

Christ's Tree



By Dr. Douglas Courtney

Merry Christmas 2015



CHAPTER 1

Rain splattered the windshield. Neither downpour nor sprinkle, it was as if each raindrop left its own pattern as it exploded on the unforgiving glass. Each pattern was easily discernable to anyone who chose to look. I sat on the passenger side of the car, my usual and comfortable place, well-worn after years of marriage. My eyes followed the windshield wiper as it swished the patterns of rain clean in preparation for the next act of nature's entertainment.

I wasn't really looking for anything in particular. The raindrops kept me as entertained as the Christmas lights outside. I was content, and in that contentment I was happy. The car's heater kept the chill at bay. The music on the radio led me to seductive memories of Christmases past. I only had to relax and attend to my own rest.

As I sat and enjoyed the moment, my thoughts turned to my husband, Harold. I wondered if men were able to easily abandon long-held beliefs. The Christmas traditions we enjoyed were supported, and often encouraged, by Harold. The live Christmas tree, the decorated house, the Christmas feast were all expected and created in a joint effort with Harold. None was left out or



questioned as to its necessity. Each was done in anticipation of a holiday celebration of a religion and religious figure we barely acknowledged or honored.

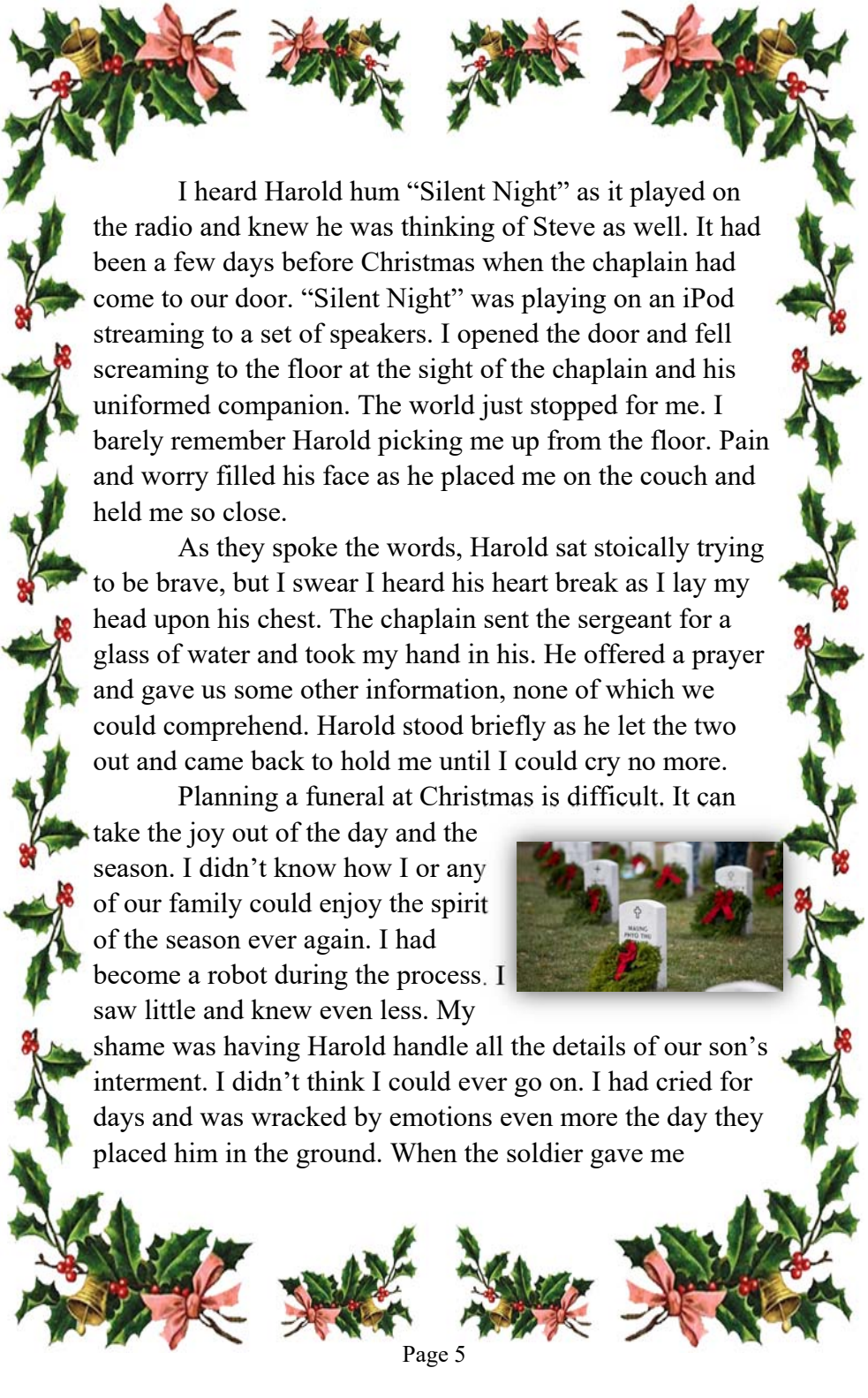
We continued our drive home and slipped into that familiar silence that only the radio music pierced. Marriage had nullified the need to keep up social patter when we were the only two in the vehicle, a trait I had come to cherish and enjoy. The silence led me even further into my darker thoughts about our Christmas. I thought of Steve, my precious Steve, ten years gone. My second son, killed by an IED in Afghanistan.



He had chosen the Army. It was what he'd wanted to do, not an act of courage based upon some patriotic sense of duty. Steve had joined as if one were applying for any other job. I never knew what inner emotion or character development had made him choose

being a soldier, but he excelled at it. It was a job he loved and loved doing.

I remembered his smile at Christmas, the boyhood leap of joy he had when the latest Army figure was unwrapped. His excitement permeated the house. I remembered his look as he gazed at the Christmas tree and studied each light, each ornament. Every tree seemed to tell a tale to my Stevie. He tried to remember them all, memories that would comfort in the hard times that would come.

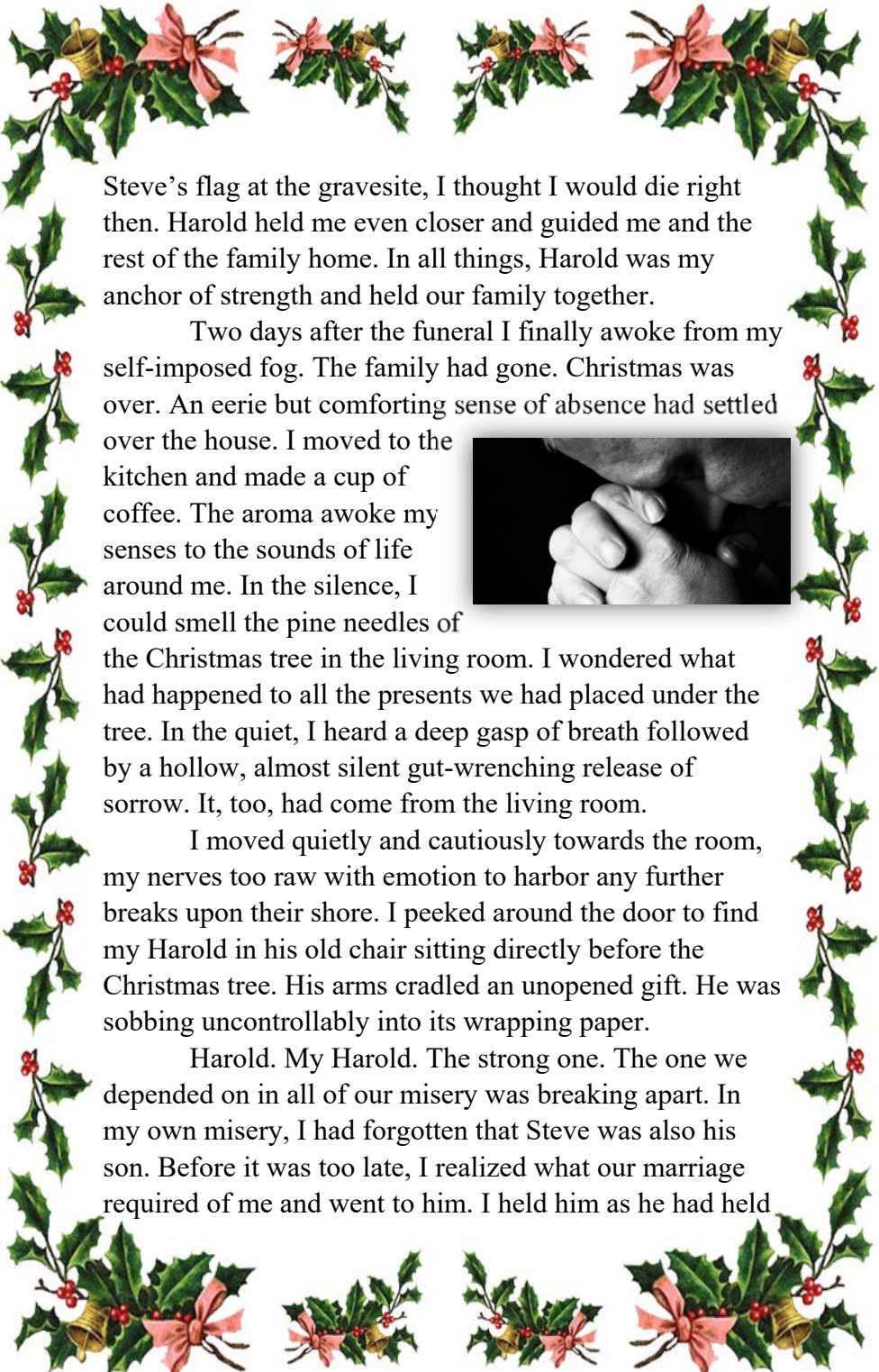


I heard Harold hum “Silent Night” as it played on the radio and knew he was thinking of Steve as well. It had been a few days before Christmas when the chaplain had come to our door. “Silent Night” was playing on an iPod streaming to a set of speakers. I opened the door and fell screaming to the floor at the sight of the chaplain and his uniformed companion. The world just stopped for me. I barely remember Harold picking me up from the floor. Pain and worry filled his face as he placed me on the couch and held me so close.

As they spoke the words, Harold sat stoically trying to be brave, but I swear I heard his heart break as I lay my head upon his chest. The chaplain sent the sergeant for a glass of water and took my hand in his. He offered a prayer and gave us some other information, none of which we could comprehend. Harold stood briefly as he let the two out and came back to hold me until I could cry no more.

Planning a funeral at Christmas is difficult. It can take the joy out of the day and the season. I didn’t know how I or any of our family could enjoy the spirit of the season ever again. I had become a robot during the process. I saw little and knew even less. My shame was having Harold handle all the details of our son’s interment. I didn’t think I could ever go on. I had cried for days and was wracked by emotions even more the day they placed him in the ground. When the soldier gave me





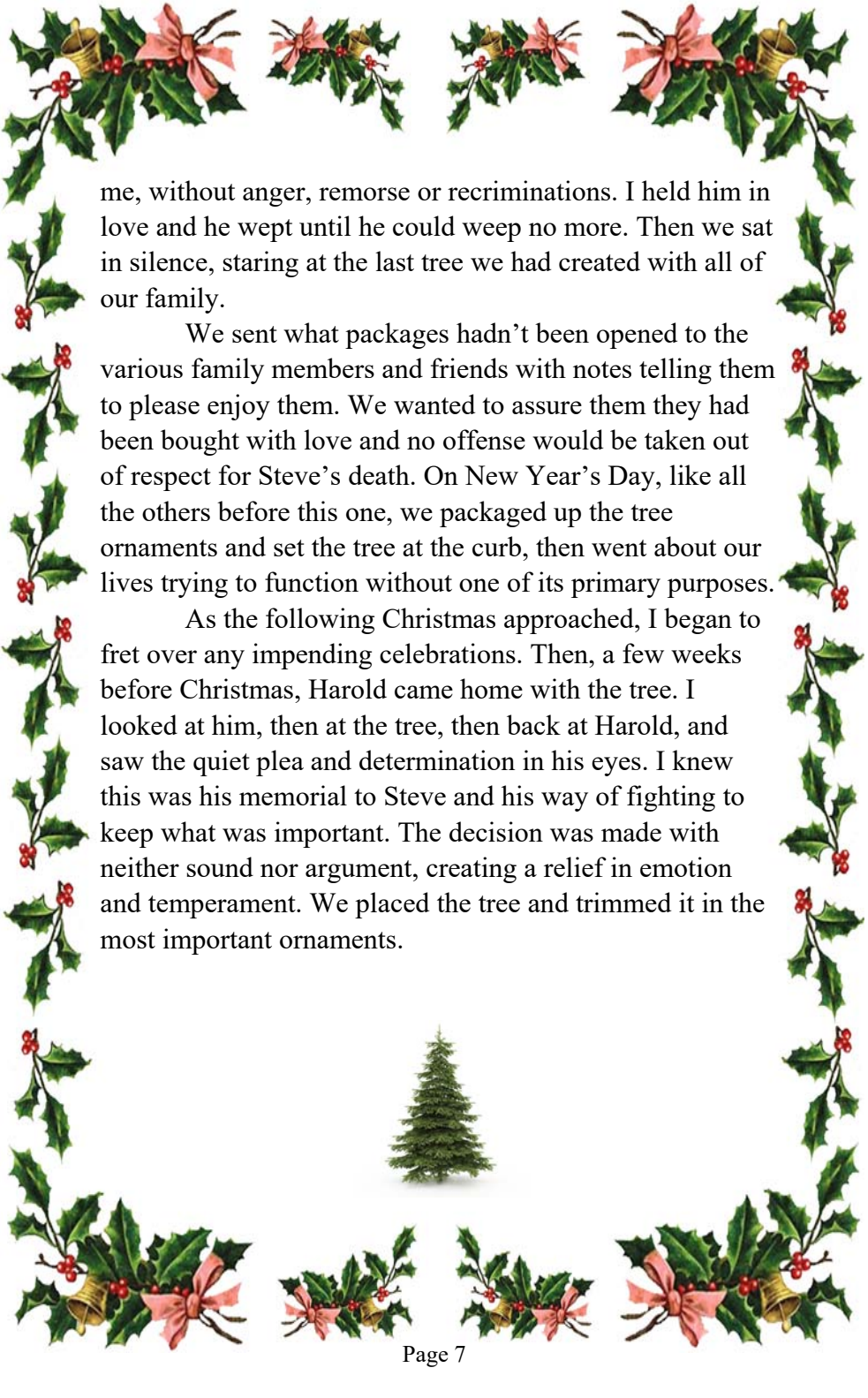
Steve's flag at the gravesite, I thought I would die right then. Harold held me even closer and guided me and the rest of the family home. In all things, Harold was my anchor of strength and held our family together.

Two days after the funeral I finally awoke from my self-imposed fog. The family had gone. Christmas was over. An eerie but comforting sense of absence had settled over the house. I moved to the kitchen and made a cup of coffee. The aroma awoke my senses to the sounds of life around me. In the silence, I could smell the pine needles of the Christmas tree in the living room. I wondered what had happened to all the presents we had placed under the tree. In the quiet, I heard a deep gasp of breath followed by a hollow, almost silent gut-wrenching release of sorrow. It, too, had come from the living room.



I moved quietly and cautiously towards the room, my nerves too raw with emotion to harbor any further breaks upon their shore. I peeked around the door to find my Harold in his old chair sitting directly before the Christmas tree. His arms cradled an unopened gift. He was sobbing uncontrollably into its wrapping paper.

Harold. My Harold. The strong one. The one we depended on in all of our misery was breaking apart. In my own misery, I had forgotten that Steve was also his son. Before it was too late, I realized what our marriage required of me and went to him. I held him as he had held



me, without anger, remorse or recriminations. I held him in love and he wept until he could weep no more. Then we sat in silence, staring at the last tree we had created with all of our family.

We sent what packages hadn't been opened to the various family members and friends with notes telling them to please enjoy them. We wanted to assure them they had been bought with love and no offense would be taken out of respect for Steve's death. On New Year's Day, like all the others before this one, we packaged up the tree ornaments and set the tree at the curb, then went about our lives trying to function without one of its primary purposes.

As the following Christmas approached, I began to fret over any impending celebrations. Then, a few weeks before Christmas, Harold came home with the tree. I looked at him, then at the tree, then back at Harold, and saw the quiet plea and determination in his eyes. I knew this was his memorial to Steve and his way of fighting to keep what was important. The decision was made with neither sound nor argument, creating a relief in emotion and temperament. We placed the tree and trimmed it in the most important ornaments.



CHAPTER 2

I listened to “Silent Night” come to an end. As we sped past an errant street lamp, I glanced at Harold and saw a single tear slide down his cheek. Soon his hand would rise to erase the tear. It was a habit he had adopted over the years and one in which I now found my own comfort. All would be well soon. The emotional tension would leave us, if but for a short while. I turned my attention to our neighborhood as we whizzed by each home.

Several had a few twinkling lights. One or two had quite a display. Harold slowed down to give me a good look at each of those. More than a few had no lights at all. Time, cost and energy had removed the necessity for many to participate in the annual rite. Harold pulled into our driveway where our display joined the neighbors’ that ascribed to the minimal requirements of festive lights.

My moments of reflection were shattered with the happy shriek of a little girl. Miriam was barging out our front door. My daughter and her children had come over for a surprise visit.

“Maw Maw! It’s so pretty. The tree is so big and pretty. There’s even presents under the tree!” Miriam exclaimed.



“Never know. One might even be for you, you little rascal.” Harold laughed as Mariam grabbed my hand and pulled me toward the front door.

“Really, Granpa? Really? There might be one for me?” she asked, her eyes growing big as saucers.

“Just might,” Harold replied, and another squeal escaped her lips.

I smiled at the teasing Harold was hopelessly inflicting on our granddaughter. I knew it would last until the present itself was opened Christmas day. It was a game they had played ever since Miriam first discovered Christmas presents, and one they both loved.

Judith, our daughter, was standing just inside the door.

“She thought you would never get home,” Judith grinned.

“Maw Maw had to work late again,” Harold said.

“They are working her to death this time of year,” Judith said with concern.

“Nothing I can’t handle, dear,” I assured her.

A cartoon could be heard playing on the TV set in the family room. The smell of spicy chili filled the house. The furnace had been turned up just so the whole house felt snuggly warm. I took off my coat, hung it in the closet and reached down to pick up my beautiful grandchild. The damp rain still lingered on her hair as



I cuddled her close. Her little arms wrapped around my neck and she squeezed tight. I carried her into the kitchen.

"Mommy says you have been cooking the chili all day. How can you cook when you aren't even home, Maw Maw?"

"Magic," I replied with a mischievous grin.

Miriam's eyes grew big again and she wiggled out of my arms and onto the floor.

"You mean like Santa magic?" she asked in all innocence.

"Probably just like Santa magic," Harold said.

"You want some magic chili, you rascal?"

"Uh-huh," Miriam pulled herself up onto a chair at the kitchen table.

I went to find some bowls and spoons while Harold stirred the pot a little.

"What are you doing here tonight? Thought you had some meeting at school?" I asked.

"We did. I did." Judith hesitated, obviously nervous about something. "That's why we came over." I turned to see what the problem might be.

"Miriam's going to be in the holiday pageant and we wanted to know if you could come."

Just like that the black hole entered our house once again. What had been a warm and inviting evening turned cold and distant. I couldn't control it. I didn't want to. It just happened.



The lights, the tree, the presents, all belied what Harold and my children knew. I had not yet reconciled with Christmas. I did not celebrate the season. There was no joy in the season. All I could feel was the cold blast of air that passed by the chaplain and that sergeant as they delivered the news about Steve. All I could see was the casket that carried my son. I didn't hear caroling. I heard taps.



It was dark. It was lonely. It is what burned in my soul. I didn't know the meaning of Christmas, nor did I feel the Christmas spirit. Worse still, I didn't want to know it. I could tell Miriam knew something bad had entered the house and she reached for her mother for comfort. I placed the spoons and bowls on the table and turned my back on everyone.

"I will be working that night. I won't be able to make it," I said, and quickly went to my study, a private room Harold had set up so I could be alone when I wanted. In my room there were no Christmas lights, no trinkets and no carols. It was quiet and dark, and I relished its solitude.

After a little more than an hour a small knock on the door broke my spell.

"They're gone. Chili was good, though. Brought you some," Harold said as he entered with a tray of chili, bread and a beverage.

For ten years Harold had put up with this blackness. He never judged. He never shirked. He just met each episode with kindness and warmth. I loved him for that.

Harold set the tray on my desk and sat on the only other chair in the room.

“One hundred and thirty died in Paris,” I said. “Thousands in the wars. Christians, Muslims, Arabs, Jews, Whites, Blacks, and I don’t know how many others. All in the name of some religion. I don’t want it. I can’t have it. Not here. Not now.”

It was my usual rant. Harold just sat and listened. He had heard it more than once. At first, he’d tried to argue. Then he’d tried to show me the good things still happening. Finally, he’d realized it was my process, my way of dealing with it all, and he just let me rant. It helped, but it never got rid of the blackness.



I no longer knew a religion. I was spiritual, but religion escaped me. I found I could not only love, but I could hate. I knew that I couldn’t in all good conscience honor and celebrate Christmas. It just wasn’t my faith. Even though I didn’t know what faith I believed in, Christmas wasn’t it. I reached for the chili and began to eat. Anger had made me quite hungry.

I had asked Harold once how he could continue to celebrate the holiday. After these many years of marriage, I knew he wasn't even as spiritual as I. So why did he bring it into our home year after year? Especially when it brought back so many bad memories? He had smiled and told me he would tell me when I was ready. It seemed I never was, and was never going to be.

I finished the chili as Harold watched. A sheepish grin began to spread across my face as my anger subsided. Harold reached out and I took his hand in mine. Warmth filled the home once more.



CHAPTER 3

Working evenings allowed me to avoid most Christmas events. It also allowed me to do my shopping in the mornings during the week. There were other



advantages as well, since most of the stocking of store shelves and discounts on many items took place at night. I often got great bargains and rarely had to look for substitutes on my shopping list.

I was enjoying these advantages the next morning after Harold left for work. Over the course of time, you begin to notice the same people are shopping or working at your store at the same time. You form a bond with these fellow shoppers even though you don't know their names. There's the short redhead who always needs help with items on the top shelf, and the veteran with the "miracle legs." I assume he lost both of his legs in the war and now wears prosthetics.

"Porterhouse" is the older man that always drives the meat man crazy looking for the finest porterhouse steaks. "Sally" is the checkout girl, but no one knows if that's her real name or the name that came with her smock. We assume "Gina" is the manager, because that's who is always being paged on the PA.

Then there's "Scarf Lady." She's quiet and moves quickly down the aisles. Her smallest is nestled in the

child's seat of the grocery cart as she picks her way through the store. I know the scarf is a hijab, but "Scarf Lady" seems a better fit in my mind. Her scarf and skin tone have her pegged as Muslim, but no one has ever asked, or seemed to care.

One of the few pleasures of my shopping experiences is the ability to be alone in my thoughts. Often I'll consider problems at work, tasks at home, or even questions of a more philosophical bent. At least philosophical enough for me. Nothing like exploring the significance of black holes while looking for the proper laundry detergent to get that greasy stain out.

The previous night's events had me delving into theory once more as I shopped. I watched Scarf Lady and wondered how she could wear that headdress and believe as she believed. If there is one God, does it matter how we pray to him as long as we prayed? Do you need to claim a religion to know a God? Why were the material aspects of man and woman so important to the divinity of a God? It seemed the more I thought about it, the more the worship of God seemed based on men and women's spiritual interpretations or requirements. These requirements were

then grouped together as a class and called a religion.

Wandering in produce, I picked up an orange. I brought it to my face and smelled the wonderful citrus scent only an orange can



emit, at the same time refreshing and invigorating. My eyes caught Scarf Lady's child sitting in her shopping cart. The child's eyes were awash with wonder at all the sights and sounds. Music played from the speakers and Christmas bunting splayed out from the store's nooks and crannies. The child cared not for the melodramatic intellectual musings on the meaning of Christmas. She just wanted to see and feel the beauty that surrounded her. She hung onto a piece of chocolate that smeared her face and relished living in the moment.



I smiled at the sight and my smile caught the little girl's eye. She smiled back with a huge chocolate-covered grin. Her mother turned from the produce at hand and caught our small exchange. Scarf Lady smiled and waved a little wave at me. I returned the gesture as I placed the orange into a plastic bag for future consumption. A small act of kindness gave a strong feeling of happiness. It seemed intellectually important. But more, it seemed spiritual. I pondered the moment as I moved toward the next aisle, heading for a box of cereal.

It was probably ten minutes after my exchange with Scarf Lady's child, although it seemed like only moments had passed, when a raised voice could be heard sprinkled with a liberal dose of obscenities. Taught early to protect myself, I initially moved to an aisle farther

away to avoid any issue with the perpetrator. As I was making the turn into paper goods I heard the shriek of a terrified child. Mothering instincts took over and my left turn into paper goods became a right turn back toward produce and meats.

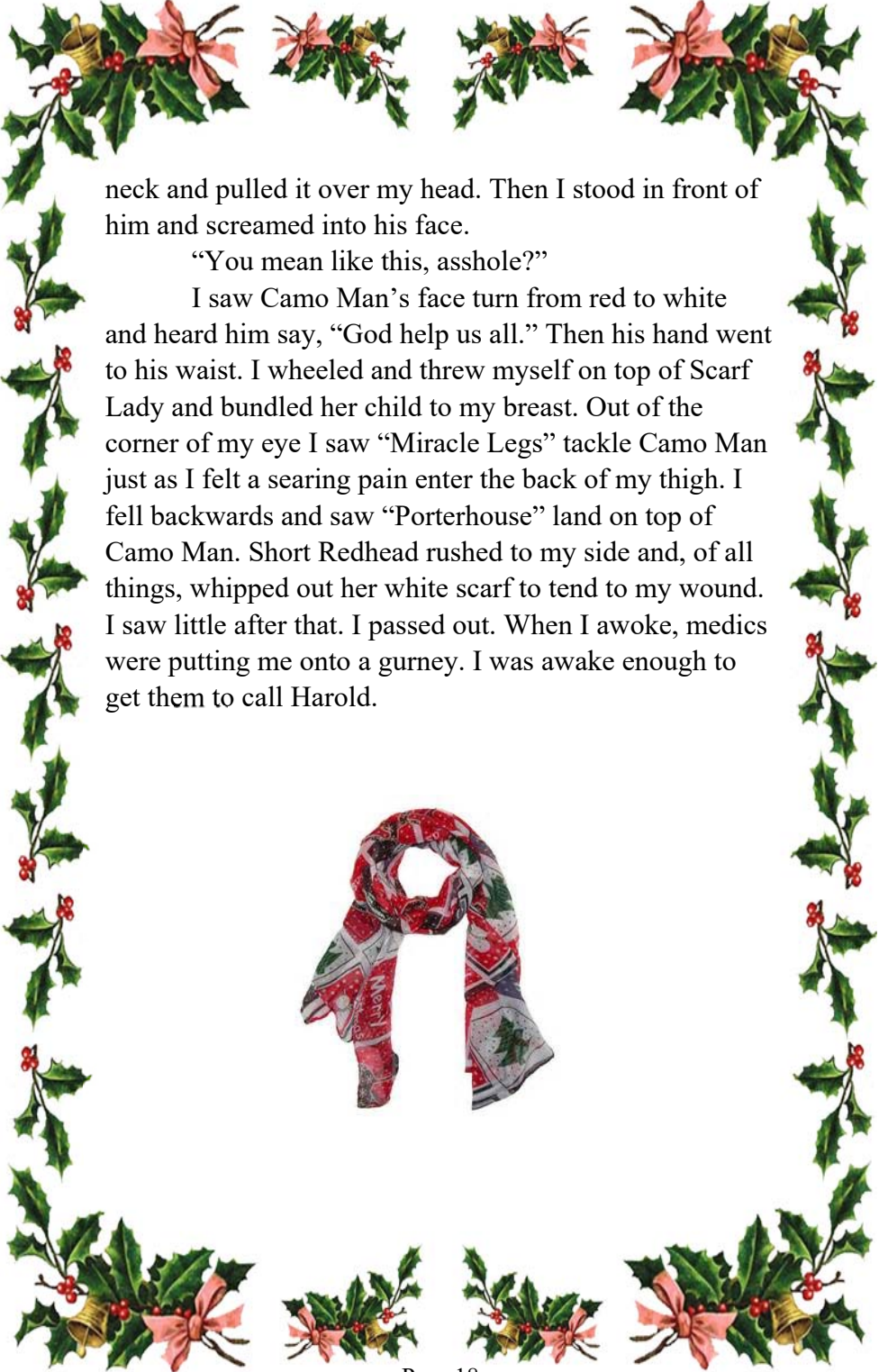
As I pushed my cart toward the meat department, I saw a burly man -- black hair, unkempt beard, dressed in that crazy camo hunting gear and sporting a holstered gun. He was yelling and pointing at someone he had backed into a corner. As I moved closer I spotted the focus of his anger: Scarf Lady. She was trapped and terrified. Her child was screaming and crying. I left my cart and rushed into the confrontation between Scarf Lady and Camo Man.



“What the hell are you yelling about?” I screamed at him. Screaming seemed to be the only method of conversation that grabbed this fool’s attention. I moved slowly between him and Scarf Lady.

“That bitch!” he yelled. “She’s wearing one of those Arab scarfs. She supports those terrorists,”

Between the rushing adrenaline and the screaming, the sheer absurdity of that statement stunned me into momentary silence. Camo Man’s face was turning beet red from self-induced anger. He also seemed to be expecting me to validate and support his actions. In a moment of personal stupidity, I grabbed the scarf draped around my



neck and pulled it over my head. Then I stood in front of him and screamed into his face.

“You mean like this, asshole?”

I saw Camo Man’s face turn from red to white and heard him say, “God help us all.” Then his hand went to his waist. I wheeled and threw myself on top of Scarf Lady and bundled her child to my breast. Out of the corner of my eye I saw “Miracle Legs” tackle Camo Man just as I felt a searing pain enter the back of my thigh. I fell backwards and saw “Porterhouse” land on top of Camo Man. Short Redhead rushed to my side and, of all things, whipped out her white scarf to tend to my wound. I saw little after that. I passed out. When I awoke, medics were putting me onto a gurney. I was awake enough to get them to call Harold.



CHAPTER 4

Christmas music awakened me. I was groggy, but awake enough to see I was in the local hospital, and that was a good thing. It had been a long time since I'd been pleased to hear Christmas music.



"I had to assure them you weren't Muslim," a familiar voice said from the left side of my bed.

"Harold, I'm so sorry. I didn't think. I mean, in a store? In our town? I'm so sorry, Harold." I started to cry as I suddenly realized what I could have lost and who would have suffered the pain.

Harold ran his hands through my hair and leaned down to kiss my forehead.

"No worries. You're with me now," Harold said. He continued to say soothing words quietly into my ear until I stopped weeping.

"Amalia stopped by to see if you were alright," he said.

"Who's Amalia?" I asked in all innocence.

Harold laughed and shook his head. It took a minute for him to regain his composure.

"She was the woman holding the child. The one you protected in the store."

"Oh, Scarf Lady. That's her name?"

Harold chuckled some more. Then he got serious.

“Why did you do it, Sheila? Why did you put yourself between them? And why, oh why, did you put that scarf on your head?”

“There was a child, Harold. I couldn’t turn away.”

“But the scarf?”

“That was for Stevie.”

“Stevie?”

I got quiet, then began to express what I knew but had not been able to say before.

“I wasn’t there, Harold. I know I couldn’t be there. Moms can’t be everywhere. But I wasn’t there when Stevie died. He was someplace I never knew. He was

protecting the people around him. He was protecting us. When he got hurt, when he died, I wasn’t there to hold his hand. I wasn’t there to make sure everything was done. He must have

looked into the eyes of some stranger, if he could see at all. I often wondered if he smelled the dirt when he died. Did he feel the hand of someone who cared? Was the sky blue? Did he feel pain? Did he think of me, of us, when he passed? Did his death even matter to anyone but us? Was he looking forward to Christmas? Did he even still believe?



“He died in a country that didn’t give a damn about Christmas or even him. But he died so they could go on living and believing as they wanted. As they were taught. If that kind of freedom was important enough for Stevie, then it was important enough for me.”

Harold sat and looked at me for a long moment, a deep look, the kind that sees into your soul.



“Good enough,” Harold said.

That was it. That was all Harold said. “Good enough.” But it *was* enough. It was more than enough. He supported me in those words. He didn’t condemn me or my actions, and he acknowledged that what was important to me was important to him. I reached for his hand and squeezed it. A small knock came at the door.

“Come in,” I said.

Scarf Lady entered. I mean Amalia. She opened the door and peaked around it. I motioned her to come in.

She came to the bedside and grabbed my hand.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much. I didn’t know what to do and Talia was screaming. And, oh thank you.”

Amalia started to cry. I reached for a Kleenex with my free hand. I handed it to her. She took it and smiled. She started to gather composure and Harold stood up to

give her his seat. He left the room to give us some time alone.

"I was so scared," Amalia said. "But he said the people were good here. The people cared for everyone here. He said there were a few bad ones, but most of the people were good. He was right."

"Who are you talking about?" I asked.

"The Christ tree man," Amalia replied with a smile.

"You mean Christmas tree?" I asked.

"Well there are Christmas trees. But this was the Christ tree man. The man who believed in Christ's trees," Amalia replied.

I was seriously confused. Amalia saw that I was and laughed her small laugh.

"I will tell you a story. I come from Afghanistan.



In our country, there are few Christians. Most follow Islam. When the Americans came, not all embraced their arrival. We practiced the faith and traditions of our fathers and mothers. We also found the faiths and traditions that the Americans brought very strange, especially Christmas. You cannot imagine, I am sure, how we perceived the idea of putting a large green tree in a house to celebrate the birth of the prophet Jesus Christ.

“You must excuse me. I forget. I do not mean to offend, but in our faith Jesus Christ is considered a very important prophet, although not the son of God,” Amalia said, a bit uneasily.

“You don’t offend me. Go ahead, please.” I was beginning to think how odd a Christmas tree in a house actually is.

“Well, after a couple of years we got used to the celebration. We still thought it odd, but the Americans never insisted we observe their tradition, nor did they impose their religion upon us. We came to a mutual understanding. Until the Christ tree man.

“He was a soldier who loved your Christmas time. He was very generous and often gave little toys and gifts to the children during Christmas time. Well, the local Mullah thought this soldier might be trying to convert Muslims to Christianity by giving gifts, so he confronted the soldier in the middle of our village. The soldier was not afraid, nor was he intimidated. He sat right down in the middle of the road and bade the Mullah sit with him. The Mullah sat with him. The soldier then asked the Mullah about his concerns. It was in this place we learned the power of the message of the prophet Jesus Christ.

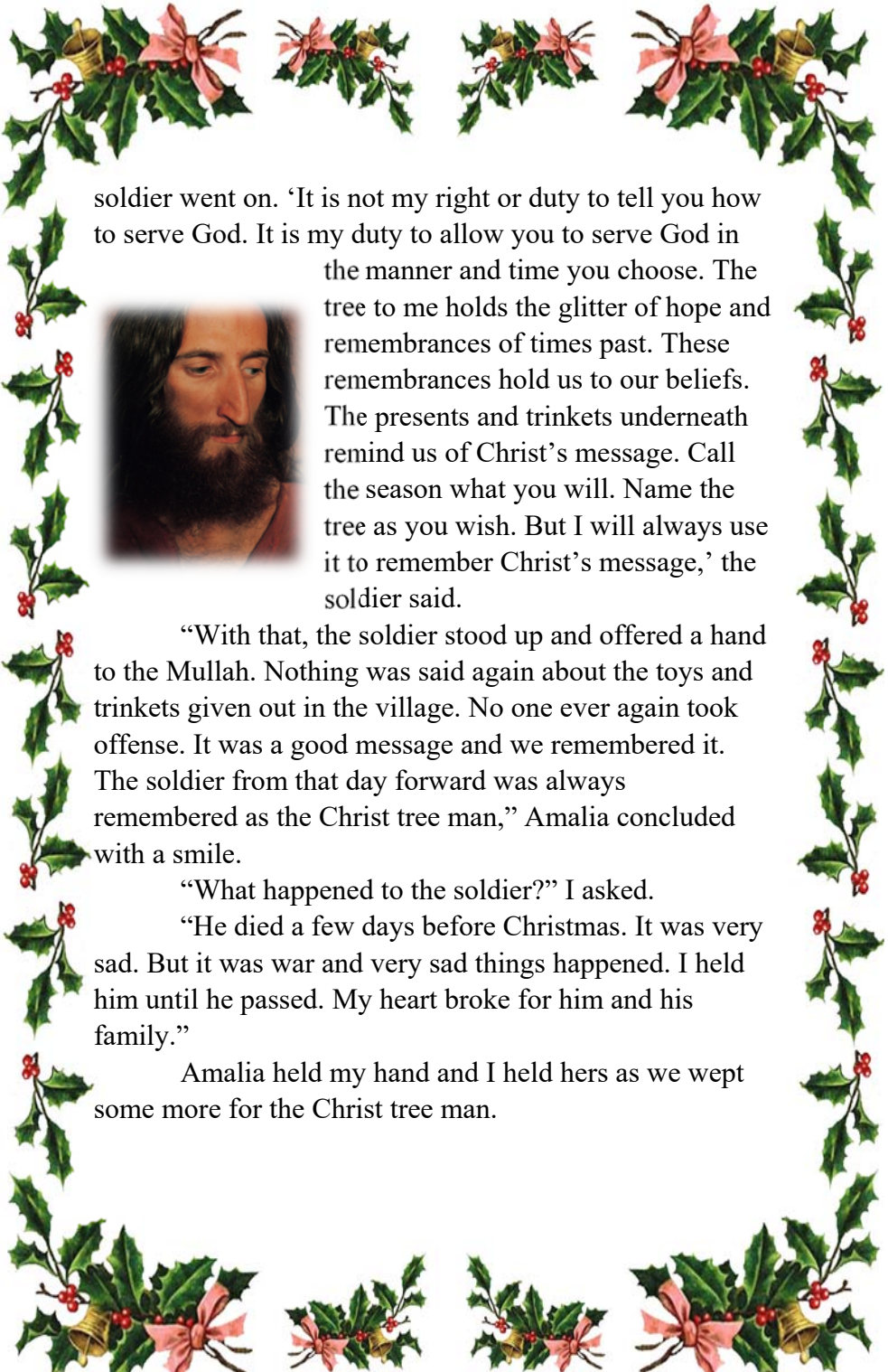


“The soldier told the Mullah that many in the Christian faith did regard Christmas as the day of Jesus Christ’s birth. He told him that the weight of tradition and belief mark the day as such in the Christian faith around the globe. But, he also told him that all of those that celebrate Christmas are not of the same belief. Learned men and women who celebrate this faith know that Christ was born in early spring. Men and women of faith know that Christmas was an adoption of a pagan holiday by the Christian church. These same men and women also know the Christmas tree is an offshoot of a pagan ritual celebrating the winter solstice.



“The Mullah then asked the soldier if such information was known, why then did Christians and others celebrate Christmas at this time and use the Christmas tree? The soldier told him the answer was simple: tradition and personal beliefs. But really, the dates and trappings were not important. Also, what names the trappings and the season were given were not important. What was important was the message, the message of Jesus Christ.

“The Mullah asked the soldier what he thought Christ’s message was. Without hesitation the soldier replied, ‘Do unto others as you would wish they do unto you.’ The Mullah was quiet at this revelation, so the



soldier went on. ‘It is not my right or duty to tell you how to serve God. It is my duty to allow you to serve God in the manner and time you choose. The tree to me holds the glitter of hope and remembrances of times past. These remembrances hold us to our beliefs. The presents and trinkets underneath remind us of Christ’s message. Call the season what you will. Name the tree as you wish. But I will always use it to remember Christ’s message,’ the soldier said.

“With that, the soldier stood up and offered a hand to the Mullah. Nothing was said again about the toys and trinkets given out in the village. No one ever again took offense. It was a good message and we remembered it. The soldier from that day forward was always remembered as the Christ tree man,” Amalia concluded with a smile.

“What happened to the soldier?” I asked.

“He died a few days before Christmas. It was very sad. But it was war and very sad things happened. I held him until he passed. My heart broke for him and his family.”

Amalia held my hand and I held hers as we wept some more for the Christ tree man.

CHAPTER 5

I was home by Christmas Eve. Flowers, baskets of goodies, and well wishes had been received from all my family, friends, coworkers and many more I had never known. My leg was sore but healing well. Amalia, her husband, and Talia had visited my hospital room often. I learned they lived but two blocks from us and I was beginning to relish our new friendship. They said they would be by later to see Christ's tree and I looked forward to it. My daughter had been cleaning up the house for my arrival and ensured me all would be set for Amalia's visit.

In late afternoon I was sitting on the couch looking up at Christ's tree, my leg stretched out before me so the stitches wouldn't tear. The largesse of gifts under the tree was the most generous I had ever seen. But my thoughts kept returning to the soldier in Afghanistan. I saw him sitting in the dirt, talking to strangers and telling them not to fear him, telling them he was there to protect them, telling them about his beliefs.

I was impressed by the strength and goodness of such a man. I wondered if I could work through my own Christmas darkness from his convictions.



Harold sat down next to me. "It began in an abandoned church," he said.

"What did?"

“The reason I celebrate.”

Harold was finally going to tell me. I just needed to be quiet and listen.

“The church had been abandoned for years. It was basically just another building, four walls and a roof. I was sent to tear it down and get the land ready for a condominium. I had been in abandoned buildings before and didn’t expect anything different, but when I walked into the nave of that abandoned church, a feeling and presence seemed to engulf me. The feeling lifted me up and I became calm in its manifestation.

“I shrugged this feeling off to imagination and went about my work. I tore the building down. But then on our trip to Rome, we walked in a ruined temple and the same feeling prevailed. And again later, in a church at home. Everywhere that people had met and joined in devotion, regardless of the religion’s name, I felt this sense of calm and peace. It was so prevalent, I couldn’t believe it was just my imagination.



“Now, I know there is evil in this world. That was evident in the man at the store whose fear was so great he attacked a small woman and her child in anger. But as there is evil, there is also good. The good was in full evidence when you threw your body on top of a stranger’s child to protect it from harm. The knowledge

that there is good and evil allows me to understand the feelings I have in places of strong devotion. When people come together to work for the betterment of all, the feeling lingers. Good continues to exist, even after the people have long since gone.

“Christmas, in spite of us, calls us all, of all religions, all faiths, even those with no faith whatsoever, to the good. This calling creates good deeds and good will. It is the Christmas spirit, and it lingers long after we are gone. It is the one time of year we all stop and consider one another. We try to do good. We will never know the extent



of the good that we create or how it will be repaid. So yes, the loss of Steve at Christmas creates a dull ache in my heart. That will never go away. But the Christmas spirit will overcome in the end. We just have to do our part to pass on the good to

those who follow.

“So I have Christmas and a tree. It is my belief, my spirituality. And the smile on children’s faces confirm its reality.”

Harold paused and looked at me but a moment. I was still reflecting on what he’d said when the doorbell rang. Harold went to the door and I could hear shouts of greeting. I turned, expecting to see Amalia, but was greeted

instead by “Porterhouse,” “Miracle Legs” and “Short Redhead” and their families. My heart filled with gratitude and I wanted to give each a big hug. They wouldn’t let me, though, and each in turn leaned down to hold me tight.

With the last hug, the doorbell rang again. Harold returned to the door and a small girlish child laughed loudly. Talia had arrived. I was sure Amalia was with her. Then I heard a scream and Amalia’s shrill voice echoed through the house.



“Christ tree man! Christ tree man!” Amalia screamed it over and over until Harold could finally bring her to me.

Amalia was holding the picture of my Stevie in his uniform. We’d always kept it by the front door with pictures of all the members of our family.

“I don’t understand. She saw Steve’s picture and began screaming,” Harold said, bewildered and worried.

Amalia sat down next to me and pointed to Stevie’s picture.

“It’s the Christ tree man! He is the one that came to my village. He talked to the Mullah. He sent you to me to protect me. He still protects all of us,” she sobbed.

When I understood what Amalia was saying, tears filled my eyes and a soft unrelenting light broke through my darkness. The heavy burden I’d been carrying so long

simply fell away. I realized that in a far-off land, in a land of hell and hate, my son had known the Christmas spirit and passed it on without judgement or prejudice. I knew then he had not died in vain or alone. He had been held by someone who cared, and cared for him. It was a mother's wish. It was a Christmas wish. I looked at my Christ tree and was at peace.

Harold came over and gave me a hug.

"It's the Christmas spirit," he said, smiling broadly.

I hugged him back. My daughter brought over some drinks and turned on some music. A party broke out in spite of myself.

In the middle of it Miriam walked by.

"Hey, sweet thing. Tell me all about your play."

"Really?" Miriam asked.

"Yes, really."

Miriam's eyes grew big and I sat her on my lap where she could give a full, detailed accounting of her Christmas play. I, for the first time in a long time, paid rapt attention.





May you enjoy the Christmas Spirit
The whole year!

Merry Christmas
and
A Happy New Year!



Hope Your 2016
is
Wonderful