

PROPHET AND LOSS:

Stories of Extreme Beliefs

by

K. Gordon Neufeld

This is a work of fiction. While some stories are based on actual events, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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These are all for Mary Jo

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Prophet and Loss

“HURRY UP, EVA.”

The long-haired, bearded young man scolds the woman walking behind him, indicating with a jerk of his head the direction they must go. He is dressed in a plaid shirt and jeans and a denim jacket, and wears a small tan-colored leather knapsack. In one hand he carries a walking stick with which he gestures occasionally. On his feet are yellow hiking-boots with large round serious laces. The woman is also wearing boots like this. The hiking-boots are her only concession to practicality: apart from those, she is wearing an old-fashioned blue calico dress down to her ankles, and a blue and black Gore Tex windbreaker. Her backpack is a shapeless black bag made of some artificial material, attached to her slender frame like a hideous parasite. Her feet touch the ground so tentatively she looks as though at any moment she might walk on the air alone.

The man looks slightly gaunt, but nowhere near as ghostly as his companion. She is finding it difficult to keep up with him, yet he does not look back in her direction except to scold her. When he does, she strives to catch up with him, with a sincere but weak effort which falters as the day goes on.

It is a late spring morning, with patches of snow still visible here and there to the right of them, at the higher elevations. From where they are walking the Rockies are a looming presence to their right, but they are skirting the mountains, neither entering nor retreating from them, but following a parallel path of the man's choosing. From time to time he will stop, a small scowl of concentration on his face, looking first towards the city, which is too far away to be seen save for a brown smudge of smog on the eastern horizon; then looking west, to the towering mountains, with the air of one who owns them. He clutches a modest black leather-

bound book in his hands. He seems to be surveying, pondering, waiting.

Whenever he turns to scold the woman, she looks at her feet and answers, “Yes, Jacob.” But at one point she glances up at him and asks softly, “Please, could we take a break? I’m so thirsty.”

The man regards her with scorn. “Of course you’re thirsty. So am I. But we must resist the body if we are to receive the vision. God will not give us the vision until we have fasted for forty days, as Jesus did. God will visit us when we are ready. He will tell us what will be our part in the End Times.”

The woman bows her head slightly, accepting. At that moment a shadow passing over them catches their attention. Looking up, they see a pair of eagles swooping low over them before soaring up again into the nearly cloudless sky. They are flying east - perhaps to reach the city.

“It is a sign,” the man says, and then opens the book in his hand with a sure touch, quickly finding the right place. “Matthew 24:27-28. ‘For as the lightning cometh out of the east, and shineth even unto the west; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For wheresoever the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.’ These eagles are gathered together to attest that I myself am the return of the Son of Man in the flesh.” He continues to follow the path of the eagles with his eyes, as does the woman, who answers, “Yes, Jacob.”



It is almost two years since I met Jacob. He came to a Bible study meeting at our church. I could tell that the other people didn’t like him, he seemed so strange. I was the shy one, the one who rarely spoke at the meetings. Jacob came into the group with his long hair and beard and his well-thumbed Bible and from the first time he attended he seemed to dominate the meeting. Even when he was sitting quiet, listening to others, he was the unmistakable focus, the unofficial leader of the group. Naturally the lay pastor who led the group soon took a strong dislike to Jacob. I did not know, when I first laid eyes on him at that Bible study meeting, that only a few months later, in defiance of my parents’ wishes, I would promise to Jacob that I would marry him.



“Let’s go, Eva,” the man says when the eagles are no longer visible. They resume their quiet pilgrimage, following a fading little-used trail through a scrubby forest. Since there is little water in this area, the trees do not grow as tall as in the more mountainous areas, which are fed by glacier waters.

After about an hour, the man stops, looking down at something near the path. “What is it, Jacob?” the woman wonders as he prods it with his walking stick.

“Cougar scat,” he answers, giving her a significant look. “We’ll have to keep watch. It’s probably somewhere nearby.” He opens his Bible and at once finds what he is looking for. “The mountain lion is like those who do not believe, Eva; he will devour you if you have contact with him. Jeremiah 5:6: ‘Wherefore a lion out of the forests shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased.’ The presence of this mountain lion is a sign to you, Eva, to remain faithful and to permit no backsliding.”

The woman waits with her head down. “Of course, Jacob,” she answers. The man resumes walking, and she follows behind. Soon, they can hear the sound of a small stream trickling nearby. The woman looks up with a revival of hope, saying, “Jacob, I need a drink.” He shrugs, looking at her annoyed, but then turns aside from the trail toward the sound. Suddenly he halts. Reaching behind him, he places his hand on the woman’s shoulder, and she stops also. He brings one finger up to his lips as she looks at him in wonderment. He points ahead of them, to the bank of the stream, just visible through the trees. The woman cranes her neck forward, and sees what he is indicating: a tawny cougar is drinking from the stream not fifty feet in front of them. The man points back the way they came, again placing his finger to his lips. The woman’s face crumples with disappointment, but she complies, following him back the way they came, treading softly so as not to alert the animal.

When they are far enough away to feel safe again, the woman speaks. “I wish I could have had a drink. I really need some water, Jacob. Just a little water, nothing more.” He looks at her and explodes, “Woman, what am I to do with you? Consider John 4:13-14: ‘Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.’ Thus spake Jesus to the Samaritan woman. Are you no better than this Samaritan? My words are more refreshing than any water of this Earth.”

The woman looks down at her feet, her shoulders slumping slightly. “Yes, Jacob.”



It happened this way. Jacob, who had taken to walking with me after all the Bible study meetings, told me that he had received the inspiration that God wanted us to be together. He said that with his special insight into the Word of God, and my humility before the Lord, we could do amazing things together. He said that he had been appointed a special role by God, and that God needed me to help him complete his work. He was just so powerful and assured in his manner, I knew that God must be leading him. In a way he enthralled me from the moment I first saw him. So when he asked me that night to marry him, I told him, “Yes, Jacob. My parents won’t like it, but I’m 18 now and I can marry you if I want to. And I will.”



The hikers press on until late in the afternoon, when they approach a forestry road that cuts through the landscape like a sword, cleaving it into two halves. The road is fenced with barbed wire running up both sides; farther up, as the road rises to higher elevations, they can see a mountain sheep caught in the fence, bleating pitifully, with its head wedged between the wires. The woman exclaims, “Oh, Jacob, look!” and points to the helpless sheep. The man gives it only a glance.

“The cougar will kill it before long,” he comments. At once his Bible is open, and he begins to quote. “Genesis 22:13. ‘And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by its horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.’”

Turning to the woman, he explains, “The sheep represents the offering of your life to God. If you are prepared to give everything, even to die for God’s Kingdom which is to come, then God will not require your life, but will take your suffering instead, which will be remembered in the Book of Life. Because you have fasted, and have gone without food and water for many days, God will lift you up, and will grant you a vision of the End Times.”



At first Jacob only liked to go camping for the weekends, because we both had jobs and couldn’t get away during the week. But after a while more and more people started coming around to our apartment, where Jacob was holding his own Bible study meetings now. He had a way of finding people who were unsure where to go next in life, and convincing them he knew the answer, if only they would listen. And they did: after a few months, we had several young people coming over almost every evening, and a married couple, who let us live with them, so we could save rent and Jacob could focus on his Bible studies and prophecy. Then Jacob began taking us all away to camp in the mountains, where he said we could escape the corrupting influence of the city. Sometimes we would even go away for a full week if people could arrange their vacations to allow it. On these camping trips we would go for hikes to get away from the other people at the campgrounds, and we would find an isolated place by ourselves where we could build a campfire. Beside the fire, Jacob would preach to us for hours. Always, the firelight would flare up to reveal Jacob’s lean, intense face, while he read from the Bible and explained what it meant. We all sat before him cross-legged on the ground. At times the flames would leap up to reveal a glistening bead of sweat dripping from his brow, like the tear of an angel poised to bless the parched and ruined earth.



“We have to keep moving,” the man declares, turning at once to cross the road by pushing down the barbed wires so the woman can climb over. She struggles to lift her legs high enough to step over. Her dress catches on one of the barbs. Eventually she frees the dress, leaving only a slight tear in the cloth. The man follows after her, easily pushing down on the wire and lifting himself over, then crossing the road to repeat the process at the wire on the other side. Finally they set off again through the scrubby forest. If there is a trail for them to follow, it is scarcely visible now.

Nearing evening, the man and woman come across a small clearing in the forest – a circle where the ground is relatively flat except for a few felled trees and some grass and weeds. The woman slumps down, seating herself on one of the felled tree trunks and slipping out of her backpack. At once she begins to apologize: “Oh, I’m so sorry, Jacob. I’m so thirsty and wish I could have some water. I just need some water, honest. I don’t need food. Just a little water, that’s all, and I’ll be fine.” She looks up at him standing over her and seems to be pleading with her eyes. “Please? Could I get some water? I’m sorry I’m so weak. God’s strength is not as great in me as it is in you.”

The man looks as if he is consulting his backpack and then says, “I don’t have any with me. The only water I saw was the stream we passed several hours ago. You don’t want me to go back there, do you?”

The woman bows her head in shame. “I’m sorry, Jacob. But I don’t think I can go on without some water. I just don’t know. I don’t know what to do.” And suddenly she is weeping, holding her head in her hands.

The man puts his arms akimbo, watching her as she weeps. Eventually he turns and strikes a large boulder twice with his walking stick out of sheer frustration. Nothing happens. Opening his Bible, he reads: “Numbers 20:11. ‘And Moses lifted up his hand, and with his rod he struck the rock twice: and the water came out abundantly.’ Eva, God has chosen not to fulfill this Scripture in me, though, like Moses, I am leading you towards the Promised Land. You have failed to do what God requires of you,

since He has not granted your wish. Is it too much to ask that you go for a few days without food or drink? Have not many prophets done this, and yet *you* are even the Bride of the Redeemer.”

The woman offers no reply, but continues to weep softly. Finally the man shrugs, and turns. “All right,” he says over his shoulder as he walks back the way he came. “Wait here. Don’t move, okay? I’m going back to the stream to get water. I’ll bring it as soon as I can. Why don’t you just lie down next to that log? You can rest, and God will watch over you.”

The woman looks up at him with tremendous gratitude in her eyes. She slowly lowers herself onto the ground next to the log, and then stretches out with her head resting on her arm as she watches the man walking away into the distance.



One day Jacob came to me excited by a new plan. He said we must go away together, just the two of us, to await the vision of the Lord about the End of Days. I would have to quit my job, because the vision might take many days and my vacation time would not be enough. So I did as he asked, and we came to this campsite near Canmore, in the Kananaskis park, where we fasted and prayed for many days. On the twentieth day, Jacob said we must arise and walk deeper into the wilderness, so the inspiration can reach us more directly. Of course I agreed, thought I was very tired from fasting and could scarcely keep up.

But now at last he has recognized my need for rest, and has honored my wish for a drink of water. As I watch him walking away I think: there he goes, the Holy One, the chosen Lamb of God. What am I next to him? Though I am his bride, I was born to imperfection. My eyes follow his retreating back until he disappears into the trees. I feel the coolness of late spring all around me, yet still I am only able to lie here, neither sleeping nor waking. As I lie here with my eyes half-closed I feel the coolness of a shadow flitting over my face, seeming like an omen or a visitation. When I open my eyes and look up, I see the eagles tumbling and soaring above me. I am filled with the urge to rise and meet them in the air.



Well after dawn the man finds his way into the clearing again, calling, “Eva! Eva? I’ve brought the water! Eva?” He is hoisting the canteen of water like a trophy at an awards ceremony. When he hears no response he goes over to the woman lying beside the log and shakes her, saying, “Eva? Wake up, I’ve brought your water.” His shaking only causes her head to loll backwards as he moves her shoulder forwards. This startles the man, and he jumps up and looks down at her for a moment in amazement. Then he kneels down beside her and shakes her again more firmly. “Eva! Eva! Wake up!” Her head lolls back and forth with the shaking, yet still there is no response. “What’s the matter, Eva? Eva, what’s up? Are you dead? You can’t be dead!” Then he stands up and looks at her for a long moment. Finally, kneeling down beside her, he closes his eyes and stays for a moment hunched in silent prayer. When he opens his eyes to look again, he senses a shadow falling across his face. Looking upwards, he sees two eagles circling high above him, tumbling and swirling in the air.