

CHAPTER 1

A GENTLE CALLING

The first time I called on God was when I almost drove off a cliff.

One fall morning, I drove to Sacramento to pick up a friend. We were heading to the Sierra Nevada for a day hike. It was early morning and dark when I arrived at his house. Crickets were chirping, and cats rustled through the fresh fall leaves. I wiped the cool morning fog off my forehead as we began a two-hour drive east towards the mountains.

As we drove, the lowland Sacramento valley dimmed from my rear-view mirror, and steep roads beckoned us. It felt like my car was struggling to stay in place, let alone climb up the freeway. My car windows were splashed with fog from the outside and covered with moisture from the warm air inside. Fresh snow appeared on the roadsides as we got closer to base camp. In many spots, there were no guardrails to arrest a drop

to the valley floor below.

My friend navigated with a map. After he pointed out the freeway exit, we turned onto a frontage road. As I rounded a corner, I lost control of steering. We'd hit black ice. My car was thrown to the cliff edge as it spun once, twice, and another half-turn.

My friend clutched the door grab handle and pushed himself back onto the seat. I squeezed the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white. I pictured our car tumbling down the mountain. I hoped that our fall would be caught or slowed by some stray trees that hugged the cliffsides. I closed my eyes. I hoped.

Then I felt my body whip back and forth. My tires dug into wet dirt on the road shoulder. The spinning stopped. We caught our breath, opened the doors, and checked the ground before we stepped out. My car was four feet from the cliff edge.

I was glad to survive the spinout, but I didn't know how to recover my car. The front tires sank into the dirt, and the rear tires were on icy pavement. I tried to back my car out, but it sank further.

Light snow fell on us through the fog. I could see about ten feet away in any direction. Our bodies shivered and stiffened outside the warmth of the car cabin.

I heard a car engine rumble and tires driving over pavement, but I couldn't see if another car was approaching. The fog and snow formed a sheen of light that blurred my sight. We heard an off-road vehicle come before we saw it. It parked next to us, and a plain-looking man came out.

“I'm here to help you.”

BRIGHT AS THE NOONDAY SUN

We didn't call for help, so how did he know to come?

The man drove my car in a rocking motion until it broke free. My friend and I tried to smile and thank him, but our mouths were too busy chattering. The man turned on the car heater and asked us to get inside the car to warm up. I looked back to thank our rescuer, but I didn't get the chance. As I turned, I glimpsed his car slip back into the fog.

In the afternoon, the snow stopped, and the sun broke through the clouds. The sky was a crisp, crystal blue. The roads were dry with a few clumps of snow melting by the roadsides. You couldn't tell that the morning was fraught with dangerous weather. The entire day, I couldn't focus. My mind kept darting back to what could have happened to us.

As we drove back to Sacramento, we talked about life and death.

"Do you think some higher power saved us?" I asked.

"Well, I am a Christian," my friend replied.

"Maybe God saved us because of you," I said.

We laughed about that comment while we coasted downhill to the warm valley. But from that day on, I couldn't shake off the possibility that we were saved by something greater than us.

One summer, Mom and I took a jewelry-making class. We'd gone through a rough season in our lives, so I thought the class would distract and refresh us.

The classroom was designed for fabrication. There was a hydraulic press, a milling machine, and other equipment in the room. Each student had a long workbench and hand tools. There were about twelve students in all; ten were women. The

only men were an older gentleman and me. He learned our names by the first session, and he greeted us as if he'd known us for a long time.

By the third session, we were ready to make stuff. Our assignment was to stamp out a piece of jewelry from a sheet of copper. To do this, we'd bend a wire to match our desired shape, and then it would be pressed against the sheet to punch out the piece.

As the students were working, I saw the older gentleman come by each desk. At first, he showed interest in what everyone was making. But after a brief chat, he would turn the discussion towards religion. He wanted to tell people about Jesus.

As I overheard him chatting, my anti-religion defenses turned on. Growing up, many people reached out to me about God. I'd learned that a polite and firm "No, thank you," usually stopped the conversation cold. That morning, I'd have another opportunity to practice my standard refusal.

As he came by, I closed my eyes and breathed out my disinterest. When I opened my eyes, he was gone. "Great," I thought, but then I realized that Mom would be his next target.

I tried to warn her. "Psst...psst," I whispered, but she didn't hear me. I waved my hands and made face gestures, but she didn't notice. She was focused on her task. I gave up and hoped for the best. What happened next was unexpected.

"Praise the Lord! You must really love Jesus!" he said.

The man jumped with his arms up like he'd hit a jackpot at the slots. After he moved away from Mom, I walked to her.

"What did you say to him?"

BRIGHT AS THE NOONDAY SUN

“Say what to who?” Mom replied without looking up. My eyes followed her gaze down to her hands. I jumped back at what I saw.

She made a Jesus Fish.

Mom didn’t grow up around any Christian influences. She wouldn’t have known what a Jesus Fish was. I examined her piece. Everything from the fish’s compressed oval shape to how the tail ends crossed over resembled it. In fact, it was perfect.

“How did you...I mean, do you know what you’ve made?”

“I made a fish.”

“No, you made a Jesus Fish. It stands for Christianity. Don’t you know that?”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“But why did you make this?” I asked again.

“I don’t know. My hands started to work, and this came out.”

Mom finished her piece and looked at it with a childlike smile.

CHAPTER 2

THE WORST THAT COULD HAPPEN

Despair kills.

Around 2012, Mom and I went through a series of low points in life. At times, we lost a sense of what was real because the challenges upended our lives. To cope, we'd reassure and encourage each other as we got through each day.

Money got tight. We both had houses under mortgage. Mom lived with me and rented her house. One day, her tenant left on short notice. When we took the house back, the walls had scratches, the carpet was torn, and there were footprints on the ceiling. My former home, with its family memories, was replaced with brokenness. Because of the damage, her house couldn't be rented out. So, we decided to rent out my house and move back into Mom's while we repaired it. In the end, we couldn't afford the mortgage payment; she sold her house at a loss.