

Finding Faith

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Chapter One

I'm going to tell you the whole story, exactly the way it happened, and let you decide. It gets a little weird in places, and totally creepy, but really deep too. So stay with me.

It was a completely ordinary Sunday. I was in my room. I knew I was supposed to feed Dog, but I was trying to get my other chores done first, and it was taking forever because I got to thinking, like, what's the point of cleaning your room when you always mess it up again anyway? What's the point of brushing your hair? What's the point of changing out of your pjs? All those little things we have to do over and over and over again—they all seem so meaningless.

Suddenly I heard Dog barking like mad. She's some kind of mutt, by the way. Real big and ugly, to be honest. But super smart and much gentler than she looks. Gran said I should give her some scraps for breakfast. She only gets scraps because she's a stray. Sometimes I slip her something that's not quite a scrap because I like her, but I don't go crazy about it. It's not like I would give her a fresh batch of mac-n-cheese or anything.

The next-door neighbors—the ones in the great big mansion with a pool that's twice as big as Gran's whole house—they said they were going to call the cops on Dog.

They don't like that she runs around the neighborhood. But Gran told Dog to shut up and lay low, explaining about the neighbors, and Dog understood.

Then for a while she looked sick, the way she was moping around all bloated and everything, but it turned out she was just getting ready to have puppies. So Gran helped her out a little with some wet rags and stuff. And three came out! Gran named them Faith, Hope, and Love.

They are the cutest things in the whole world—I'm not kidding.



Soon the puppies opened their eyes and started playing around. The two mostly black ones—Hope and Love—are good. But Faith—the one who's mostly white—is naughty. She keeps sneaking under the fence, and then I have to chase her down.

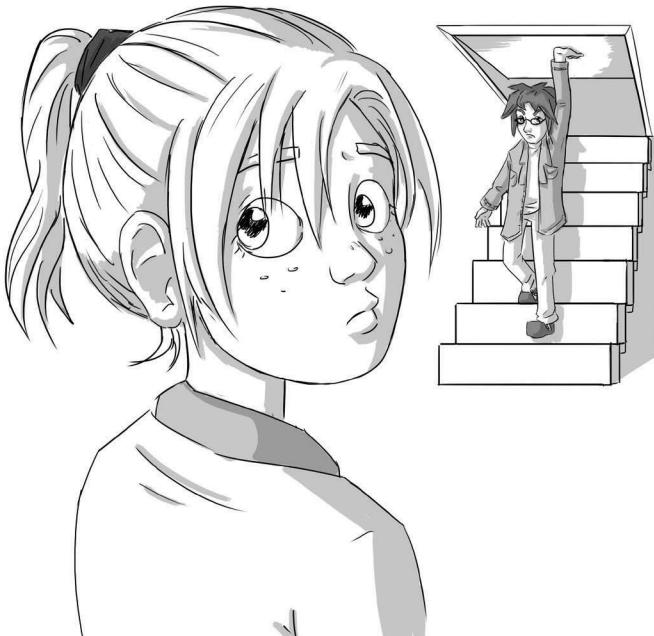
Gran said she knows some people at church who might adopt the puppies. She went off to church this morning, leaving us in charge—which is why I paid special attention when I heard Dog barking like mad.

My brother Will didn't hear her. He probably had his headphones on and wouldn't care anyhow since he's obsessed with his artwork.

As soon as I heard Dog, I went tearing out of my room, but then I stopped, afraid, thinking, *What's out there that she's barking so hard about?*

"Will!" I called. "Come down!" I ran back and banged on the hatch to the attic.

"Get lost, Vida!" he shouted back, like usual.



But I opened the hatch, and he heard Dog. I guess that made him come down.

He charged right down the hall, too annoyed to be scared. “What’s she doing inside?” he demanded, glaring at me as though I had let her in, when I didn’t even know she was inside.

But the kitchen door was open. Since the screen door doesn’t shut right, it wasn’t hard to see how Dog had gotten in.

She was barking at Gran’s old rolltop desk in the dining room.

Will looked around the desk to see what little critter she must have chased inside. On the desk was the printer Will had set up in between all Gran’s bills, recipe books, receipts, and what-not. It’s connected wirelessly to the laptop Gran got us for our schoolwork, which was on a stack of catalogs on the floor of the living room. There’s no room for it on the dining room table because of all the newspapers and dishes. Gran says we’re going to get it all organized one of these days.

The printer showed a little green light, which meant it was on. There was a piece of paper in the output tray.

“Did you print something, Vida?” Will asked.

“No,” I answered as I put a bowl of water on the floor for Dog. “I mean, not lately....” I couldn’t remember the last time I had printed something.

“Then what’s this?” he asked, and he held up the paper. It read:

FIND FAITH!

**TAKE THE TEN TO THE LOOP.
LOOK IN THE GNIWOLF TRAP!**

– GOD

Chapter Two



You can imagine the look on my face when I read that note! I mean, back before my mom and dad died, when I was little, Santa Claus answered one of my letters, and I thought that was pretty special. But this was downright amazing.

“Quit screwing with me, Vida. I’m busy, okay?”

That was Will’s response. He thought I had typed up the note as some kind of joke. He went into the kitchen and got himself a bowl of cornflakes, so I went outside to check on the puppies. Sure enough, Faith was gone.

I could tell from Will’s reaction that he wasn’t

playing a joke on me, and Gran doesn't even know how to work the computer, so it seemed there was only one conclusion to draw: it really was God.

“Well, why not?” I asked Will. “God can do anything he wants. If he wants to send us a message, this is as good a way as any to do it.”

“The message doesn't even make sense,” Will countered through a mouthful of cornflakes.

I stood with my hands on my hips. “What doesn't make sense? He obviously wants us to find Faith at The Loop.” The Loop is an amusement park on the other



side of town. “I think the Ten goes there.” The Ten is a trolley.

“But how would Faith have gotten there?” Will objected. “And ‘GNIWOLF’ isn’t even a word.”

“It’s obviously an abbreviation: G-N-I,” I shot back. “We just have to figure out what it stands for. And ‘WOLF’ makes perfect sense. Gran said wolves hunt puppies and other dogs.”

Will just shook his head.

“We’ve got to save her, Will,” I begged.

He put his bowl in the sink, and I could see that he was getting ready to go back up to the attic. I got a funny feeling in my stomach, like a hole was opening up in there, empty and cold.

“I’m going,” I said.

And then there was a big argument, of course. I’ll spare you those details. In the end, I got my way only because he was kind of interested in going to The Loop anyway. We already had transit cards, but we had to transfer a bunch of times. When we finally got to the last leg of the trip, he laid it on me.

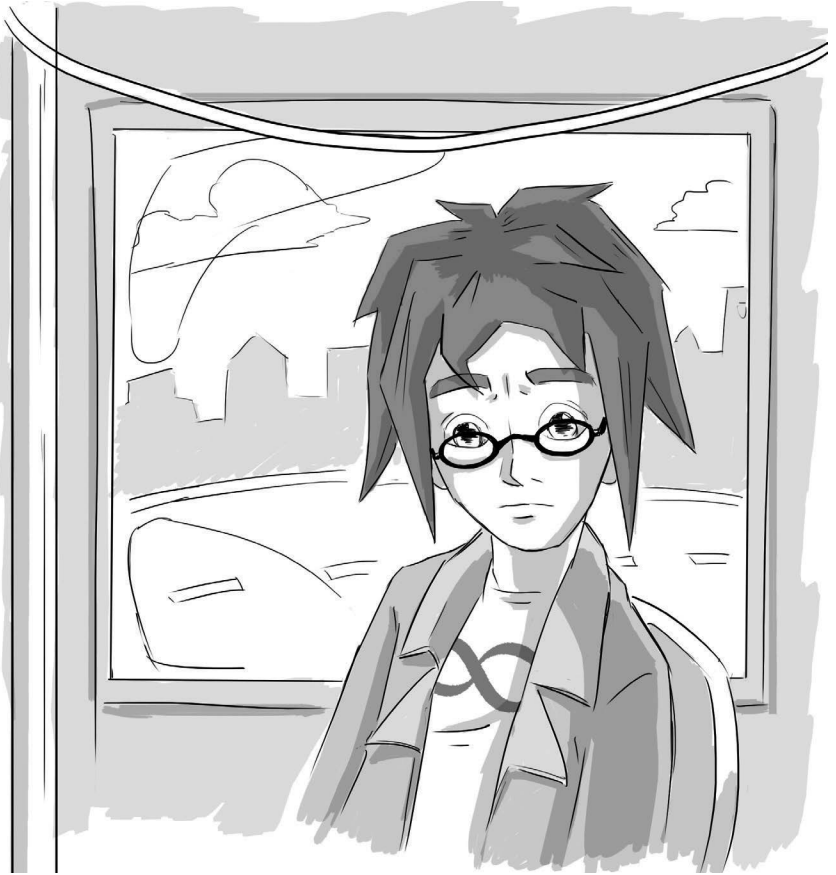
“Look Vida, I’m going to tell you why that note can’t be from God.”

“Why?”

“Because God doesn’t exist.”

“How do you know?” I objected. “You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I do.” Will had a softness in his voice when he said those words that made me feel even worse than I would have if he was harsh as usual.



“How?”

“Because, there is too much bad stuff in the world. If there were a god, he would have taken better care of everything.”

I frowned at him.

“Think about it, Vida. You said yourself, ‘God can do anything he wants.’ That’s because God is all-powerful. If you were all-powerful, wouldn’t you stop bad stuff from happening?”

“Yeah....” I was thinking fast. “If I knew about it....”

Will nodded. “Well, God is all-knowing. So he knows about it.”

I shrugged. “Maybe he has his reasons for not interfering.”

“Vida—“

“Like, you know, when the puppies fight,” I pressed. “Gran says you have to let them, even if they hurt each other, because it’s how they learn—”

“Vida—”

“You don’t know what his reasons might—”

“Vida.” Will’s voice was quiet, and he put his hand on my knee. “I was there when Mom and Dad died, and you weren’t. I can tell you that it was bad—I mean really bad—and there was absolutely no reason for it.”

His face clouded over, and I could tell that he was seeing what he had seen that day, the day of the accident. I looked at him hard, trying to see it too. But I couldn’t. I didn’t really want to. In some ways, though, it was worse having to imagine.

Will folded his arms across his chest. “No god would let that happen.” He looked out the window, and I knew we were done talking about it.

But I had to think about it some more. After all, Gran had never stopped believing in God, even after the accident. She always says, “Some bad stuff happens because people make the wrong choices, and other bad stuff happens in order to make us strong.” That’s not how I would run this world, but then again, I’m just a kid. There’s this one teacher at my school who’s really strict and mean, but she gets awards, and all the grown-ups say she’s the greatest. Maybe it’s like that with God.

At any rate, I didn’t have any more time to think about it because we had arrived at The Loop.

Chapter Seven

In the next moment, the spotlight went off, and ordinary fluorescent lights came on. Blinking in the brightness, we could see now that we were in a warehouse, two stories high, with concrete floors and no windows. The track for our cars went all around between props and projection equipment.

I looked over at X. His eyes were shut. His face was completely calm. One perfect tear was streaming down each cheek. I shook him. His eyes blinked open. He had been deep in meditation.

A door slammed, and we heard laughter.

All of us swung our heads around to look at the control booth, which was up a flight of stairs, with big glass windows for viewing the entire warehouse floor.

Two men leaned over the balcony and shook their heads at us. “I guess that’s what you get for trespassing, huh?” one of them called.

They trotted down the steps, talking among themselves. At the bottom, one veered off and left through a door marked EXIT. The other made his way toward us. I felt my heart beating in my ears.

When he arrived at our cars, he pulled out a set of keys and unlocked our safety bars so that they popped

up, freeing us at last.

“You got a sneak preview,” he said. “We haven’t quite finished the end yet, so we improvised a little.” He smiled broadly and a bit regretfully when he saw how shell-shocked we were. “What did you think?”

Will recovered first. “It was awesome.” He stood and stretched, trying to look casual, as though he was never scared at all.

“Yeah!” X wiped off his cheeks. “Can we do it again?”

The man chuckled and shook his head. He was



wearing a hoodie and jeans instead of coveralls. Though his hair was brown without any gray, he had a large bald spot on the top of his head. He caught me looking him over.

“My name is Thomas Aquinas,” he said. “I’m the designer.”

“I’m Will,” Will said, acting all grown up. He put out his hand to shake Aquinas’s hand and introduced the rest of us.

“What do you mean, you’re ‘the designer’?” I asked.

“A ride like this can’t just happen all by itself, you know.” Aquinas planted his hands on his hips. “Where do you think it came from?”

“Well, you would need the idea first. Did you draw it all out?” Will asked.

“Sort of,” Aquinas replied. “I created a graphic simulation on the computer.”

Will nodded, his mind racing, picturing himself becoming an amusement park ride designer someday. “But how did you get everything to fit together so perfectly?” he asked. “I mean the wind, and the smell of pine, and the water spraying....”

Aquinas nodded proudly. “It takes a lot of planning and a lot of really smart people to put it all together. It’s like a whole little world in here.” He put his arms out to encompass the entire warehouse.

“And that makes you God,” Will added.

Aquinas laughed. “The analogy is a good one, isn’t it? The world we live in is a great big amusement park ride. So there has to be a designer up there.” He pointed to the sky.

I frowned. I had never thought of the world as an amusement park ride. It seemed like the grass, the trees, the rivers, and all the animals had just always been here. But come to think of it, how could it come together so perfectly all by itself? Someone must have planned it out. Who else but God?

Foo cleared her throat. “Sorry we snuck in, Mr. Aquinas. We’re really just looking for a lost puppy.”

“A lost puppy!” Aquinas exclaimed, skeptical.

“Someone left a note saying she was in a wolf trap,” Foo explained, “and so we thought she might be trapped in here.”

“Oh!” Aquinas remarked, looking at her hard to see if she was telling the truth. “Well, I’m pretty sure there aren’t any animals around here—real ones, anyhow.” He paused to scratch his head. “But you know what? I think ‘Wolf Trap’ is the name of the casino across the street.”

“Really?” I was amazed. We seemed to be getting closer and closer to Faith.

Aquinas saw me light up. “You know the big hotel? There’s a casino there. Kids aren’t allowed, but maybe

you could ask at the front desk....”

I nodded with enthusiasm.

He shook his finger and glared at us, pretending to scold. “No more sneaking around.”

We said our goodbyes and hurried toward the exit.

Chapter Eleven



“Here in my hand is an ordinary quarter,” Pascal began. “When you toss it, you have a fifty-fifty chance of getting heads or tails.” She tossed it. It landed tails. “Suppose I offer you a bet. If you bet heads and it lands heads, I’m going to pay you five dollars. If you bet heads and it lands tails, then you have to pay me two dollars.”

“What if we bet tails?” I asked. I always pick tails.

“If you bet tails and it lands tails, I’ll pay you three

dollars. If you bet tails and it lands heads, then you pay me two.” She reached for a clipboard and drew the following chart:

	Lands Heads	Lands Tails
Bet Heads	+5	-2
Bet Tails	-2	+3

“So looking at this chart,” she prompted, “which is the smarter bet?”

“Heads!” X answered. “If you bet heads, you gain more when you win. If you lose, you lose the same either way.”

“But I always bet tails,” I complained.

Pascal smiled at me. “But do you see why tails would not be a smart bet in this instance?”

“Well, if it really is a fifty-fifty chance....,” I conceded.

“Right,” she said. “You can prove this mathematically. It’s called ‘Expected Utility.’ Just add the columns across. Whichever is higher is the better bet.”

	Lands Heads	Lands Tails	Expected Utility
Bet Heads	+5	-2	+3
Bet Tails	-2	+3	+1

I nodded, ready for her to flip the coin. “Are you going to flip it?”

“No, that was just an analogy for the gamble I want to talk about.” She put the quarter back in her pocket. “In this life, every person has to decide whether to bet on God or against God. And it’s the biggest gamble of all because your entire future depends on it.”

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“If God exists, what does he offer?” she asked.

“Eternal life in heaven,” X answered. He had clearly been listening attentively to Renée Descartes’s prayer.

Pascal nodded. “That’s an infinite payoff. Let’s plug it into our chart.”

	God exists	God doesn’t exist	Expected Utility
Bet on God	+ ∞		
Bet against God	- ∞		

“If you bet against God and it turns out he exists, then you lose infinity.”

“What happens if you bet on God and God doesn’t exist?” I asked.

“Then you’ve wasted some time praying, I suppose. But since praying tends to relax people and put them in a good frame of mind, it’s not much of a waste.”

“And what if you bet against God and God doesn’t exist?” Will asked.

“Then you have the satisfaction of being right. But it isn’t much satisfaction, since you don’t find out for sure until you’re dead—when you won’t be aware of anything anyway.”

“It doesn’t matter what values you put in the second column,” Foo interjected. “Infinity plus or minus any finite number is still infinity. So betting on God will always be the smarter bet.”

Pascal nodded and plugged in some numbers.

	God exists	God doesn't exist	Expected Utility
Bet on God	+ ∞	-20	+ ∞
Bet against God	- ∞	+20	- ∞

“So you see, my friends, this is what faith means to me.” Pascal laid her pen on her clipboard. “As far as I can tell, there’s no proof that God exists and no proof that he doesn’t. It’s a fifty-fifty chance. But the potential payoff is so great that you can’t afford not to bet on God.”

“Ms. Pascal,” the man at the computer called, “the report is printing now.”

“Thanks, Joe.” She got up and went to the printer. Studying the pages, she shook her head and came back to the table. “Kids, there is no sign of any animals in this building.”

“Not even on the roof?” I asked.

She looked again at the pages, shaking her head. “I’m sorry.” Just then an alarm started shrieking, and a red light flashed on the wall.

Pascal turned to the man at the TV monitor. Rising from his chair, he cast a frown in her direction. “It’s code thirty-seven.”

Pascal swore under her breath. “Kids, we have an emergency, but it has nothing to do with your puppy. I’m calling a city squad car to take you home.”