

Faithcation: An Adventure on Trust
by Kristine Madera

Chapter 1

I held the airline barf bag in one hand and gripped the armrest with the other. All around me, people sat unruffled. The guy next to me had started snoring before takeoff on the Hong Kong to Beijing flight. Every few minutes he shifted from snoring into my ear to snoring into the ear of the man in the aisle seat. Other people sipped tea, water or a syrupy pink punch they passed off as juice. No one else held a barf bag.

Just me.

My rational self said that my growing nausea-laced panic could have been the shrimp dumplings I'd had the night before. I didn't know what they were supposed to taste like, so maybe the slight tang that had seemed delicious at the time was really a sign that they had been tainted.

But I knew better. I blamed my seven-year-old self. If she had been a normal kid concerned with which outfit to dress her Barbie in, I wouldn't be on this plane. Holding a barf bag. Heading to the place that terrified me. It made no rational sense. But nothing about this was rational.

I could still see my seven-year-old self, huffy with the frustration that only a crisis of faith could spark. It wasn't my first crisis of faith, but it was the first I'd felt empowered to do something about. Faith had always been presented as a disheartening servitude in which you carried out a long list of "shoulds" without complaint and received assurance of a cosmic safety net in return. Raw deal that it seemed, I still relished my long conversations with God after my official bedtime prayers were over and I was left blessedly alone to snuggle under the covers and dive deep into dialogue with the divine. As long as we stayed away from the servitude of the shoulds, I'd fall asleep after a satisfying, chatty communion.

My younger self felt emboldened after a recent Sunday School lesson in which the teacher, with a disapproving frown, said that the Old Testament prophets used to fight with God. Her tone was meant to warn us off of that sort of mutinous madness, but I felt like I'd taken a deep breath for the very first time.

Freshly empowered during this crisis of faith, my younger self tromped into the backyard on the edge of despair. I'm not sure what precipitated this moment specifically, but I could still feel her loneliness like a deep dark hole that could never be filled. I had no "excuse" for this. I had loving parents, a middle-class life, food on the table. There was nothing to point to and say "that hurts." Life hurt, and I didn't know why. I could hold it together for periods of time with inner anguish like a low-grade fever, flavoring, but not dominating, my life. Once in a while a trapdoor would open and drop me into a sea of sadness, where life felt like too much to bear.

It must have been one of those days. Feeling this way was definitely against the “shoulds” of how I knew I was supposed to feel, so I usually tried to put on my happy face, figuring if I ignored it, God would, too. This time instead of hiding my despair, I got mad.

“This place is crazy.” I said. “I don’t understand the point of life. It’s meaningless and I don’t see any reason I need to be here. It seems like a waste of time.”

I rarely heard a verbal response, but I always felt a response, a sort of knowing deep inside. My heart opened into a spaciousness. If God was mad at me, he was keeping his cool. I went on.

“I need to know why I am here,” I said. “Or I need to be done.”

Immediately I had a vivid impression of me as an adult, so filled with the presence I identified as the divine that there was no otherness, just a harmonious oneness of me and divine radiance. In the accompanying vision, the adult me was talking as if on a stage, with no sense of a separate self—no self-referencing sense of identity, no sense at all of division between me and the divine. There was no “me” there, yet I felt more me than I ever had. It was the most “real” thing I’d ever experienced. Much more real than the world around me. To me, this divine elixir was evidence of a reality that I’d had glimpsed but thought I was making up. It became my ongoing touchstone to measure what was truly real, and what wasn’t.

My younger self got it in an instant. The technicolor impression bestowed a guiding purpose as well as a barometer to know when I was moving toward it, and when I was drifting away. Living it out seemed so simple.

“Okay,” my younger self said, shifting suddenly from despondent to determined. “I can do that.”

That moment was why, 16 years later, I was on a flight to Beijing, ready to barf. An hour left to go in the flight felt way too short. I needed more of a buffer between the China-lite of Hong Kong and mainland China. Hong Kong had been the perfect launching place. Most people I met there in 1991 were as anxious about merging with China as I was.

My irrational fear of China had less to do with the country and more to do with what it represented. That first brilliant flash of unity consciousness when I was seven installed a ravenous hunger to experience it all of the time. I soon realized that I’d received no direction on how to bring this reality to life. The mammoth contrast between the experience of that moment and the narrow bandwidth of my ordinary life was the most obvious place to start.

Always a reader, I knew books opened doors to new perspectives, so I went to the biggest books I could find. I scoured our family World Book Encyclopedias for exotic countries and read about other cultures. I’d close my eyes and imagine myself growing up there, wondering what my daily life and family would be like. I’d introduce the me in the exotic culture to the “real” me, and get them talking—comparing life stories, exploring the difference in culture, figuring

out how we thought and felt differently about the world and our lives. I had zero idea if my imaginary friends fairly represented their cultures, but I learned that my personal experience of life was just one perspective among multitudes. My perception about life, I realized, was a collection of ideas, stories and beliefs rather than a true representation of reality. Finding new ways to identify and dismantle assumptions, perceptions, beliefs and anything else that interfered with the delicious flash of “reality” in my vision became a daily preoccupation. One of the best ways to uncover and dismantle, I discovered, was travel—the more different from the familiar the better.

The other primary way I discovered to find the edges of my narrow world was fear. Fear was like a hot electric fence zapping me when I pushed the outer edges of my personal boundaries. The way to enlarge this self-made prison, I realized, was to walk in the direction of fear and let the zapping guide me rather than stop me.

These two strategies served me all through school, and also in my first post-college job teaching English in Japan. As my stint in Japan came to a close, I had the option of a plane ticket back to the States, or the equivalent in any other ticket or cash option I desired. This crossroad crackled my inner electric fence. Not only was the option I choose my first unsupervised major life decision, but this decision determined which reality I would attune my life to—the consensus reality of the surface world, or the deep, harmonious unity consciousness beneath my outward experience.

It was my decision alone. I’d never told anyone about my vision—I didn’t start sharing it until about ten years ago. I’d kept it tucked deep inside as my private guiding light. As real as it was for me, I still didn’t know if it was true in any verifiable way. I also suspected that if I told people about it, they would claim it was a momentary delusion and try to stockade me into their version of reality. Or commit me. I knew that what I experienced was real, even if it was just real for me.

Faith is one of those broad-spectrum words that spans everything from fealty to conviction to belief in a wide variety of higher powers. The word that companions it, whether spoken or silent is “in.” People almost always talk about faith in...something, even if they can’t always articulate what that something is.

What is faith really in—codified ideas about the divine, or the truth beneath the concepts? If a person’s experience of the divine conflicted with their beliefs about the divine, which “faith” would they choose?

I believed in the truth of my experience, but I didn’t yet have faith in the reality beneath it. I wasn’t even sure what it was, how it worked, what it meant, what it wanted from me, if anything. I wasn’t sure if I fully trusted it because I as much as I lusted after the deliciousness of it, I’d never entrusted this reality with my life. For 16 years it had been a theoretical pursuit.

The dawning realization during my last few months in Japan was that the time had come to play for stakes. If I decided to claim this deeper reality as my truth—and I did—my first decision as an independent adult would be to test this faith out.

Ever the planner, I decided I needed three things: 1) To be in a place that was so unfamiliar that I had no idea about how things should work; 2) To be in motion—sitting in a meditation retreat somewhere wasn't going to do it; 3) To have little or no safety net. I created a loose plan that I would get a one-way ticket to Beijing (via Hong Kong) and travel overland through Soviet Russia to Europe and then fly home. Along the way I'd put myself in situation after situation where it was just me and what I'll call the divine, so that I could figure out what this was, how to work with, if I could trust it—and if so, if I could trust myself to act on that faith. Or would I wuss out?

It all made so much sense when I was safe in my Tokyo apartment flipping through guidebooks. Now that I sat with a crumpled barf bag in my hand and ten minutes to landing, I finally realized I'd put all my chips on a single roll of the dice. Fear laced through the marrow of my bones in a way I had never felt before.

As we touched down and then taxied to the gate, I tucked the wrinkled, but unused, barf bag into my backpack, just in case.