

Angels Among Us!

An excerpt from Sons of the Eastern Plains: A Memoir
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One of the greatest miracles of my life happened during a blizzard in 1982 when I met my guardian angel driving a snow plow. Mom and Dad had just moved into a beautiful, tri-level home that we had custom built for them on a two-acre lot. The acreage was about eight miles outside the city limits in a new subdivision. Not only was it a custom home, but it was one that Dad had designed, having a friend draw up the prints. It really was the home of their dreams. It normally took us about fifteen minutes to get to their house from our home in the city. Our Christmas Eve celebrations usually began around three in the afternoon, so when we woke up on that cold, snowy morning, we didn't feel any sense of urgency to rush around to leave. But, not too long after breakfast, the snowflakes started getting bigger as the snow quickly began to pile up on the streets and sidewalks. I decided it would be a good idea to pack the car with all of the gifts and food so that we could head out a little earlier than planned. As my wife got the kids ready, I decided to go ahead and put the tire chains on our little brown Toyota Corolla, as an additional precaution. The snow was already about a foot deep, when I finished chaining up the car. I finished packing the trunk of the car, and for no particular reason, I decided to throw in a couple of sleeping bags, even though there really wasn't any room to spare.

As we started out the back road that we normally took and with the kids warmly buckled in the back seat, it quickly became obvious that the snowplows hadn't cleared the two-lane highway at all that day. Not wanting to push our luck, we headed out to the four-lane highway, winding along the outskirts of the city, in an effort to get back on track. As we trudged along at about fifteen miles an hour, we passed a half-a-dozen vehicles that had slid off the side of the road and were unable to get unstuck from within the clutches of the deep, wet snow drifts. At one point, I was tempted to turn around to head back home, but once we made it to the highway, the sky began to lighten. With the snow letting up, we decided to continue on our journey.

Continuing to travel down the highway, the snow-packed roadway looked more like a war zone with abandoned vehicles littering the way. Cars, trucks, even tractor trailers had slid off the road, becoming entrenched in the snow-covered ditches. We were at a point that we should have turned around, but there wasn't any place that would allow us to cross the median to head back. Besides, we really were only minutes from reaching our intended destination. Surely, we could make it a few more miles without any trouble.

Before turning down 114th Avenue to make the last mile-and-a-half of the journey, the wind picked-up, causing the freezing snow to pile up into huge drifts that covered the already snow-packed roads. There was a two-foot drift across the road making it impassable. It was obvious that we would have to turn around in an attempt to get back on the highway. With any luck, we could reach the next cross road, which was 120th Avenue. When we finally found our way to 120th, the storm had turned into a full-fledged blizzard with near-white-out conditions.

Visibility was maybe twenty to thirty feet, while the wind-chill had brought the temperatures down to well below freezing. The windshield, as well as the windows of the car were almost completely fogged over. I had to roll the driver's window down to stick my head out into the elements in order to see where I was driving. Our trip, which normally took about fifteen minutes was already into the second hour of driving. We were still more than a mile away from the folks' house. I knew that they would be worried sick since my wife had called them right before we left home. We decided it was time to stop at one of the few houses along the road to try and call.

I pulled into a snow-drifted driveway as far as I dared, before getting out of the car. I left the engine running with the heater blasting so that my wife and kids could stay warm, thinking hopefully that it might help the windows defrost while sitting there. I trudged through the knee-deep drifts of snow as I made my way to the porch that covered the step. The porch offered a bit of protection from the freezing wind that pelted my face with the harsh blowing snow. I stomped the snow off my boots, while brushing the snow off my pants, as I waited for an answer to my ringing the doorbell. I must have rang the doorbell at least four times, with no reply. Obviously, nobody was home.

My heart sank in near hopelessness as I turned to head back to the car. The gigantic, freezing flakes stuck to my face, and flew into my squinting eyes as I rushed back to the car with my head hunched down deep into my shoulders. "Nobody is home!" I barked as I slid back into the driver's seat which was wet from the snow that had blown into the car and then melted.

"What are we going to do?" My wife desperately inquired with a tinge of despair dangling from her words.

"I guess we'll see if we can make it somehow!" I replied in an attempt to hide my fear. I wasn't to the point of panic yet, but I was extremely concerned about the circumstance we found ourselves in. The one thing I knew for sure is that we couldn't turn around to head back home.

As we pulled onto 120th Avenue, snow began to fall even harder. As we headed east, the visibility dropped to just a few feet beyond the front of the car. Once again, I rolled down the window to begin searching for the cross street we needed to take south. As we crept along at a turtle's pace, I strained to find a trace of the road as the blowing snow literally blinded me with its freezing force. The snowplows had been down the road we were currently on, which of course, piled the snow up almost to the top of our little compact car. It was like driving down a one-way tunnel. I couldn't see anything. There was nothing ahead of us but white. Everywhere I looked it seemed as if I was covered in a white linen sheet. I kept hanging my head out the window in an attempt to keep from running into the walls of snow on each side of us, built up by the snowplows. Suddenly, as we emerged from this tunnel of white, I discovered that we had reached the top of the hill. As my mind whirled in a frantic effort to determine our exact location, I realized that we had driven right past the road we needed to turn down. I quickly found a spot in the road that allowed us to turn that little Toyota around so we could head back once again in the same direction from which we had just come. This time I drove even slower, stopping every few minutes to verify our location in relation to the road we were frantically searching for.

At this point, I was extremely concerned about getting stranded with a six-month old and a two-year old in the back seat. Visions of a Christmas Eve tragedy began to infiltrate my thoughts as I began to ponder the ramifications of my foolishness, wandering out into a blizzard. I knew we should have stayed home where it was safe. I let my pride interfere with common sense as we set out that day in weather that warranted staying put. I kept thinking about what would happen if we were stranded in that powerful storm. We could freeze to death on the most sacred of holidays. How would that impact my family? How would they be able to cope with such a tragedy? My mind whirled with the prospects of a multitude of disastrous endings to our seemingly hopeless plight. Suddenly, I was brought to my senses from my dreaded thoughts as I caught a glimpse of the street sign that we had been searching for so diligently. Maybe, our luck had finally changed, and we could finally reach our destination.

I turned south on the street and traveled several hundred yards before coming to an abrupt stop. Right in front of us stood a three-foot-deep snow drift. It completely covered the road. We sat there for a few minutes in total silence. The sound of the car engine, along with the whirling sound of the heater masked the rushing sounds of the wind-whipped snow outside the car. I dropped my head to the steering wheel, resting my forehead on my hands as I contemplated our next move. The snow dripped off my stocking cap as it melted from the heat of the defrosters, saturating a spot on my jeans with its cold reality. I sat there for several minutes, searching for an answer, realizing that this situation was completely out of my control. I had no idea how to get my family to safety, out of reach of this deadly storm. As I sat there shaking like a leaf in the wind from the cold that had permeated my entire body, because of my dripping-wet clothes, I began to pray. At first I prayed silently. But before long, as I turned the car around in an effort to try to make it down 120th Avenue to where my friend's mom lived, my prayers turned into spoken pleas of desperation to God. Actually, it was probably more like a mumble, but my prayer was that we could make it back down 120th to the safety of a friendly refuge. Even if they weren't home, I knew they would forgive me if I broke into their house to find refuge from the storm.

As we began to retrace our path back to 120th, with my head once again hanging out the window trying to keep an eye on the road, I continued to pray out loud. My wife kept looking at me and asking "What? What did you say?" Finally, she looked at me and with a tinge of agitation in her voice, she barked out, "Would you quit mumbling!"

I glanced her way giving her "the look," before proclaiming, "Would you be quiet, I'm trying to pray!" I know that I shouldn't have snapped at her, but trying to concentrate on two things at one time was especially difficult for me, especially when it was trying to drive in a blizzard and pray at the same time.

Not more than a few seconds after my little outburst, I saw something coming down the road in our direction. At first, it was just a dark, blurred silhouette. But, as it came closer, I could see it was a snowplow. When he saw us, he quickly pulled over to see if he could help. I jumped out of the car, running through the deepening snow as fast as I could.

Rolling down his window, he leaned out to ask, "Where you headed?"

“We’re trying to get down Peoria to 113th Avenue,” I yelled out in an effort to be heard above the noise of his diesel engine and the blowing snow.

He paused for a second then responded, “We’re supposed to be keeping 120th open and we’re having a hard time doing that. As soon as we plow it, the wind blows the snow back over it again, making it nearly impassable!” There was a trace of despair in his voice, and I could feel that he was as overwhelmed by the intensity of the storm as I was. After thinking about it for a minute he shouted out his window, “Get in your car and follow us. We’ll plow down to 113th for ya!” I ran back to the car and hopped in. “Buckle up, he’s going to plow down Peoria for us!” I shouted out with exuberance as I wiped the melting snow off my frosty face.

We started following the plow, when we got to the point where we had to turn back before, the winds picked up with a vengeance, creating another complete whiteout. I slammed on the brakes, coming to a quick stop, since I couldn’t see anything, including the snowplow. After a few minutes the snow let up just enough to see that the snowplow was leaning at a pretty steep angle. The whiteout had caused him to slide off the road into the ditch. As he tried to work the truck, rocking back and forth from reverse to first gear, it was obvious that he was burying the truck deeper and deeper into the soft mud. When he finally gave up, the wheels were buried past the hubs, and he wasn’t going to be going anywhere.

I mustered up the energy to get out of the car one more time, to battle my way through the raging storm up to the truck. I stepped up onto the running board as the driver rolled down his window. “I’m sorry kid, but there’s no way we’re getting out of here!”

“What are you going to do?” I asked with a tinge of guilt in my voice.

“We’ll just radio in for someone to come get us, and in the meantime, we’ll just wait out the storm. There aren’t any other trucks in the area to help us, so we’ll just wait. The only other truck is trying to keep 132nd open and they were having as much trouble keeping up with things as we were. So, we’re all just going to hunker down and hope that the storm lets up pretty soon!” He stated as a matter of fact, like this was just a routine part of his job!

My heart sank in total despair as I headed back to the car. “They’re not going anywhere!” I quipped, as I got in the car looking back at the kids. “I guess the only thing left to do is see if we can make it up to Flo and Ron’s house!” I muttered as I turned the car around one more time to head back in the same direction we had just come from. “Lord help us,” I prayed as I pulled up to the barely visible stop sign on 120th Avenue. The storm had let up, allowing the visibility to increase just a little bit. Straining to see out the windshield, I thought I saw another silhouette of something coming closer toward us. “What’s that?” I questioned with an intense curiosity.

“It looks like a snowplow!” My wife cried out with excitement.

We couldn’t believe our eyes as another snowplow was fast approaching. I had no idea where it had come from since the other driver told me that there were no other plows available to come help us out. It wasn’t supposed to be there, but then again, I didn’t care! When it pulled up beside us, I quickly jumped out of the car, into knee-deep snow and ran up to the driver’s side of the plow as the man inside rolled down the window. I stepped up on the running boards as the driver leaned out the window to yell out, “Where you headed?”

“We’re trying to get down Peoria to 113th,” I eagerly replied as the windblown snow continued to fall sideways.

“Well, get in your car and follow us!” He replied with a reassuring smile.

I ran back to the car and jumped in, as my wife anxiously asked, “What did he say?”

“He said to follow him!” I responded with a hopeful voice.

I knew we were going to finally make it there this time, I really did. I just knew it! God doesn’t send help your way that many times without making sure you get where you’re going. We followed the plow down Peoria until we reached 113th Avenue where the folks lived. The plow continued down Peoria as I gunned the engine on our little Toyota Corolla in an effort to blast through the drifted snow as far as we could before getting stuck. We ended up about twenty feet from the back fence of my parent’s two-acre lot. We grabbed the sleeping bags, stuffed the kids in them, and then proceeded to head out in the blizzard for the last four-hundred feet of our arctic expedition.

Mom and Dad had been watching from their sliding-glass door, with frantic anticipation. When they first saw a blurred shape of two people walking toward their house in the blowing cold, they quickly came running out to greet us. We had just crossed the three-rail fence when they met us. Dad grabbed Dennis as we trudged through the thigh-deep snow drifts heading back to the house. Once inside, Mom and Dad hugged us like they would never let go. I have never been so thankful to be home. The love, the security that had always been a stable part of my life, was magnified to the nth degree as we stood in the kitchen, reliving the past three-and-a-half-hour journey.

After waiting an hour for us to arrive that morning, the folks started to worry as the snow quickly piled up around the area. Dad decided to take his truck out to find us. Less than a half-a-mile from the house, he had gotten stuck and had to walk back home himself in the raging blizzard. While Dad was out looking for us, Mom had started calling all the relatives to start a prayer chain for our safe return, as well as, for my brother who had to work that morning. His four-wheel-drive Bronco had slid off the road, getting stuck right outside of the city on his way back home. But fortunately, he was able to walk several miles to his girlfriend’s house. He had called several hours earlier to let the folks know that he was okay. So all their concern and focused prayer had turned to us. I’m sure it took all the collective prayer to accomplish the miracle we had just experienced. As we stood around in the kitchen, discussing the miraculous rescue we had just experienced, I glanced out the sliding-glass door, to watch the snowplow head the opposite direction down Peoria, returning to wherever it came from. Within minutes the storm became so intense that we could no longer see anything beyond the back deck of the house. It was a total whiteout as the blizzard’s intensity continued to increase.

I was convinced that God intervened to save us from that deadly, winter storm. The second snowplow should never have been in the vicinity to come to our rescue and safely guide us home. In fact, Dad still swears that he never saw a snowplow going down Peoria that morning. The only thing he ever saw was our tiny little brown car as we turned on 113th Avenue. The next day when Dad walked back to get his snowbound truck to bring it back home, he noticed that Peoria had

never been plowed at all. In fact, his truck was stuck right in the middle of the road and there was no snow plowed up on either side of his truck. The only snow that surrounded his truck were the three-foot drifts that had swirled around this vehicular snow fence.

The snow chains that I had put on our car before we left home that morning lasted our entire drive; that is until we had been delivered to the back door of the folks' house. Both of them broke just as we high-centered on the snow drift right by the acreage. Without chains that little car would have never made it even half-way to our destination. It was amazing that even my brother's four-wheel drive Bronco only made it a few miles out of the city, while our rear-wheel drive Toyota carried us all the way home. My brother's story too was a miracle in itself as he was able to safely walk to a safe shelter from the storm. If he had gone any further, he would have been caught out in a merciless blizzard without any gear to survive, or even to stay warm. God's guardian angels were working overtime that day in their efforts to keep us safe in the midst of this deadly torrent of nature.

What gifts did we receive on that Christmas Day? We were given the gift of life which came through a miraculous deliverance. Prayers had been answered. I experienced a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity as we were delivered out of a life-threatening storm by an angel of God. I still like to think that the two individuals in that second snowplow were angels. I often tell people that I had the opportunity to meet my personal guardian angels, and they both wore plaid. By far, it was the most memorable of all my Christmas celebrations. It was the Christmas where we were literally touched and protected by the mighty hand of God.