



FINDING FAITH

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They were gone: the tubes, monitors, and IV bags with saline and antibiotics. His body—a skin-wrapped bracket of bones stained purple and green from broken down blood vessels unable to handle another needle—had given up. Seven weeks after my mother’s death, my father succumbed to leukemia, hastened by a broken heart.

On a cold October morning, I became an orphan, shipwrecked in grief with no spiritual or religious anchor. Life seemed irrelevant and pointless; a story without a plot. An absurd knock-knock joke— ‘Who’s there?’ ‘No one, and nothing.’ For months, I drifted rudderless, a decades-old conversation weaving through sorrow.

“I don’t understand, Dad. Why is it so easy for people to believe in God, The Creator, or some other higher power that gives purpose to our lives? No matter how hard I try, I just can’t.”

“Faith,” he provided. “Belief without the burden of proof. Your mom is protestant even though she’s never sat down with God to hash out Protestant doctrine versus thousands of other options. Me, I’m agnostic, the *I’m not sure* Faith.” He paused, careful not to push his perspective.

“Finding a belief that fits for you is like trying on clothes. If it doesn’t feel right, then it isn’t.

You search for a better fit, bearing in mind that belief is nothing more than a best guess for any of us. The reality is that we don't know if a higher power exists or if there's a greater purpose to our lives until we die."

After our discussion, the *I'm not sure* Faith was tucked away as a last option while I set out to find a more definitive fit. Years passed in what turned out to be a campaign of religious and metaphysical binge and purge with tenets always dissolved by logic or science. Back then the quest was fed by curiosity. Now, a dark night of the soul was on the hunt. Like the alcoholic hitting rock bottom and seeing the hand of God, or the wife-in-mourning feeling the presence of her deceased husband, I could only hope for answers within the depths of despair. As grief washed over and through me, I waited and paid attention. To be clear, what followed was not a message from beyond or a sixth sense. It was my own urgent declaration—"You have to keep searching."

It was a warm, sunny day when I crossed the Manitoba border heading toward Spearfish Canyon Lodge in South Dakota where a spiritual workshop was being offered to skeptics. Six hours later the weather began to turn with wind and snow spinning pockets of whiteout and glazing the road ahead, forcing me to alter my plan. I reasoned that if I topped off the gas tank in the next town and stayed in a hotel overnight, I could get an early start in the morning and make it in time for most of the conference.

“No gas here. No hotel neither,” the attendant shouted above howling winds even though we stood no more than a metre apart. “Sorry, can’t help.” He locked the door and with a dismissive wave of hand, trudged toward a clap-board shed.

I pressed on through blasts of convulsing white powder, eventually prizing a skirmish of rusted truck and car carcasses. Beyond that a gas station.

My tires skated across the slick lot, finally making purchase alongside one of the rusted pumps. With winds of at least 100 kilometres per hour, the car door slammed shut every time I tried to open it. Somehow I managed to squeeze out between blasts, but coaxing fuel from the frozen pump proved impossible.

Behind me, an older man vigorously worked the nozzle inside his truck’s tank before giving up, yanking it out, and smashing it against the pump. He staggered toward me, frosted nasal hair pulsing in exasperation, gloveless hands vibrating in the air, skin above his knuckles tattooed in surly introduction: *Shit Fuck*. Spittle instantly froze on his chin as he barked the obvious: “Can’t get the fuckin’ pump ta work.”

Sleet slashed my cheeks and forehead. “This one too,” I returned, words freezing like icicles in the air. “I’ll see if someone inside can help.”

“Yeah, do that,” he yelled over his shoulder as he lumbered back to the truck.

“Is something wrong with the pumps?” I asked, trying to catch my breath, once inside the station.

“Blizzard’s killed the power, no gas,” came the dull reply from behind the counter. A dozen dark, empty eyes turned toward me as the room fell silent. Feral was the feel.

“Thank you,” I mumbled, urgently jamming my shoulder into a resistant door. Angled against a roaring team of wind and snow, I struggled to return to a car I could barely see. An old van, more corrosion than paint, shot out from the white squall and slid sideways, less than a few metres in front of me. When I hit the ground, an explosion of laughter erupted from inside the vehicle, mocking and churlish.

“Nice wheels,” the driver trumpeted from an open window as I scrambled to my feet. Once inside the car, I locked the door and checked the rear and side view mirrors. A canvas of pristine white glared back. If the man from the truck was still there, I couldn’t see him.

Snap. A power line bullwhipped to my right before disappearing inside the snowscape. Terror flooded my body on waves of adrenaline as my foot jammed the gas pedal. *What do I do? No cell coverage. No GPS. No help. No plan.* The gas needle bounced near empty. *I can’t go back, and even if I had enough gas to go forward...where would forward be?*

The flight part of fight, flight, or freeze took over, challenging my car to swallow a stretch of highway now melded with ditch and sky; one solid sheet of shrink wrap closing in around me, squeezing my lungs and crushing all hope.

“Now would be the time for that miracle,” I pleaded. “Mom...Dad? Are you there? Is anyone there? God? Please, can I have a sign?”

And then—a red light on the dash.

My heart surged and then collapsed as letters cobbled together. **Alternator/Battery-Service Immediately.**

Fate, not Faith, had declared itself. I was going to die, and soon. I just didn't know how. Would it be a semi that saw me too late? Or would my car, in defeat, drift into an unseen ditch leaving me to freeze to death? Tears streamed down my face as my foot refused to leave the gas pedal because...well...it didn't know what else to do.

My mind, trapped inside a mechanical coma, stared into a white abyss. Time stood still and went on forever so I can't say how long it took before it happened—a seam tearing apart in the shrink wrap. A gas station with lights. Someone moving inside.

“You have no idea how glad I am to see you!” I gushed without grace or decorum, face slick with tears and post-nasal slosh. A middle-aged man with big ears and kind eyes smiled back.

“I think I do,” he returned. “But I have to say, I’m awful surprised to see you. Everything’s shut down, all the way to Rapid City. National Guard’s still waiting for things to settle so they can get out and rescue people.”

Looping his arm around my shoulder, he led me to a window. “Wait till it clears a bit and you’ll see there’s a motel across the street. Prairie Vista Inn. A bunch of folks are holed up there, waiting for the storm to pass. The fire department’s next door and they made stew for everyone. You head over there I’ll watch as best I can.”

Just inside the motel parking lot, the dashboard made good on its threat. The alternator heaved a last gasp and the car stuttered to a halt. Through winks of visibility, my eyes fixed on a ghosted building. Wind churned the snow into angry clouds, bullying me to the ground as soon as I exited. Crawling on all fours, head down, I muscled my way around the perimeter of the motel. By the time I reached a doorway, my body was shaking out of control. Two men helped me to my feet and brought me inside. Twenty or more hunters, truckers, locals and travellers warmed themselves around a generator-powered heater. Candles glowed in the dark.

As terror released its grip, my mind began to work again, post-game analysis flooded with possibility, including the presence of a higher power. I shook it off. Yes, I was humbled and thankful to be in this rough-hewn place when only a short time ago I’d been staring down the throat of death. But I refused to be seduced into a man-made myth because of survivor’s

gratitude. There was no doubt in my mind that I had been utterly and completely alone out there without guidance or help of any kind. I tried my cell and this time there was a signal.

“Hi Graham, it’s Mom. I’m fine, but the storm is bad down here. What? No, I actually don’t know where I am. Hang on, I’ll ask.”

The manager was making his way through a crush of guests, handing out food and water. I motioned to him just as laughter erupted in the corner of the room. A hunter had pulled a Skibo game from a shelf near the reception desk and was challenging his pals to a match. The small smile crimping my lips was a sad one. Skibo was the game my mom played with my kids at the lake.

“Is there something I can do for you?” the manager asked.

“Yes, can you tell me where I am?”

“Yes, ma’am. You’re at the Prairie Vista Inn.”

“Oh, I know that. The man at the gas station told me. I mean what’s the name of the town?”

I saw his lips move. What he said made my blood run cold. Or was it hot? Was this a bad joke? Coincidence? Or something else? Goosebumps sprinted across my body and not because I was still cold. My brain swam in a stew of confusion.

A solo road trip as part of an ongoing existential odyssey, more desperate now than before. A blizzard, the likes of which had never been seen in this part of South Dakota. Hundreds of people

stranded along roads and highways. My car, threatening breakdown on a cold and lonely stretch of road, leaving me ill prepared to survive with scant clothing, no food, and no winter kit. A tiny motel in a place I never knew existed; literally a port in the storm.

“Pardon?” my voice cracked.

He repeated himself with unmistakable clarity.

“You’re in Faith, ma’am...Faith, South Dakota...”



A gift from the motel manager