, trying to stifle my anguish as best I could.” “Pausing in her examination, Preacher asked “Sassy are you ok?” Through gritted teeth, I somehow mumbled, “Yeah, I’m ok,” but I probably wasn’t very convincing.”

“Lifting my head slightly from the impromptu pillow that Katie had fashioned, I gazed down toward where she was working. “What is it Preacher, and how bad is it?” I asked not really sure if I wanted to know or not.” “It’s your leg Sassy” she replied somberly. “I’m not a doctor, but I’m sure that its broken. But...” It’s still there though, Right? I emphatically interrupted.” “Looking over her left shoulder at me she said, “Yes, it’s still here Sassy.” And in a more serious tone continued, “But there’s something else...” “My eyes followed hers downward toward my broken right leg, but because Katie had positioned herself in such a way as to conceal the most badly damaged portion of my lower leg, all I could see was the ripped, bloodied trousers of my camouflaged BDU.” “We gotta get you moved a little further from that crumbling wall Sarge,” she said, “it looks like it could collapse at any moment.” “Her words rang hollow in my ears, sounding distant and muffled. I strained trying to see around her. I wanted to assess the damage personally.” “SERGEANT,” Katie yelled, “EYES FRONT!” “Her stern tone had the desired effect, it drew my attention away from my leg and back to her face.”

“Sassy, we have got to get you away from this wall. You hear me Sarge?” “Come on, stay with me now!” Katie had a vigor in her voice as she lightly shook me back to the moment. I nodded. “This is gonna hurt Sassy, I mean really bad. You understand?” Again I nodded, trying to prepare myself mentally. “Are you ready? She asked. Not waiting for an answer, Preacher started the countdown. “Three, two... one!” “With that, for the second time that day, I descended into what had to be Hell on Earth!”

Sassy returned momentarily from the past and focused on the congregation. As she scanned their faces, she could tell by the eyes that she met, that their emotions were in sync with hers. They all shared in her pain, and their tears flowed as

shamelessly freely as her own. Another deep breath, and she continued.

“Once the move was complete, Katie and I sat next to each other with our backs against the opposing wall of the stairwell, which had already collapsed.” “The move had only been about fifteen feet, but it totally exhausted me. The pain was so intense that it somehow had me numb now.” “I still can’t explain it, but I sort of didn’t feel anything.” “Katie had wrapped a tablecloth or something around my leg so that I couldn’t see it, and I just kinda didn’t think to look again.” “Preacher, I didn’t know you had it in you,” I remarked to her. Rolling her head in my direction, she asked, “What’s that Sassy?” “After seeing the way you load a truck, well I wasn’t sure that you could lift me up, much less drag me over here without finishing me off for good.” “For a skinny white girl... well, you’re ok.” “That light-hearted moment caused us both to laugh out loud, not at, but with each other.” The relaxed dialog between the two caught the congregation off-guard, and they too shared in an unexpected laugh. Sassy looked around the tearful but smiling faces of her new brothers and sisters in Christ, with a twinkle in her eye and a knowing smile on her face, she continued.

“You doing ok Sassy?” Preacher asked. “I suppose if being attacked, blown up, buried beneath a pile of rubble with a broken leg is ok, then yes, I’m doing just fine!” “I guess the fragility of the situation had come slamming home, and I had unwittingly reverted back to my pre-attack self. With a somewhat condescending tone I continued.” “My God, my leg hurts! I never imagined that I’d die under the pile of an exploded building in some God-forsaken land!” “What about you Preacher, you think its ok?” “No Sassy, I don’t think this is ok. But, I do know that it will be ok.” Again sarcastically, I asked “Oh you do, do you?” “Of course I do Sassy” was her calm reply. “I guess you have faith that someone’s gunna

come a knocking on the door any minute and save us?" I said this with a sarcastic laugh. "Faith, yes, and of course I would like to be rescued. Whatever else may happen next is not in our hands." But I do know that I have been saved already, and that Sassy, gives me great comfort." "I was about ready to respond with another sarcastic and demeaning remark when I turned toward her and maybe for the first time, really looked deep into Katie's eyes." "Feeling a little uncomfortable at her steady gaze, I looked away, and instead at the carnage of the living Hell around us." "This is a place of death I thought, not for the living. Yet, here we were... why?" "For a second, I even wondered, are we really here, or are we already dead?" "A stabbing pain running through my leg reminded me that yes, we were indeed still here. There has got to be a reason I rationalized." Confused by my own questions, I turned back to Katie. "What I saw in her eyes was a sincerity that was just... just so real." "Suddenly, hope didn't seem to be quite enough. Perhaps I thought, it was time to take a leap of faith myself." "After an instant of contemplation, I turned to speak to her again, this time not afraid to look deep into her soul." "So Preacher, how exactly does this saving thing work?" I asked. A chorus of hushed Amen's ushered from the assembly as they recognized that this must have been the pivotal moment in Sassy's life to this point.

Addressing the congregation with an open-ended question, Sassy continued. "And guess what happened next? Why our little Katie began having a Church service right there and then!" "The more she spoke, the more I wanted to hear. She shared many experiences that she had here with you folks." "Preacher told me about when her and her parents were going through some hard times, you, her church family were here for them... all of them." "She also said, and this is the important part now, "That's just the way it is at "PC." "PC"... Sassy giggled a little and a sly smile crossed her face while shaking her head slightly side to side. "You know Preacher liked to

pray,” Sassy continued, “and she prayed a lot.” “She also had this thing that she would mention somewhere toward the close of each one. It would go something like this... “and thank you my heavenly Father for all you do, and thank you for PC.” “Or maybe... “Thank you Lord for the blessings given to me and PC.” I think you get my drift here, she always mentioned this PC.” “The rest of us in the Unit didn’t hear every single prayer, but we heard enough to know that “PC” would be in it somewhere. We knew that it had to be an acronym for something, and I’m here to tell you, that girl loved an acronym!” Sassy joked. Speaking to the congregation as comfortably now as if she had known them her whole life, Sassy continued...

One day during a break in a unit exercise, and after she had just finished one of her prayers, I asked her. “Thomas, what’s with this “PC” thing?” “We hear you pray for your mom and dad, we also hear you pray for aunts and uncles, the sick and starving folks around the world, and even the little kittens and puppies. So, for heavens sake, what is this PC?” Sassy mimicked Katie’s explanation to her fellow soldiers that day the best she could now... “Oh that? That’s my way of saying God bless Pastor Donaldson, and Mr. and Mrs. Morris, Mr. Conners and Mrs. Conners, Miss Watson of course and Mr. Freemont. The Kearney’s, the Warner’s, the Jones’s, everybody in my church family back home.” You see, I want to pray for them every day because I know that they are doing the same for me!” “But, one time during a lonely night back at basic when I was laying there in my bunk at lights out praying for them individually, I fell asleep before I could finish with everybody. It had been a really hard day, and I was totally spent. I felt so guilty the next morning!” “So, I decided to kinda shorten it up a little bit to just “PC... Pierce Chapel.” “That way, I wouldn’t miss anybody, anymore, ever again!” Panning the faces of the crowd, Sassy could see many of them

dabbing at their eyes, smiling in remembrance of the sweet girl that Sassy was so accurately describing.

“Folks, as Katie would say... “That’s a “GHT,” a “God’s Honest Truth” story!” That comment brought a short burst of laughter from the congregation, the mood noticeably lighter. “That’s also how she got the nickname “Preacher.” I guess I was the first to hang it on her, but I felt that I owed her some payback for the nickname she had come up with for me.” “From that day on, Specialist Katie Thomas would forever more be known as “Preacher” throughout the entire unit. I thought that I was being pretty cute and clever giving her that name, and I thought it would embarrass her. As I’m sure you know by now, Boy was I wrong!” “Katie carried that name with the unapologetic pride of a disciple. I wanted you, her family to know that. Katie loved God, and she loved all of you so much... each and every one of you.” That statement softened the barrier of discipline that had kept the sobs until now muffled and quiet. A wave of emotion swept through the sanctuary, touching all who had gathered there. They were no longer timid in displaying their emotions. Janice Morris openly wept, and Miss Watson sniffled and wiped at her tears.

Again, Sassy carried them back to that fateful day, and the spot where she and Preacher’s fate lay in wait. She continued the story...

“Preacher had a lot to say to me that day. In my darkest hour, she was there with me. Thank you Jesus!” “When my body was broken, she was also there. While I writhed in pain and agony, she gave me comfort.” “When I had given up any hope of living, she shared her gift with me. Preacher shared the gift of Jesus Christ with me!” “The love of her Savior, her church, and you people of Pierce Chapel. She shared all that with me, and for that, I have truly been blessed!” “Thank you God for Katie Thomas, and thank you God for PC!” Sassy paused

before adding, “but most of all God, thank you for your son, our savior... Jesus Christ.” As Sassy reached this crescendo, the congregants erupted in a unanimous expression of praise. Amen’s and Halleluiahs resonated from every pew.

In a quieter tone now, Sassy resumed her narrative...

“Preacher gave me something else that day, something that I’ve kept with me everyday since. This gives me great pride, joy, and solace.” As she spoke, Sassy reached into the breast pocket of her finely trimmed uniform and carefully removed an elegantly simple gold cross dangling from a thin golden chain. Suspending it gently between her thumb and forefinger about shoulder high, she turned, looking at it lovingly as she continued. “This is a treasured gift given to me by my most treasured friend. Katie called it a special Christmas gift.” “Sassy, I want you to have this cross,” she said. “I received it when I was ten years-old. It was gifted to me when I was baptized the second time at Pierce Chapel.” “The first time of course was when I was a baby. I’ve had it close to me ever since.” “The power it invokes is real Sassy. Keep it close to you. Feel the warmth, accept the love.” “Take it, it’s ok, really it is.”

“I reached my trembling hand toward the cross she displayed in front of her, wanting so much to hold it close to me. Preacher extended her outstretched hands toward mine, and guided the small cross into my loose fist.” “Thank you Sassy,” she said, as she softly squeezed my hand.

Sassy, no longer able to completely contain her emotions, looked heavenward again. Tears escaped the corners of her eyes and coursed steadily down her cheeks. Extending her upturned palms, she went on... “I am so grateful to Katie. I accepted this cross, and I accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.” Amen’s again resounded throughout the tiny

church. “I expected death to take me that day,” Sassy continued, “but I was not afraid anymore.” “I had truly accepted Jesus. I knew now that everything was in his hands, just as Katie said it would be.”

“Katie Thomas was a loving and caring person. She had a very special way about her. A way that’s hard to describe exactly.” “She showed more love for me than I had shown for myself, or anyone else for that matter. Katie had a natural ability, a God given ability, to see the good in everything, and everybody. I’m sure that all of you know this too.” “She would have been a fine Pastor, had she survived.” “In fact, that was the last thing we ever talked about. I remember the very last words I ever heard her say, and I want to share them with you.” With that, Sassy returned to the darkened chamber of their entombment, the congregation fully absorbed.

“Preacher had just finished the Lord’s prayer. Though my body was broken, my heart which was now filled with the love and strength of God’s glory was strong.” “We were huddled close, facing each other, foreheads touching. Katie’s hands were cupping mine, both of us holding tight to the precious little cross.” “I remember telling her... “Preacher, you’re pretty good at this.” “What’s that Sassy?” “You know, the way you explained all of this to me. You made it so simple to understand, so clear.” “The power of God’s love, and how to accept it.” “Aw, I didn’t really do anything Sassy,” she replied in typical fashion. “God did all the work. All you had to do was ask.” “Well, still I want to thank you for showing me the light Katie.” Then I added with a little teasing, “With a little practice you might just become a real live preacher!” “Why you may even have your own church one day. Of course you would have to hone your skills a bit if you want to be one of those bigtime, slick-talking TV preachers.” We both laughed at that silly comment. She then told me about the last time she

was home on leave, and a conversation she had with you Pastor Donaldson.

“Last time I was on leave Sassy, my pastor and I talked about that some. I asked him what was the best way to hone one’s skills at preaching?” He told me something that had been revealed to him by a wise old man of the cloth when he was just a young preacher starting out.” “He leaned in close to me, and in a soft yet firm voice whispered... “It don’t really take much honing when it comes from the heart Katie.”

Sassy looked at Pastor Donaldson with a loving gaze as she addressed him directly now. “Pastor Donaldson, Katie loved and respected you very much. She wanted you to be proud of her, and you can be.” “You passed on to her, and she to me, that simple truth that has become my advice to young people too... “It don’t take much honing when it comes from the heart.” Noticeably touched by those remarks, Pastor Donaldson again removed his glasses and dabbed at his free-flowing tears, nodding his head in affirmation as he did.

“We were quiet for a few moments after that,” Sassy continued “and with the day’s events overtaking us, I guess we slipped away into the darkness.” “Only this time, my mind was more peaceful, and I was ready to die.”

“I don’t know how long I had been asleep this time, but I do recall how I was awakened. At first I felt something impacting my face.” “Not hard like a slap, more like a tickle. Then I felt it on the back of my head and neck.” “As I opened my eyes and struggled to regain focus, my vision slowly faded in. Small chunks of concrete pebbles and dust were drifting down from above me.” “I also heard the sound of shifting debris. Suddenly a terrifying thought crossed my mind... the remains of the wounded building that were balanced so precariously above our cocoon of protection was about to complete its final

collapse!” “Lord, please make it quick!” I prayed, closing my eyes again for perhaps the final time.

“Through my closed eyelids I could sense a glowing presence that seemed to get brighter with each passing second. Sort of like a fast approaching car with it’s high-beams on coming straight at you.” “I was convinced now that this was the end of my life on earth. Trying to prepare myself with a prayer of “Oh God, Oh God,” I willed my eyes open, expecting to see his face.” “A bright and blinding light stung my eyes, and I batted my eyelids feverishly in a desperate attempt to shield them, only to have them involuntarily snap shut again.” Not wanting to turn away from what I thought was the corridor to Heaven, I strained to open my eyes again. Cautiously this time, concentrating on adjusting my focus slowly. I wanted to meet my maker.” “As I did, I heard a faint sound, a voice I thought, though it wasn’t clear. Could this be the voice of God calling me home, I wondered?” The voice became louder and louder. It also became more distinct and understandable. “SOLDIER, YOU DOWN THERE... CAN YOU HEAR ME?” The voice, close upon me now, screamed again... “SOLDIER, CAN YOU SEE ME?” “LOOK... UP HERE!” Turning my head toward the voice, I saw above the halo of the glaring floodlight, a helmeted figure peering down on me through a hole in the debris. In an instant I realized that I was still alive, still of this earth. For a fleeting moment, I was disappointed.

“I managed to right myself on my elbows. Squinting up at the shadowy figures working intensely, but carefully trying to broaden the narrow opening...” “YES, I screamed back, or at least attempted to. My voice, weak and faint. Vocal cords deprived of water and damaged by the inhalation of the foul lingering dust not wanting to respond with anything other than a raspy whisper.” “YES...YES, WE’RE DOWN HERE.

PLEASE HELP US!” “I SEE YOU,” came the reply. “HANG IN THERE, WE’RE COMING TO GET YOU!”

“I was overcome with emotion at the realization that somehow we were going to survive this ordeal. As the rescuers inched closer, I turned ever so briefly to where Preacher was still sleeping and then back toward the light. I didn’t want to lose sight of them, lest the whole scene vanish like the fleeting memories of childhood had.” “Shaking her gently, I cried out... “Preacher, oh Preacher... we’ve been saved!” “Not getting a response from her, I tried again... “Preacher, wake up!” Just then, the first rescuer reached me, and tears of joy flooded my eyes, blurring my vision yet again.

Sassy paused for a long moment. Breathing deeply, losing the fight against the lump in her throat. With a clearly broken heart, she fought to continue...

“Everything from that point seemed to happen so fast. Unlike the time we were trapped, which seemed to be a lifetime.” “I guess you could sort of say that it *was* a lifetime for me. Deep within the rubble of that evil, I had been born into a new life.” “As I was being stabilized, another two or three rescuers descended. They helped to harness me into the Stokes litter that had been lowered, and prepped me for the lift.” “In what seemed to be only a moment or two, I felt myself being lifted head-first toward what was now an eerie silence.” “I was lifted out first. As I was being hoisted, I looked down to where I had just been. I saw another of the rescuers hunched over Katie, presumably to prep her for the next lift.” That would be the last time I ever saw Katie...”

“As I cleared the debris, I emerged into the soft glow of a surprisingly beautiful and peaceful sunrise. I only learned later that it was Christmas day and that we had been buried for more than eighteen hours.” “There were faces of unknown

soldiers coming in and out of my vision as I was carried to the waiting Blackhawk Medivac helicopter. They were all mouthing something, but I couldn't hear anything again, not even the chopping of the rotors whipping through the crisp early morning air." "But I could feel it..." "My other senses seemed to be on high alert. The shooting pain in my leg, the forceful downdraft of the chopper against my face, the stark high definition clearness of the faces, the curling smoke, the staggered pile of rubble that had been the Headquarters building... the vibrant colors of the sunrise. All in eerie silence." "Sometime shortly afterward, somewhere on the flight to the Air Force hospital at Balad, Iraq I lost consciousness. I did not wake again until after I had arrived at Walter Reed." I went home to recover... Katie, our beloved, precious Katie, went home to be with Jesus."

Joe and Marie Thomas sat embracing each other. Joe softly caressed the back of Marie's head, trying to soothe her as she fought to restrain the raw emotions that had been stirred by the public retelling of her daughters last moments on earth. She had heard it before during the private meeting that they had with Sassy the night before. That's when she had told Sassy that she wanted her to tell them all the truth, the whole... terrible... truth. But even in the loving arms of her husband and church family, it still hurt so much!

"It is said that God works in mysterious ways," Sassy continued. "Without Katie by my side that day I would have surely perished, both physically and spiritually. And, it was nothing short of a miracle that she was there." "The doctors stated in their final report that Katie died of massive internal injuries caused by concussive force, and blunt force trauma. In other words, by injuries received in the explosion and collapse. Injuries that caused instantaneous death." That's what the report says...

“But, what I can report is that Specialist Katie Thomas died saving the life of a fellow soldier, and I was that soldier!” “How can that be one might ask? How is that even possible? The doctors were clear that Katie could not have lived for even one hour after sustaining those injuries.” “I can only answer that God does indeed... work in mysterious ways!” The congregation erupted in a chorus of praise and admiration for the beautiful eulogy to their Katie, given so affectionately by this friend whose love for her was so indisputable. Sassy concluded...

“My friends, my *new* family... I want to finish by sharing this last thought.” She reached again for the simple gold cross and held it up for all to see. “From this day forward, I too will include in my bedtime prayer to our Heavenly Father the simple, but truly heartfelt inscription that Katie had placed on the back of this cross... “God Bless PC.”

The spirit and blessings of Christmas are not confined to this one twelve-day period at the end of the year. They are seen every day, all over the World. It just so happened that Sassy’s blessing *did* occur at Christmas time. One life lost, another saved. But was Katie’s life really lost? Perhaps her sacrifice was pre-ordained. Through her giving of both self and spirit, Katie helped Sassy to find Jesus. Jesus used Sassy to influence countless others throughout her life, never failing to mention the way in which she herself was influenced by Katie. Was Katie a Christmas Angel? I don’t know, that too may be one of God’s mysteries.

Merry Christmas...