

# THE FALL OF FAITH

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*To Christy, my guiding light and soulmate.  
The road to faith is long and winding. Thank you for walking it  
with me.*

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“Never fear to deliberately walk through dark places, for that is how you reach the light on the other side.”

Vernon Howard

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## ONE

Jimmy's stomach growled in thundering protest, but his well-seasoned fork hand kept shoveling the under-seasoned Eggs Benedict into his mouth. His other hand gripped a cracked mug of thick coffee the waitress efficiently refilled after every couple of sips. He stared across the deserted Waffle House with droopy eyes, taking in everything but unable to focus on anything. A hazy film clouded his vision. *Maybe it was lack of sleep*, he thought, *but probably all the grease*. His left arm felt glued to the stainless steel countertop. Every tap of his foot pulled up another layer of grime, which stuck tightly to the heel of his boot.

*The only thing not greasy in this place is my spoon.* The thought made him smile. His wife would have shaken her head at such a dad joke. His mouth tightened and his eyes watered. He bit his lip and shook the thought out of his head, burying the familiar pain. That's what the men in his family did. They took their lumps in silence, as god intended.

"How you doing, darlin'?" The rotund waitress asked as she poured more sour coffee into his mug until Jimmy was sure it

would overflow, scalding his hand. He felt slightly disappointed when she stopped just before the ceramic dam broke.

“I’m good, ma’am. Thank you,” Jimmy answered loudly, so she could hear him over the constant rumble of the big rigs on nearby Interstate 49. Even in the dead of night, the highway was still full of life. One of the minor arteries pumping commerce to and from the heart of the country.

“Don’t call me ma’am. Makes me feel like an old lady. And though I may be old, I’m anything but a lady. The name’s Gladys.” The waitress cackled and winked at him, which caused a chasm of makeup cracks to form from the edge of her right eye down her cheek. She touched Jimmy’s arm with her free hand as she spoke. “How was your breakfast, hun? You sure scarfed it down like you haven’t eaten in weeks. I like a man who loves to eat and don’t mind what he puts in his mouth.”

“It was good. Real good.” Jimmy tried to pull his arm away from her touch, but the suction of the countertop combined with the weight of the waitress’ hand held him in check.

“You’re a two-time liar, but you’re awful cute, so I guess I’ll give you a break. And ooh, would I love to break you!” The waitress cackled again. “So what do you do, handsome?”

“I’m a truck driver.”

“Oh, well shoot, I’m surprised I haven’t seen you in here before. We’re real popular with you truckers. And I’d remember if you’d been in before. A tall sturdy feller like yourself.”

“I rarely stop. Don’t get paid if you’re not moving. So I spend most of my days and nights cruising along the highway back and forth between Bentonville and Kansas City.”

“A Walmart man, huh? I sure do love that danged old store. What brought you in tonight, doll?”

Jimmy stared down at the congealed mess of his nearly empty plate. He’d finished everything but the four strips of thick cut bacon. “I just needed a break, is all.”

Gladys leaned across the counter and patted Jimmy on the shoulder. "Is that all? I thought maybe you'd spent all your money at that damned strip club masquerading as a truck stop across the way."

"No, ma'am. I've never been."

"Get out of town! Every man's been to a strip club. Especially you truckers. Why you can't throw a rock without hitting a club or a triple-x video store along this stretch of the highway, or any other I imagine. Why truckin' and naked struttin' go hand in hand if you ask me."

Jimmy shook his head slowly and stared out the window. He frowned at his reflection. He looked like a ghost of himself. His hair had thinned recently and looked even thinner in the glass.

He found it fascinating how the hair on his head had slowly migrated down to his shoulders and his back. Like an hourglass he couldn't turn over or reverse. Maybe it was the gravity of a hard life, a life on the road, never stopping, never standing still. Jimmy liked to imagine time as a hand constantly reaching up for you out of the depths of the earth, trying to pull you down and bury you. Only the bravest, the luckiest of us, escape by the hair on our heads. It looked to him like his time was about up.

As he stared at his receding hairline, he acknowledged, if only to himself, that his life had been filled with neither luck nor courage. He had always been more comfortable inside himself than out in the world.

"Sugar? You still with me?" The waitress' voice broke the comfort of his solitude.

"Sorry," he said as he shook his head. "I've just never had a reason to wander into one of those clubs, I guess."

"Well, good for you. Why should you pay for what you could get for free from a cow, or however the saying goes?" She cackled again as Jimmy forced a smile. "You should stop back by during the day sometime. I get off around lunch. I could show

you around. The nearest town is Eden, which is fitting because this place sure seems like the birthplace of original sin, if you ask me, and I know you didn't."

"I appreciate the offer, Gladys, but after 15 years of wearing out my tires and wearing away my life, this is my first and last visit. I'm getting out of the trucking life."

"That's too bad, sugar. You might find there's something to do here upon deeper inspection." She paused, and Jimmy supposed it was to see if he'd take the bait. "But I'm not surprised you've never stopped. Not many do, 'sept for them that just don't have the gumption or the gas to go no further."

"I'll just take my check and a doggy bag, please."

"Okay, but there's no need to rush off. You look like you've been on the road a bit. It might do you good to get your blood pumping."

"I'm running late, and my wife is expecting me." He hoped she wouldn't see in his eyes that this was another two-time lie.

"Oh well. Suit yourself, hun. I'll get you that doggy style bag." The waitress squeezed his arm as she pushed herself from the counter, her own arms now coated in grease and lint. She blew him a kiss as she waddled away.

Jimmy's thumb rubbed against the line of pale skin on the ring finger of his left hand. All these years on the road, and he'd never strayed. Never fallen prey to the undercurrent of lesser demons, the ones who stirred up trouble and spurred on man's innate need to conquer new villages and vaginas.

GLADYS DROPPED off Jimmy's bill. She tapped her finger on the folio and gave him one more cracked wink before she set off to assault the new customer who had just wandered into her web.

Jimmy watched her amble across the floor, deftly avoiding

the tables and chairs with a dancer's grace that made him shake his head in disbelief. Her latest prey looked around as if he might want to change to another waitress' section. Little did he know this was Gladys' domain. *Poor fool.*

As Jimmy flipped open the folio, it didn't surprise him to see ten digits floating above an enormous lipstick stain and a brief note that read *If you ever want to bite off more than you can handle, give me a call.* He liked her style, if not her tactics. He set his beat up trucker's hat with its worn KC Chiefs logo and soggy brim over a strawberry syrup dispenser and left an extra big tip for Gladys.

As he unstuck himself from the countertop and swiveled off his barstool, he casually scooped up his hat, syrup dispenser and all, and headed for the door. He looked over his shoulder as he pushed open the door, but Gladys, now thoroughly engrossed with her new playmate, never even glanced his way.

The cool night breeze swept over him as he headed for the rickety bike rack near the front door, where he'd left Maybelle on a leash with a bowl of water. He sat down on the curb next to his trusty Shepherd mutt and scratched her chin while she licked the remnants of egg from his face and whined with anticipation for the bacon in Gladys' doggy style bag.

His heart still beat with the excitement of his petty, pedestrian theft as he crumpled up his receipt and tossed it and the syrup dispenser into the rusted trash can a few feet away. He had to admit he had enjoyed Gladys' antics. The thought of someone, anyone, flirting with him brought up long dormant feelings, and he'd always liked a nice curvy road.

His thoughts trailed again to his wife and the look she'd give him if she were there. Tears blurred his vision, but he bit his lip again and quickly pushed the thoughts from his mind, shoving the pain down even deeper.

*Damn driving.* Too much time for your mind to see the



roads you've already been down and to measure the turns you've missed while your eyes search for what's up ahead.

MAYBELLE'S KISSES became more frantic as she sensed Jimmy's mood change. He smiled and scratched her under the chin, a spot that always drove her crazy. She stretched her neck and rocked her head from side to side. Her tail was a blur as she reveled in her human's attention.

"Guess what I've got for you, Maybelle girl? You're going to love this."

He slid the bacon from the bag and handed it to her, one piece at a time. "Careful, girl. You're supposed to eat it, not inhale it."

When she'd devoured the last of the bacon, Maybelle licked all around her mouth to make sure she hadn't left a crumb or any tasty grease. Then she turned her attention back to Jimmy. She jumped into his lap, unaware she was much too large to be a lap dog, and attacked him with kisses.

Jimmy went through the motions of warding her off, but he loved her attention. He couldn't help but think of old Gladys inside. She'd been like a dog with a bone with all that flirting. He decided it had felt good after all. No matter who the attention came from and regardless of the fact that he hadn't been in the mood to flirt back and didn't even want the attention in the first place, he had needed it. *A man cannot live on a dog's affections alone.*

Maybelle, perhaps sensing another change in Jimmy's mood, began circling in his lap before settling down with her head hanging over his knee. Occasionally, she'd nudge his hand with her snout if he stopped rubbing her head, but she seemed happy to just be in his presence.

For a moment, Jimmy felt content. The cool breeze teased

the coming fall, one of his favorite seasons. He loved the fall in Missouri, and especially in his hometown of Kansas City. The air had a crispness about it that woke your senses. Sounds traveled farther. And the leaves would turn shocking colors of reds, oranges and yellows before raining down like a firestorm to the cold ground below. Jimmy felt more alive when the rest of the world was preparing to hibernate.

Jimmy looked around the deserted parking lot and then across the road to the truck stop strip club. Its lot was easily four times the size of the Waffle House's and was jam-packed with trucks, cars and motorcycles of all sizes.

Jimmy shook his head. "Come on, Maybelle girl," he said as he stood up slowly, so she could climb out of his lap without hurting either of them. "Let's get a little exercise in before we get back on the road. I think we could both use it."

He took off toward his truck, which he had parked in the farthest corner of the lot. He always made a point of parking far away. It not only made it easier to get out of most parking lots, but it was also his way of making himself walk more. Although, with Maybelle around, he didn't have to worry about staying active. She quickly caught up to him and easily passed him on their way to his big rig full of trinkets and trash and other household crap bound for the Wal-Mart distribution center in Kansas City. Just one last trip and he and Maybelle would be home for good.

JIMMY OPENED the passenger door and pulled himself up onto the ladder, blocking Maybelle from bounding into the cab. She frantically jumped up and down from the ground to his shoulders. He thought she might actually scramble up his back if he didn't hurry. She loved hitting the road with him, and he enjoyed her stoic companionship. She'd often spend hundreds

of miles at a time with her chin propped on his thigh. His right hand absently rubbing her back as she snored softly, unaware of the miles of road rapidly disappearing behind them and the miles more stretching out in front of them.

Jimmy kept her at bay long enough to reach under the passenger seat. As he spun around with her tennis ball launcher in his hand and a wide grin on his face, she barked once and took off toward the grassy knoll between the lot and the I-49 offramp. *Game on.* Jimmy pointed the launcher at the sky about twenty feet in front of Maybelle and pulled the trigger.

“Here it comes, girl! Go get it!”

As the ball flew toward his eager dog, he lumbered behind. He didn’t like physical exercise, never had. His wife had forced him to do a 5K run when they had been married for a couple of years. She didn’t want them to grow too fat and happy, which to Jimmy had seemed like a perfect goal as a married couple. But he played along, bought a pair of ridiculously expensive running shoes (not from Wal-Mart), and trained with her three days during the week and twice on weekends for a full month.

Jimmy wheezed and let the ball launcher fall from his sweaty palm as he rested his hands on his knees. He thought he might lose his breakfast. His breath steamed from his nose and mouth like exhaust from his truck. He wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve, which brought back more memories from his forced 5K. He had managed to make it to the finish line of the race they called The Trolley Run in Kansas City. His wife, who ran with him for the first fifteen minutes, ended up racing ahead of him. When he finally crossed the finish line an hour after her, she was waiting to give him a congratulatory hug. Instead, he had puked all over her chest. She didn’t speak to him for weeks afterwards, and he never ran again.

Maybelle knocked the memory out of his head as she knocked him to his butt onto the cool pavement. She dropped

the ball into his lap and roughly nuzzled her head against his hand, pushing it toward the launcher.

“Okay, girl, okay. I get it. I’m all yours.”

He shot another ball, sending Maybelle scrambling deeper into the greasy grass patch that divided the interstate from what passed for civilization in this godforsaken and forgotten dot in the middle of flyover country. The two scrambled through the dewy grass and played fetch until Jimmy could no longer feel the chill of the night.

“Last one, girl,” Jimmy said as she circled his legs, her tongue hanging limply from her wide open mouth. Her eyes shone with life. *This must be like heaven for dogs*, Jimmy thought.

His last shot of the night curved toward the interstate, pushed by a stiff wind that suddenly blew from the west with a gusty fury. Maybelle bounded after it, ignoring Jimmy’s warnings. She leapt across the uneven ground. Jimmy dropped the cannon and sprinted after her. His sides ached and his lungs burned. He called her name, frantically looking in both directions of the highway. The ball bounced toward the southbound shoulder. Maybelle jumped for it and bit into it hard as she skidded to a stop just past the white line and rumble strips of the interstate.

Her tail thumped against the glass strewn asphalt as she stared back at Jimmy. He stopped and called her to him, thankful for the unusual lack of traffic. She bound to him, her head cocked as if he were crazy for shouting at her. Jimmy collapsed as she jumped into his lap. She covered his face in sloppy kisses.

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry, Maybelle girl. I should have known you’d catch that silly ball. It never stood a chance.” She rolled onto her back, letting him scratch her belly. He yawned and

looked at the highway that was more home to him than any other place on earth.

For the first time, he noticed the small yard signs dotting the grassy no-man's-land closest to the interstate like a cluster of weeds. They seemed to announce a candidate's bid for county coroner.

*People are dying for my re-election bid* read one. *I'm dead serious about my job* stated another. Yet another announced that *Vic Kilszeks Kills it for Adrian County*. Jimmy laughed so hard Maybelle jumped up, cocked her head and whined at him.

He slowly pushed himself off the ground. "Come on, Maybelle. Let's get the hell out of this crazy place and get back to civilization before we get sucked into the Twilight Zone."

JIMMY TOSSED the ball up and caught it as he walked to his truck. He snuck a look at Maybelle to make sure she hadn't missed his taunting. He flung it in the air again as she circled him, her head following the path of the ball.

"What's the matter, girl? Too tired to get that ball?" Maybelle whined softly. Her tongue nearly drug the ground. "Don't worry. I've got plenty of water in the truck, and once we're back on the road, this ball is all yours." He threw it up into the crisp night sky again as she trotted ahead of him, seemingly convinced.

The game over, Jimmy stuck the ball in his pocket. He looked up at the moonless sky as he ambled to his truck. He wanted to get on the road, but he didn't feel the old familiar pangs of guilt from being away too long. The more he examined this newfound freedom, the more he felt guilty... for not feeling guilty. *Jesus, what kind of head games are you playing with yourself?*

He counted the stars to distract himself. They were bright and plentiful without all the light pollution of the big city. Maybe after this last run he would find some place out in the country. Maybelle would love that. Not this place, though, with its randy waitresses, truck stop triple x clubs, and sociopathic coroners. But somewhere out of the way, where the future was honest and easy, and the past was as distant as the stars up above.

Maybelle barked at him as she paced near the truck. The parking lot light near his big rig blinked incessantly as a high-pitch buzz radiated from its moth-encircled bulb. Maybelle's barks became whines. Her ears twitched wildly.

"Hold your horses, girl. I'm almost there." But she didn't hear him. Something near the road had caught her attention. She sniffed the air, her head swaying side to side, then she bolted.

"Stop! Heel! Maybelle, goddammit, get back here!" He dropped the tennis ball cannon and took off after her. Whatever scent she'd picked up, he knew from experience she wouldn't stop until she'd found its source.

She headed toward the truck stop, leaping into the road just as a car turned out of the busy lot. Its headlights blinded Jimmy as he chased after her. He heard the screeching of tires and the crunch of gravel as the car braked hard. He ran into the road and slammed into the side of the car, scrambling over the hood. But she wasn't there.

"Get off my car, you damned fool," the driver slurred. Jimmy waved and jogged toward the truck stop. Unlike the diner's parking lot, this one was dark and full of as many shadows as cars. Like even the parking lot of the strip club was full of secrets.

He finally saw Maybelle's shadow as she trotted behind the building. He cursed under his breath and took off again after

her. As he rounded the corner, he realized what he expected to be an alley was actually another street.

Maybelle sat on the other side, next to a little girl in front of the Dedd Inn Motel. The little motor inn stood between the highway and the club, but Jimmy hadn't noticed it when he'd exited the interstate just a couple of hours ago. As he looked at the squat two-story building, its dim lighting and partially blocked entrance, he thought it seemed purposefully hidden, which seemed counterintuitive for an interstate motel.

Something made Jimmy stay where he was on the opposite side of the street. The little girl was filthy. Her dress appeared dirt brown but could simply be covered in dirt. She clutched a headless, naked doll in one hand while she petted Maybelle.

She didn't look like she was just passing through. Jimmy thought about her growing up in the shadow of decadence, surrounded by drifters, grifters and druggies. She'd never make it out of this quarter mile patch of land. If she was lucky, she'd end up waiting tables at the diner. More likely, she'd find herself riding a pole and pumping more than gas. *What kind of monster would bring a kid into this world?*

Jimmy stepped into the street. It was obvious Maybelle wouldn't come back on her own now that she'd found someone new to give her attention. He stopped mid-step as a muscular young man appeared from the shadows and rested his hand on the girl's head. The man stared at Jimmy with an intensity that made him recoil.

He wore faded camouflage pants. His naked chest looked like someone had chiseled it out of stone. Some kind of arrow tattoo adorned his forearm. Maybelle tucked herself between the little girl's legs and rolled over onto her back. In a blur, the man's leg came up. The tip of his boot connected with Maybelle's head. She yelped and darted toward Jimmy. He started to yell at the stranger, but something in the man's eyes

turned Jimmy's mouth dry and sour. He swallowed his anger and retreated with Maybelle as fast as he could to the safety of the diner's lot.

HALFWAY ACROSS THE LOT, about a hundred feet from his truck, Jimmy collapsed to the pavement. He could feel his heart beat in his temple. His breath came in ragged torrents that tasted like bile. Maybelle stopped and turned her head to him but kept her back facing him. She crouched about fifty feet in front of him. Her fur had fluffed out, making her look twice her size. She tucked her tail between her legs, growled under her breath, and peed.

The night was deathly silent, so when the big Lincoln Town Car came tearing through the lot with no headlights on and sparks trailing behind it, Jimmy thought he was hallucinating again.

He reached a shaky hand for Maybelle as she disappeared under the ghostly car.

Time seemed to jump around in random order as Jimmy sat on the concrete in disbelief. A man's stilted voice cut through the sudden silence. "You killed my dog! I'll have you arrested for this. I'm calling campus security. Do you know who I am? You can't just go around killing professors' dogs, you know. There are consequences, young man. You killed my Kevin!"

Jimmy closed his eyes. When he opened them, he hoped the tall old man with the floppy hat who was screaming and waving his cane at him would be gone. Just a figment, an unrealized fear.

"The University Police will hear about this as soon as I find my phone. What's your name? Are you even in this class? Didn't I fail you once? Is that why you took revenge on my poor Kevin? You sick little weirdo. You're in big trouble."



“Shut up!” The words thundered through the air and sounded to Jimmy as if someone else had shouted them. The old man turned pale and seemed to shrink before him. Jimmy crawled over to Maybelle. She lay behind the man’s front tire, half under his car. Her chest was still. She was gone.

“Oh, my goodness. I’m so sorry, young man. The dog came out of nowhere. I couldn’t have. I didn’t know. Please, please forgive me. Don’t tell Virginia. She mustn’t find out. She’ll be so disappointed in me. I have cash. A lot of it. Never trust the banks. I know it can’t bring her back but....”

The old man collapsed to the ground. His wails pierced the night, but not Jimmy’s heart. *What the hell is happening?* A ringing in Jimmy’s ears made the old man’s continued rambling sound as if it was coming from a poor phone connection or from the other side of a tunnel rather than just a few steps away. His words echoed and faded in and out, bouncing across Jimmy’s brain.

Jimmy hugged Maybelle to his chest and rocked back and forth. *She’s dead. She’s dead.*