



“BASE CHAPEL”

Directions aside, the Base Chapel could not have been easier to find. Structurally, even though it pretty much looked like the rest of the other important buildings on the base, which all seemed to be red brick rectangles, it stood out in a nice way. Instead of two metal, bulkhead doors at its entrance, it had two wooden doors. Instead of a flat roof, it had an angled roof and a steeple, which no other buildings on base had. Instead of clear windows, it had stained-glass windows. The real clue about the Base Chapel, however, was that the building was identified as the Base Chapel by white, hard plastic letters that spelled out “BASE CHAPEL” screwed into its red bricks.

Just inside the two wooden doors, a table with a sign, “Welcome, UPT Class 88-07,” had been set up with some programs for today’s event and two piles of church cards. I took one thing from each pile as I passed by the table and carried them with me to a pew where Kurt, Kenny, and my fellow Yankee Dolan were sitting.

I don't think the Chaplain was Catholic, but then again, I didn't expect that he would be. This part of the South was primarily populated by Baptists, and I didn't expect the Chapel to be designed exclusively for any one denomination. Even back at the Academy, the magnificent Cadet Chapel with its seventeen tall, metallic spires—one each for the twelve Apostles and the five members on the Joint Chiefs of Staff—was designed to be a Protestant Chapel on the main floor. The Catholics, Jews, and all others were banished to the basement for their services.

My first couple of years away from home at the Academy, I had been pretty good about going to Mass regularly. It helped me deal with the stress of cadet life and the separation anxiety that I had so far away from my family and friends for the first time ever in my life. As I got more comfortable with the Academy environment, as I earned more freedom for being on the Superintendent's List, and as I earned more money for having paid off my cadet uniforms and school books, I became less-disciplined about going to church on Sundays. I don't think God would be ready to put me on Catholic SMS yet, but maybe I wasn't too far away.

We were still a few minutes away from the scheduled start time for our Chapel in-brief when I sat down, kneeling and crossing myself before I did, of course. I looked over the program that I'd picked up from the table. It was pretty much a folded piece of copy paper with a drawing of the Base Chapel, a T-37, and a T-38 on the front. No hidden meanings that I could see. Our names were all listed on the inside, left-hand page. There were a couple of prayers on the right-hand side. The service schedule for the various religious denominations was listed on the back. One of the little cards I'd picked up listed the Ten Commandments. The other card had the Lord's Prayer on it.

Still waiting for the briefing to start, I looked over the Ten Commandments. I guess I was doing pretty well about most of them. Good. Good. OK. Good.... If they were graded like a test, I thought, and then adjusted to a bell curve, like most exams were at the Academy, I bet I'd score above the mean. I might have trouble, however, if they were graded to the UPT standards Lieutenant Sims had shared with us when he talked about SMS.

"Please don't call the room to attention," instructed the Chaplain, as he entered the room from the front left side, right on time. "I'd like to welcome Class 88-07 to

Columbus Air Force Base and to our beautiful Base Chapel.” He was a middle-aged man, dressed in his summer uniform of dark blue pants and light blue, short-sleeved shirt, like the rest of us. He wore the rank of Lieutenant Colonel on his shoulders and a Chaplain’s badge on the front of his shirt, near his nametag.

He opened with a short blessing, and as might be expected from a Chaplain, he appeared quite comfortable speaking to a large group even though that hadn’t really been the trend of the day to that point. But then, right after his prayer, he followed with a cliché we’d heard too many times already, and one that we were sure to hear at every in-briefing.

“I’d like you to look to your left.” I couldn’t believe it! Did the Chaplains have to take the same, bad Air Force class on de-motivational speaking that everyone else we’d met had taken? After a brief pause, he followed with “Now, please look to your right.”

I leaned over to Kurt and whispered, “One of the people you’ve just looked at will not be going to Heaven.”

Fortunately, the Chaplain didn’t look in our direction, and he continued with his welcome. “The graduation rates of UPT tell us that either you or one of the two people you have just looked at will not be here at the end of this year of training. I am sorry that this is how things are, but perhaps, this is how they must be. Now, I’d like you to look up at the front of the Chapel.”

This was something different. A little twist, perhaps? Looking up at the front of the Chapel, I saw the typical inside of a church—an altar, a chalice, a cross. Where was he going with this?

“Jesus will always be here for you,” he said reassuringly. “No matter how difficult your year in UPT might get, whether you lose a classmate or lose your way....” At least he added a little originality to the stupid, “Look to your left” joke that the rest of our leaders thought to be so clever and original.

After a few more remarks that I didn’t pay too much attention to, the Chaplain came up with another nice UPT-religion play on words that caught my ear. “I’ve set up a small table at the entrance of the Chapel with a few handouts for you. There’s a program on the back of which I’ve listed the schedule for all our services. I’ve also left a couple of pocket cards that I encourage you to take. One lists the Ten Commandments,

and the other has the Lord's Prayer. I'd like you to think of them as God's Checklist and God's In-Flight Guide."

I kind of liked his tying in religion and the UPT environment. I imagined Jesus with His long hair and beard standing on the flight line in His flight suit with His class patch on His sleeve. No hidden meaning on His class patch, though—just a peace sign with "14 STUS" on the bottom of it. After His first solo, His classmates would try to throw Him in the dunk tank, but He'd just land on the top of the water and then walk off—without having sunken in—completely dry. Everybody would remember that the dunk tank was a dumb idea because He's Jesus and could walk on water. "Good one, Jesus. What were we thinking?"

As the Chaplain continued to talk, I kept playing out the Jesus-in-UPT scenario in my head, working His miracles as He trained to become an Air Force pilot. I imagined Jesus touching the eyes of the Commission Only officers, who had been told they couldn't fly because their eyes weren't good enough, and restoring their sight to give them their PQ. I thought of Jesus healing the DNIF [pronounced "Da NIF" for Duty Not Including Flying] so they could fly. I even envisioned Jesus working an empty snack bar, full of hungry student pilots, and He feeds them with fish and of course, those delicious Snickers ice cream bars you could get at the snack bar. If God hadn't put me on Catholic SMS yet, I'd probably just sealed my fate with this line of thought, and if Military SMS followed you around for the rest of your career, would Catholic SMS follow me around for eternity?

Just then, I had such an awful thought that I didn't think it would be right to say it in the Chapel. But I figured that writing it down would be okay. Pulling out a pen, I did my best to write neatly without looking down.

"What", I started, but I could barely write without laughing, "did", and I didn't want to draw any attention to myself. When the Chaplain wasn't looking in my direction, I'd quickly jot down another word, "Pontius." I had to finish and get this over to Kurt before the moment had passed. I didn't necessarily want an answer to my question, which was actually more of a riddle... I just wanted to get a reaction out of Kurt.

Word by word, I'd write, stop, look ahead, act innocent, look down, and write again. When I finished, I folded up my blasphemous note and discretely passed it over

to Kurt. With a nod of my head, I let him know that I wanted him to open it up and read it. I looked up at the Chaplain and pretended I was listening to him, just in case he looked our way. I hate to say it, but he was probably used to people not paying attention, so I wasn't too worried. I knew I couldn't look at Kurt as he read, because I figured that one of us would start laughing, so I looked ahead innocently.

By the time I shot a glance back over to Kurt, I could tell I was too late to get his initial reaction. He had the hand closest to me up to his face so that I couldn't see his expression. First, he rubbed the front of his forehead, like he had a headache. Then, he pretended he had something in his eye, so that if the Chaplain happened to look over, Kurt's giant, raised hand wouldn't appear out of the ordinary. I couldn't get a read on his face, but I knew I had gotten the reaction I was looking for.

While the Chaplain preached on, Kurt and I struggled harder and harder to suppress our growing urge to giggle uncontrollably in the middle of the church. Laughing in church is bad enough when you're a kid sitting within pinching range or backhand range of your parents, but it's worse when you're a grown up, newly commissioned officer in the United States Air Force. Our classmates around us were starting to notice our squirming, and it was only a matter of time before the Chaplain would catch on, too. I had grossly miscalculated the stupidity of my actions. I tried biting my lip, thinking sad thoughts, even thinking about how my own blasphemy would come back to bite me at the time of my Final Judgment. Nothing helped. The only way this would end well was if the Chaplain hurried up and dismissed us.

As the need to laugh grew stronger and stronger and tried to force its way to the surface, more and more of our classmates had become aware that something was going on. Lucky for Kurt and me, the Academy experience taught everyone that you always take care of your classmates, so even though people kept nosily looking our way, they were careful not to direct the Chaplain's attention towards us.

And then there was Kenny Wessels. He wanted in on the joke. I could hear him on the other side of Kurt asking, "What? Aaay, what?" Kurt tried to ignore him, but Kenny wouldn't let it go, and each "What?" he asked seemed to get louder and louder.

"What?" I heard Kenny ask again. "C'mon, let me see."

After fending off several of Kenny's requests by simply shaking his head and not saying anything, Kurt must have decided he'd had enough. Kenny had broken him. With one eye on the Chaplain, I watched Kurt reach down out of the corner of my other eye and unfold the program to show to Kenny, who just reached over and grabbed it from Kurt, because he couldn't wait any longer.

I didn't know Kenny very well at the time, and I had no way to predict how he'd react. All of a sudden, the fear of getting busted by the Chaplain exorcised my laughter demon, and my need to giggle subsided. My heart started to race a little, and my stomach felt like it just dropped off the side of a cliff. Nervously, but curiously, I glanced back and forth from Kenny to the program, wondering how I was going to get it back, so it couldn't get passed on to anybody else.

I couldn't believe what happened next. Instead of closing the note and putting it away, Kenny actually started reading it in a loud whisper. Was it possible that he didn't get my joke?

He read, "What did Pontius Pilate tell the students when he heard that Jesus was the King of the Jews?" Kenny shook his head and looked over at Kurt and me.

How could he not get it? It's all we had heard at every in-briefing we attended. Slightly relieved, and my urge to laugh having subsided, I turned my attention back toward the Chaplain, who seemed to be wrapping up his remarks. I'd tell Kenny after we'd left the Chapel.

"Heavenly Father, You gave us Your Ten Commandments to guide our actions, our thoughts, and our choices. You sent Your only son, who suffered under Pontius Pilate and died for our sins, so that we all can earn our heavenly wings and enter into Your Kingdom."

At that moment, Kenny leaned forward, holding out my riddle on the folded piece of paper. With a nod and a huge smile on his face, I could tell that he'd just solved it. I gave him half a nod back to acknowledge that he had the answer, hoping he could let it go, and that he could all let it go until we got out of there, but I had no idea what he might say or do.

While I tried to fake a prayerful state of mind in case the chaplain looked our way, Kenny reached across Kurt, who continued to cover his face with his giant hand, and

Kenny stuck the riddle in my face. “Aaay, I get it,” he said. “What did Pontius Pilate tell the students when he heard that Jesus was the King of the Jews?”

“Heavenly Father,” the Chaplain concluded, either oblivious to our discussion or used to having people not pay attention to what he was saying, “as these young, student officers begin their demanding journey to earn the silver wings of an Air Force pilot, help them always to remember the lesson your Son has taught us.” The Chaplain paused before revealing to us what this lesson was. But I never heard what he had to say, because Kenny’s timing was so perfect.

He had solved my blasphemous riddle.

“If you ain’t a Pilate...” Kenny whispered in his best Texas twang, loudly enough for our classmates in the surrounding pews to hear, “you ain’t shit!”