

THE PROLOGUE TO THE SIDEWALK PREACHER'S TALE:

"Well that was an excellent story," said the street preacher. "I certainly enjoyed the comical names and the various references to popular works of literature. But I would love to share with you a tale I have. I must admit, I'm not much of a storyteller. In my line of work, most of the stories I tell have already been told for centuries. So forgive me, but the only story I have for you today is a story loosely based around my own life. I will at times take some creative liberties so I will refrain from using my own name. Instead, I will use the name of my good friend, Ralph Childrew. May I begin?" he asked.

"By all means," said the Drifter.

"Yeah, man, go on. I'm excited," said Hank.

"Alright," the sidewalk preacher said. "Ralph Childrew was the son of two Catholic immigrants from Denmark. They had come to England just before the war broke out, leaving with nothing more than what his father could hold in his wallet. He was born towards the end of the conflict and had grown up in a country reeling from the effects of German bombings. His parents had tried their best to raise him in the proper Catholic manner. He went to the local Church daily, had a confirmation at the age of thirteen, and graduated from a Catholic preparatory school with full honors. He went on to attend Oxford Law school and soon earned his degree in corporate law. He was immediately offered a job at England's biggest firm, Loughran and Burke. Around this time, as he was looking for an apartment, he met a lovely young woman by the name of Margaret Riley and immediately was taken by her charm and good looks. He did everything within his power to win her over but much to his surprise, there was no need: she was just as smitten as he was.

"They soon married and settled in an apartment on the corner of Livingston and Mandrake streets, just outside the subway entrance. They had one child, a son whom they named Jeremy. Jeremy was a small baby, only about

seven pounds, but he had the same bright blue eyes and large pointy nose that Ralph had. Even from the start, the baby attached itself to Ralph more than to his mother, Margaret. Realizing the special bond between his child and him, Ralph dedicated every minute of his free time to raising Jeremy to be a smart boy. On days he didn't have to go in to the office, Ralph would take Jeremy to the park and sit with him to feed the ducks and chase squirrels up trees. As Jeremy grew in height and weight, Ralph continued to maintain a special bond with his son – one which Ralph hoped and prayed would last through Jeremy's teenage years. At the age of fourty-two, everything was falling into place for Ralph: a happy, healthy family and a steady paycheck. He had begun to look for a house in the country so Jeremy would have more room to grow. But things were about to take a drastic turn for the worse on one crisp October morning.

“He walked out of his apartment and straight down to the subway, skipping his morning ritual of coffee and a newspaper at the corner market. It was 7:32 in the morning and Ralph had promised his colleague that he would be there at 7:30 to review for the upcoming case. As he looked down at his watch and realized the time, he broke into a slow jog, trying not to look too much out of the ordinary. He reached the steps and immediately felt the welcoming gust of wind and the sharp screech as a train left the station. He shifted his brown leather briefcase from his right hand to his left in order to hold on to the stairway railing and briefly looked up to check if the clouds had rolled in. As he did so, he felt his foot miss the next step and he felt his balance shifting. Trying to regain his footing to and continue descending the stairs at the same time, his other foot came out from underneath him, sending Ralph into a horrifying tumble down the stairs. He heard a sharp crack and felt his arm bend awkwardly underneath him, giving way to the bulk of his torso. But he was falling too quickly to even feel the pain and was helpless to stop the tumble. Step after step passed underneath him until his body turned in such a way that he was able to see

directly ahead of him. He saw the next step rushing up to meet him, on a direct course with his head. He desperately attempted to throw his arms out but was too late. The stair hit him with full force in the face, breaking his neck and jaw in several places. Lying on the cold tile floor, a couple of feet from the turnstiles, Ralph could feel his grip on life slipping away. He gave in and let himself be carried away by the waves of pain as they permeated throughout his body. He figured it was end when he could barely make out the people standing over him. He tried to make out their faces to see if his wife was there but he could not focus. Between blinks, his vision faded away. He opened his eyes once more and then it went black.”

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HERE BEGINS THE TALE OF THE SIDEWALK PREACHER:

“Morning, John. Newspaper, please.”

“Surely, Mr. Childrew. That’ll be two shillings.” As Ralph reached in his pocket for the change, hoping it would be there, John, the owner of the newspaper stand, added, “So where are you gonna set up today, Mr. Childrew?”

“Oh, I’m not completely sure. They say the rain is coming in again in a couple of hours so I’ll probably just set up inside.”

John nodded his head agreeably and replied, “Well, do come back if you need anything.”

“Of course, John. Have a nice day.” Ralph tucked the daily news underneath his left arm and reached with his hand to pull the cap on his head a little tighter over his ears. He stuck his hand into his pockets to see how much money he had, but all he came up with was a crinkled flyer from a local Church. He opened it up and began to read it, trying to divert his attention from the fact that money was beginning to become an issue.

As he neared the subway entrance, he looked up to make sure no one had taken his spot. For the past five years, Ralph had occupied the same general location outside of the subway entrance. On good days, the rare days in which it wasn't raining, Ralph would jump at the opportunity of setting up his things outside and enjoying the fresh air. But on days like this, Ralph was left with no other option but to set up indoors.

It would be incorrect to say that Ralph loved the subway. He disliked the cold, damp air that smelled faintly of human excrement and he was annoyed by many of the people who normally used the subway, especially the rowdy kids coming home from school everyday. But he forced himself to accept it, they were all children of Jesus and he had to love them as his own. Such was the life Ralph chose for himself following the incident.

Ralph made his way down the stairs to the platform and slung his blue backpack off from his shoulder and began to unpack his things. He took out the frayed red shawl that he used partly as a blanket, partly as a cushion, and partly as a method of making sure his books of God never came into contact with the filth of the subway floor. He unfolded it and laid it across the ground, noticing the hole in the center was bigger than the last time he had noticed it. He then took out his books. The Holy Bible was followed by various other copies of Bibles in different languages. These in turn were followed by hundreds of pamphlets and flyers Ralph had designed for display and to hand to the everyday traveler. And last but not least, Ralph took out the cardboard signs that had been jutting out awkwardly, not allowing him to close the backpack fully. He hung the signs up around him using the same gray duct tape and settled down to gather his thoughts.

"What's on the docket today?" he thought to himself. Although he had been at it for an extended period of time, preaching on the streets still presented Ralph with the same challenges everyday. How would he attract the attention of

people rushing to and from places? What material could he present and what material would people find offensive? Who was his target audience? Such were the dilemmas in his head when he was interrupted by Charles, the homeless, African American beggar who had become his lone friend and confidant.

“What’s new, father?” he said facetiously.

“Charles, let me tell you again: I’m not a priest. You can call me Ralph,” Ralph responded, playing along.

“I see, Ralph. So, father, what’s the topic for mass today?”

Ralph chuckled. “Well if you must know, I haven’t a clue. I’m still deciding between the Jesus-Is-Coming line or the Avoid-The-Devil line,” Ralph responded, referring to his two favorite themes for preaching.

“I think I’m in the mood for something different. How about the How-To-Get-Into-Heaven theory. I think the congregation would like that,” Charles said, smiling and gesturing partly to the mass of people walking by and the various other people who called the subway home, the beggars and the prostitutes.

“You know I don’t take requests but I’ll see what I can do, Charles.”

“Thanks, Ralph. If you need anything, I’ll be right around the corner.”

Despite the fact they conversed like this on a daily basis, Ralph never ceased to be amazed at Charles’s upbeat attitude and his positive outlook on the world. Ralph longed to view the world through Charles’s eyes because it was his impression that Charles didn’t know what pain or suffering was. Ralph, on the other hand, was well accustomed to those feelings. Ever since his family left him – or rather, he left his family – the anguish of not having anyone to love continued to grow on him. He attempted to find solace in the everyday atmosphere of the subway, hoping that one day, God would reward his piety with inner peace. But the peace never came for Ralph and he continued to search for it everyday in those same halls. There was some comfort in seeing the same people everyday, Charles, John, the newspaper-stand owner, and the other

regulars in the subway, the people Ralph liked to refer to as “the drifters.” These were people of ill-repute who clearly had strayed from God’s path but Ralph tried to do his best to respect them. But try as he might, he could not bring himself to think of them as equals. To him they were the proverbial “scum” of the subway – a notion that he kept inside of him for fear of ruining his credibility as a man of God.

After collecting his thoughts, he put out his donations jar (which was nothing more than a used coffee cup) and, with the Bible in his hand, proceeded to begin his preaching. “I would like to begin by thanking you in advance for listening to what I have to say. Today, I will be talking about salvation and the path to heaven. I will begin my discussion with a selection from the Good Book . . .,” and he proceeded to give his message to the crowd. As he watched the people pass by, he would sometimes look one or two people in the eye to catch their attention, but for the most part he was not talking to anyone in particular. It seemed upsetting to Ralph that no one seemed to care about what he had to say, save for the occasional “Amen!” he heard from Charles and some of the other regulars. He understood that people were consumed in their own affairs, jobs and personal lives, but he could not understand why no one found it important to listen to religion and include it in their lives. Nevertheless, Ralph continued preaching in the subway, believing that one day he would change someone’s life in much the same way that the incident on the stairway had changed his.

Ralph continued to preach throughout the day, becoming passionate at times until his energy wore out around nine o’clock in the evening. Instead of rushing off to the shelter which he had been sleeping in, Ralph decided to take a short little nap, thinking he had earned it after a hard day’s worth of sermonizing. When he woke up, he glanced at the clock and saw that it was around 11:15 PM. He knew that the subway was closing in about half an hour, so he began to pack up his stuff. Besides, he thought, there was little if any

commuter traffic at these times and he would be wasting his time continuing his sermon.

As he reached down to the money cup to see what kind of a meal he could afford for that night, he heard a sound coming from around the corner. He heard the echoes of muffled voices and the scuffling of shoes. Unaccustomed to hearing much of anything at these times, Ralph calmly walked down to the corner to see if it was Charles or someone else he knew. The moment he turned his head around to look down the hall, he saw two well dressed Caucasian men crowding around a homeless man who was sitting on the floor with his hands up in a defensive position. It was Charles.

“Hey, Mike, get a load of this guy. He thinks he has the right to come into *our* subways and spread his filth around,” one of the men said to the other.

“Yeah, what makes you think we like your kind around here? Huh?” said the other. Charles responded, but his voice was trembling too much for Ralph to hear. Apparently, his response didn’t please the two men and Ralph watched as the one named Mike kick Charles in the face.

“What’d you say? You say you want more? Is that what you said?” and with that the first man took his turn in kicking Charles in the face. Ralph watched as the men rained kick after kick onto Charles who, at this time was hunched over with his hands over his head. Ralph was so shocked at the whole scene that he felt like vomiting. He knew he should have done something to , it but every time he tried to muster up the courage to barge in, something inside of him made him halt in his tracks. He tried desperately to find the will to rise up against the senseless violence. There was Charles, the man who had been Ralph’s only true friend since he became a preacher, getting violently beaten up and Ralph was too weak to respond to Charles’s cries for help.

“God will protect me,” Ralph kept repeating to himself, hoping it would stimulate his muscles into action. But the feeling in his stomach kept getting

worse and his muscles remained stationary. As Ralph struggled with his own weakness, the men started beating Charles harder and harder.

“Sam, I think we need to send a message to his kind, right here, right now. Let’s tell ‘em that they’re not welcome anymore,” Mike said, in between punches to Charles’s body. The beating continued for another 10 minutes or so until Charles’s broken, bruised, and bloodied body failed to get back up again. Then, Ralph, watched as the men spit on his body and took his change cup, laughing to themselves as they counted how much Charles had managed to make. They began to walk away, right up the hallway to where Ralph was standing with his back against the wall and his face drenched with sweat. Ralph realized they were coming and tried to run away but realized he couldn’t move a muscle. Literally paralyzed with fear, Ralph could do nothing more than break into tears and fall over, putting his head between his arms and hoping that the men would pass right on by. And to his great surprise, they did. He watched as they walked right past him as if they had just gotten off the latest train. He watched as they ascended the stairs and walked off into the dead of night.

Ralph lay there, breathing hard in between sobs, not knowing what to do next. He looked over at Charles lying on the floor, a trail of blood trickling out of his mouth. He knew he had forsaken Charles. At the moment when Charles needed him most, Ralph was too worried about his own personal safety to do anything. The thoughts raced through Ralph’s head. “It can’t be my fault. Charles is my friend and I did all that I could to help him.” Refusing to blame himself for his failure to respond, Ralph’s thoughts immediately turned towards his God. “Why did God abandon me? How could he have let something like this happen? What kind of a God would allow a homeless man to be beaten up?” But then Ralph realized what he was thinking and quickly reassured himself. “No! God is merciful! God is all-powerful! Everything is part of his plan. He must not have meant for me to do anything. That’s it! Charles was probably a bad person



and God was punishing him. Exactly! ” Ralph thought as the battle raged on his mind. “What am I thinking?! Charles is an angel compared to most of the people in this cursed city! Oh, how could you have done something like this?” Ralph reasoned, looking up to the sky through blurry eyes. Broken and dejected inside, Ralph stayed in this position for another half hour, all the while tears of inner pain streamed down his face. Eventually, taking one last look at Charles, he got himself up, and hobbled away up the stairs hoping that if he went back to the shelter and went to bed, things would be the same in the morning.

When he arrived at the shelter, he opened the door and rushed to his cot, hoping no one would see him in his disheveled state. He had made up his mind that if anyone asked him what had happened, he would tell them that he had gone out for some dinner. The faster he went to sleep, the faster things would return to normal he thought as he climbed quickly under the covers. He lay there for quite some time with his eyes wide open and his heart pounding inside his chest. “Oh, God, what have I done?” he mumbled to himself as the reality of what just happened set in. “I just left a man to die. Oh, Lord, forgive me. Please, I beg of you, forgive me for my weakness and please let Charles understand why I failed to help him. Please, God, I’ve been your faithful servant for 5 years now. I’ve made a grave mistake but I hope that, in your divine wisdom, you can find a way to forgive me.” Ralph continued to mumble these prayers and confessions into the cold air of the shelter for hours until his fatigue forced him to shut his eyes.

In the morning he was awakened by stray rays of sunshine streaming through the red and blue stained glass of the shelter. Ralph, still in a state of semi-consciousness, sat up in his cot and looked around. He could see that the majority of cots were still full with sleeping people. He smelled the sweet smell of breakfast wafting out of the kitchen and immediately realized that he had not eaten in over twenty-four hours. The sharp pains and loud growls coming from

his stomach diverted his attention even further from the events of the previous night. He walked over to the kitchen and received his portion of eggs and muffins. The warm food instantly brought a smile to Ralph's face and he continued to consume the meal rapidly, savoring each bite before he swallowed. "What a wonderful day," he thought, looking forward to starting his sermon with a mention about God rewarding the people of England with good weather.

After finishing up his breakfast, Ralph spotted a newspaper lying on a vacant table. He got up to go retrieve it but was stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the front headline: "Homeless Man Beaten and Robbed In Subway." The rest of the world seemed to shut off and Ralph focused on the article, his eyes burning holes right through the paper. The memories of the tragic events of last night came rushing back, bouncing off the walls of Ralph's mind. He was immediately overcome with emotion and staggered backwards, stumbling over the chairs and tripping over table legs. It wasn't a dream after all. Ralph began to feel beads of perspiration forming on his brow but was drawn back to the article to read further. His eyes raced from one edge of the paper to the other. The article said that the police had no leads and there were no witnesses so the investigation would be close to impossible to conduct. But more importantly, it said that the victim, Charles Grey, was stabilized but was in critical condition. Ralph breathed a sigh of relief and silently thanked the skies for their mercy. He gathered whatever things he remembered to bring with him and quickly set off for the subway, vowing to never let something like that happen again.

As he walked out of the large oak doors that welcomed the city's homeless, he noticed the director of the shelter talking to two men, both dressed in full military uniforms. Before he had a chance to even wonder why these people were here, the director motioned towards him.

"Here he is, gentlemen. He's all yours." The director said, leaving to enter the shelter.

“Ralph Childrew?” one of the men asked.

“Yes, that’s me. What’s the matter?” Ralph asked timidly.

“Mr. Childrew, please sit down,” he said, gesturing towards the steps.

“We have a letter for you from the military. We advise that you read it now while you have somewhere to sit,” the man said, without a hint of emotion in his voice.

“No, I think you have the wrong man. What would the military want with me? I have nothing to do with the military,” Ralph responded, as he took a seat.

“Mr. Childrew, it’s about your son. Please, just read the letter.”

“But wait, I don’t have a son – how do you know I have a son?” Ralph said disbelievingly.

“Sir, that is irrelevant. Please, just read the letter.” The man handed Ralph the white envelope, embossed with the Government seal. Ralph’s hands trembled as he took the letter and opened it. How did they find him? How did they know about Jeremy? What is this all about? He unfolded the paper and began reading. Within a few seconds, Ralph’s mouth dropped. His body began to shake and looked up at the men, choking back tears. His son was dead. Jeremy had been killed in a routine training accident on a military base somewhere in Northern England. Ralph hadn’t even known his son was in the military.

“No. You have the wrong man. There must be a different Ralph Childrew. My son is safe and healthy,” Ralph said, offering the letter back to the men with shaking hands.

“Sir, we are deeply sorry for your loss. Jeremy was a good soldier.”

“No, no no! Stop talking! Please, just leave me alone. I’m telling you: you have the wrong man.” As Ralph’s voice rose, people began to gather, watching the spectacle from a distance. “My son is safe. My son is happy. My son loves me very much!” he yelled, taking his rage out on the two men. But then all of a sudden, he stopped. He seemed to calm himself down and withdraw his

emotions inside of himself. But instead of losing interest, the crowd was intrigued by the awkward silence. Ralph's emotions seemed to be welling up inside of him, waiting to burst like a volcano. Ralph looked at the men, looked back at the tall doors of the shelter, and then up to the sky. He said in a quiet voice "I have done nothing but sing your praises to the people of this cursed town. I have tried my best to make your word known. And this is how you reward me? This is how you show your appreciation?! I gave up my life, my family, for you and this is what I get? How could you leave me?" To the crowd, it appeared that Ralph was talking to the air around him but to Ralph, he was finally unleashing all the pent up anger and bewilderment he had been suppressing with his false piety. With a final hurrah, he looked down at the people on the sidewalk and screamed "THERE IS NO GOD!"

He then stood up rigid and pushed his way through the crowd and broke into a run, heading towards the subway station. As he ran, his mind became clear. There was no doubt in his mind as to what to do; the way Ralph saw it, there were no other options. He was going to go back to the subway, the place where his life ended, where it began anew, and it was going to end again. Except this time, there was to be no rebirth.

And when he looked into the headlights of the oncoming train, he finally felt like he had made the right decision. He suddenly felt calm inside as he let his eyes go out of focus. He watched as the headlights of the oncoming train smear together to form a shape, the shape of the Holy Cross.