

# MYTHOS



Dane Clark Collins

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DANE CLARK COLLINS

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## PROLOGUE

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The scene opens with an old man lying on his deathbed.

Wild eyes dart around a drab and lonesome room. Scattered bits of oily hair fail to cover a jaundiced scalp dappled with scabs and spots. His sagging face contorts in grief and terror. His body, stripped to the waist, shudders violently in pain. Horrible scars that seem to have been carved with blunt instruments in the shapes of strange symbols—some still crusted with dried blood, some wet with fresh blood—adorn his bare chest and stomach.

Arthritic, age-spotted fingers fumble around in his pockets but find them empty. His head tilts back, his mouth opens, and stretched cheeks sink between toothless gums, emitting a tearless sob. He looks around the room with wide, desperate eyes, searching, it seems, for someone, but he is alone. Whatever path this man's life took, it brings wretched and horrifying solitude as his life comes to its end.

I'm terrified by this man, and I don't know why.

His eyes shine with a fleeting moment of clarity and his hand slides beneath his pillow, searching, then emerges, bleeding, with a broken piece of razor blade. A joyless smile bends his lips.

I look again at the cuts and scars covering his body then back at the jagged bit of razor and come to a grisly understanding. The scars are self-inflicted, and he has one left to carve—a final act of symbolism—the last exclamation point to punctuate the story of his life. He brings the blade to his face, and with a shaking hand, he slices a symbol into his tongue—two overlapping x's followed by lines

and curves that quickly become obscured by the blood. His final curving line cuts too deep and his tongue drops to his chin, dangling, held only by a slim bit of flesh.

I scream in terror, but there is no sound.

Is this a dream? It's too real. Where am I? Why am I so terrified of this old man?

Tears and blood seep onto the pillow as he turns onto his side, and his stomach tenses and spasms with sobs. I feel his emotion as if it's my own. His grief and his fear. The unbearable loneliness. I want to cry but cannot. Emotion has no release in this formless place from which I watch.

I can hear his thoughts as he begins to reflect on what brought him here. He has lost everyone and is stuck in the solitary prison of his mind. How did he come to this? At what point in his life did the road fork, and how did he choose his path so wrong—a path that led to such utter despair and loneliness?

But he's not alone. I freeze as the shadows begin to move, coalescing into a horrifying creature of darkness. The serpentine shadow wraps around his leg, finding greater purchase as it ascends his body, attempting to drag him down...to where?

Despite my terror, I feel compelled to go to him. To save him. To fight off this creature. But I can only watch in helpless horror.

I see his body relax. Is he giving up? Is he letting the creature take him?

No, he has an idea.

He closes his eyes and the curtain closes.

As the scene vanishes, I'm carried backward in time through the tortuous catacombs of the old man's memory. This is his last effort to try to escape the Demon, but it's close behind.

As I watch the old man's life speed in reverse, I can see this thing has been hunting him for a very long time.

I can guess now what he's doing. He's trying to find that moment when the Demon first came into his life, and from there...I don't know. Perhaps he will find some clue to free himself from the Demon's grasp.

As the Demon reaches for him, we flee further backward through his

memories. I see him speak to family and friends, and I see the fear in their eyes. His words, it seems to me, are not frightening, but people are afraid when they don't understand, and no one can understand this man any longer. To them, he is a cautionary tale, and they avoid him. He is ostracized, and eventually, he is institutionalized. When the institutions no longer care for him, his solitude is complete.

His loneliness aches like an old wound that will never heal but has become as familiar as the air he breathes. He has carried his loneliness through times of companionship as well as times of solitude, for he craved more than the physical company of others; he wanted to be seen. He wanted to be understood. Perhaps all of us are isolated in our own minds, and we all can feel lonely amongst others, but none so acutely as this old man. He was alone long before he was abandoned.

I fall further back through his memories and discover his numerous attempts to connect with others. Perhaps, he thought, he could connect through the universal language of music—the language that seems to magically sync listeners to the same rhythmic pulse. The language that conveys complex, ineffable emotions and primal impulses that words cannot possibly express. The language that can inflame the zeal, devotion, and passion of entire populations of people. The language that, in the hands of a master, can build a bridge connecting listeners' entrenched states of mind to any of the far reaches of consciousness and beyond.

But even with the language of music, the old man ventured further from the comfortable shores of convention than others were willing to follow, and he found himself again lost at sea and alone.

I travel back further in time to see his efforts at communicating the ineffable through poetic language. I see that moment when he first discovers that he can sometimes reach people by telling stories laden with complex emotion and mythological significance. Then I see his frustration as listeners and readers filter his words through their own prejudices and biases and come away with corrupted and sometimes even antithetical interpretations, driving a wedge further between him and his audience.

As I travel back further, I see his first attempts to communicate subversive bits of wisdom he believes he has discovered. As he tries, I see the blank stares, confusion, and contempt that he faces. I see how people pull away from him as if revolted by what lives in his mind, and I feel his mind flinch and retreat into isolation, where it is lonelier but safer. The more he is injured in this way, the more afraid he becomes to express himself to others, and the deeper his mind retreats.

Traveling back further, I can see our destination. This is when his consciousness shifted in such a way that his perceptions of the world seemed to diverge from those of other people.

He's a happy and curious young man who has only recently discovered the richness and wonder of the world within his mind—a world ripe for exploration. He finds the excitement of discovery grows every time he closes his eyes. He swims in every direction, venturing further and further from the shore with each expedition.

Today, he has traveled further than ever before and finds himself facing a vast darkness. For the first time in his life, he feels perfect serenity. He allows himself to melt into the darkness before a survival instinct takes hold and he looks around for some sign his mind is still alive. He sees a dim glow amidst the darkness and moves toward it to find a curtain of shadow lit subtly from behind. The curtain parts.

The scene opens with an old man lying on his deathbed.

The old man looks around with wide, desperate eyes, searching, and finds a small hand-held mirror. He holds it up to his face and our eyes meet.

How can he see me?

Wild eyes dart around a drab and lonesome room.

*Always so dizzy.* That was his thought, not mine.

I try to close my eyes, but the image of the old man does not go away.

Is this a vision into my future, or am I an insane and lonely old man reflecting on the life that led him to madness and loneliness? Which side of that mirror am I on?

I feel the Demon grip me and I scream soundlessly into the void of my mind.

This was the moment. This was where the road forked. It was this old man who infected me with the Demon. It was me, at the moment of my death. How can that be?

I have to find a way out of here, but I'm lost. The old man and I are the same mind, now, and I feel him dying as blood gushes from his mouth. Time has slowed down. I have to think. How did I get here? I have to follow my memories back further.

*Chapter One*

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**FORBIDDEN SCRIPTURE**

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*I* was exploring. Always exploring.  
*Exploring where?*

I can't remember.

*Retrace your steps. Go all the way back. What's your earliest memory?*

Terrified parents. That's my earliest memory. I'm very small and I'm fascinated by the world around me. While my parents are distracted, I wander out into the yard and watch the bumblebees hover amidst the dense yellow flowers that pierce upward through the denser green of grass beneath.

The road. Solid black, winding through the hills. The road is how we go to new places; I follow it. Houses. Different from ours, with different people. Different families with different rules and different routines.

The Artist's house. I know this house. My mother comes here sometimes to paint ceramic figures. I haven't been inside, but I know there is art inside.

I knock on the door and am conducted inside by a surprised Artist. "How did you get here?" she asks me. She goes to the phone while my imagination takes in the population of colorful ceramic people who adorn walls, shelves, and tables throughout the room. Cowboys dominate the landscape and they become animated in my mind, riding horses across vast plains and desolate hills and facing death from primal threats that live only in dreams and the past. I'm overcome by a wonderful dread that clutches at my chest and freezes the breath in my lungs and I close my eyes to imagine its form. It takes the shape of a pale face, mouth open as it wails silently its anguish. It takes the shape of a great

beast, sides pierced by a showman's spears, oozing blood, eyes staring with terror as its life slips away.

The Artist recruits a visitor to drive me home in his truck, and when I arrive home, I discover parents too terrified by my adventure to do more than hug me tightly. Perhaps exploration is hurtful to others. I don't want to scare them like this.

I'm soon compelled to explore again.

The years pass and my family moves, time and again. Each move leads to new adventures and discoveries of new places to explore. New terrains, new sights and sounds, new personalities, new rules of conduct, new ways to fit in or stand out, new teachers with new lessons, and new sets of ideas and interests.

A picture of the world is emerging but is never complete. I seek clues everywhere. Adults, ever so eager to teach, give me wide-scoping and often divergent clues that create more mysteries than they resolve, so I dig deeper for truth, for surely one of them has it. They certainly act with the confidence of one who knows at least some great portion of the truth. If only they could articulate it in such a way that I could fit the pieces together.

So I ask questions. When I realize I'm not probing deeply enough, I ask questions I'll later learn are subversive. When the answers don't satisfy me, I ask questions I later learn are heretical. My parents are amused by my curiosity; most adults are not. Sometimes my questions are answered with contempt, but I persist, for my curiosity outweighs my embarrassment.

Eventually, as my adventures continue from region to region, patterns develop. I know, now, much of what to expect from each new place and can predict much of what might differ. All that was once new becomes but variations on themes, and I've grown all too familiar with those themes. Space grows between life's surprises, small at first, but ever-widening. What, I wonder, might life become when no surprises remain? Do I really want the answers I seek? The thrill of curiosity amidst the chaos is becoming dulled by knowledge and familiarity.

Nowhere does this weigh more heavily than on the arts I once so deeply enjoyed. Music, I realize, is just repetition of similar patterns, time and again in

marginal variation. The stories of books and movies are retold over and over in slightly varying configurations. Worse, I see that this dull repetition is not by accident. Masters of the arts are ordained by culture's gatekeepers, and the masters provide formulas for peers and students to replicate. A song must inhabit *this* structure. A story must follow *this* framework. *This* is how one properly composes a photo or a work of visual art. To break the rules subtly is sometimes deemed genius, but to make one's own rules is heresy. To defy convention is to disrespect those who worked so hard to codify artistic expectations.

*And then your life came apart.*

Yes. I'm thirteen and the person I feel closest with is taken from me. I lose everyone else to grief for a time. Before this, I've never felt alone. Now I'm becoming intimate with that feeling.

It hurts, but it also ignites my creativity because imagination is all I have. If my friends avoid me, I'll imagine new ones. I practice solitary discipline of both mind and body. I exercise. I meditate. And then I create. I don't yet know much about music, but I start to compose it. I don't know much about literature, but I begin to write stories.

Creativity helps me through those years, but then apathy returns. New friends in a new town distract me. I've traded the creativity I found in isolation for the comfort of a wide circle of friendships. Does one preclude the other?

Many of these friendships are an artifice, but I need them. Their presence is comforting and the apathy afforded by that comfort helps to deaden my pain.

*But that all changes when you meet the Hedonist and the Magician.*

Yes. They open the portal door. The Hedonist, beautiful and artfully adorned, sees my curiosity. She invites me in. She introduces me to her husband, the Magician. If I believed in a devil, he would surely look like this. He makes me uneasy, but my curiosity is ablaze. Their eyes hide secrets. In one night, they guide me toward a mysterious path that I can see leads to my self-destruction, but behind the mischief in the Magician's eyes lies a plan, and my curiosity compels me. Perhaps self-destruction is exactly what I need. They will circumvent every conceit my mind has so carefully constructed, but I trust them—not to take me to safety, but to take me somewhere interesting.

*It may have been a mistake.*

I can't know that yet.

They introduce me to works of art that invoke passage to alien worlds—new worlds of creative exploration. I never knew that art can go so far outside of convention, and that it can be so powerful when it does. Much of it disturbs me deeply—frightens me, even—but I'm immediately addicted to the feeling and want more of it.

I know, now, that I'm free to explore outward from the artificial boundaries imposed by my fears and the expectations of others. The bars of a cultural prison have been revealed and exposed as illusions. I walk right through them.

The binds of creative scripture have lost their power to contain me. I breathe new air into my lungs and gaze upon a world reborn—a world far larger and far more varied than I'd known, where the lines and delineations of old are now fictions of the past. I've been led to an open door to a magic world of infinite horizons and I'm a gluttonous explorer.

I'm in a spiral, spinning outward until the shore is almost lost, and then I lose consciousness.

That night brought the dream that wasn't quite a dream. I'm a child, warned against going into a cursed woods, but I go anyway. The woods are drenched in perpetual dusk, almost nighttime but never quite. I penetrate into the womb of the forest and find an old moldering cabin in a sweltering swamp shadowed beneath a canopy of moss. I approach slowly, afraid to open the door, but my curiosity compels me forward. I reach my hand toward the door and it creaks inward.

It is very dark inside and for a moment my eyes invent shapes in the shadows—but soon, my eyes have adjusted to reveal a single occupant.

A slow-moving man with skin of weathered parchment stretched over sharp bone mumbles over a bowl of foul blood. As I take a step into his home, he turns toward me a ragged face framing the black shadows of empty eye sockets. Scars mark the entirety of his flesh from apparent self-lacerations; an open wound seeps into the bowl. Though I've never met him, I recognize him and begin to weep. He does not have to speak for me to understand the devastating burden he

bears, for I know his mind—he has lived within me all along, hidden in my depths. His dark magic keeps the world in motion, and that magic requires him to bleed and to suffer more intensely than any person could bear. He is blind, for he has sacrificed his eyes. He must bear the burden alone, for people fear his power and are repulsed by his misery. No one else is willing to share his burden, so he must continue for as long as the circle of life continues on our world.

That was my first experience meeting a god. I met him in a dream, because that's where the gods live. He's the god who chose freedom and discovered that his freedom was frightening to the enslaved. Yet for all his fearsomeness, his choice is made out of love. He cannot be expelled, so he is pushed down into the forbidden depths of consciousness where he must suffer alone.

I awaken and much of the day has passed. The Hedonist and the Magician still slumber. I leave and do not see them again, but I'm no longer the same; I walk a new path, now. I remember the person I was before, but that person has alchemized into something different. Something less defined. Something amorphous and emergent.

Who am I?

*That's up to you, now. I'm so sorry.*

My explorations, now, begin in earnest.

My adventures continue to spiral outward. The farther I wander, the more exhilarating discomfort I discover. If you were to swim out into an ocean far enough, you would lose sight of the shore and perhaps lose your sense of direction to swim back. It is that danger that has kept others so close to shore. By swimming outward, you might find waters that none, yet, have discovered. You might find islands that have been long forgotten. You might find an undiscovered continent.

So I swim outward, uninhibited, facing my fears at every stroke, keeping the shore just barely in sight, maintaining a frightfully delicate balance.

*But look: you've grown too comfortable out here, and you've stopped watching the shore. Look around, now. It's gone.*

Moments ago, I was a young man on a voyage away from the shores of sanity, and now I'm no one and nowhere. I've lost my sense of direction. I don't

know my way back. Maybe my intuition or luck will guide me back if I hurry.

Not yet.

*Go back.*

Not yet. What is this place? An oceanic darkness moves in shifting chaos around pulsating rhythms, patterns perpetually framing and reframing the infinite possibilities of the void. It's music; I can see it. No, this is some other sense. Something new, like all the familiar senses and more combined into a single unified awareness.

I see a stage veiled by a curtain of crimson shadow. My senses are consumed by this color—the deepest red I've ever seen. I move in closer and the curtain parts.

The scene opens with an old man lying on his deathbed.

This frail old man horrifies me for reasons I don't yet understand. He lies just at the threshold of death.

This is a theater of all the senses, and I can feel what he feels—and my heart breaks as I feel his loneliness. It's this moment that I know hell, and hell is eternal isolation. Eternity is not the perpetual endurance of time; it exists in a single moment. He has seen time slow, as if zooming into the moment so the moment becomes larger. Zoom in far enough and time ceases to move by any perceivable measure. Upon death, time will slow until he is trapped eternally in a single moment of excruciating aloneness.

*It comes for me.*

What comes for you?

*The Demon.* His body convulses and tears run down his cheeks. *It has chased me my entire life, but I've kept ahead of it. I found ways to confuse it, distract it, and mislead it, but this is the moment when I cannot run any longer.*

What can I do?

*This is where the road forks. You always choose the same path.*

I don't understand.

*I'm going to say something different from what I was told. Listen. If you do nothing else, listen.*

Listen to what? To who?

*Just liste—*

The word is severed by a gasp and his eyes widen in horror. I want to close my eyes to block what comes next, but I cannot. I cannot help but experience his death.

For one last brief moment of lucidity, the old man holds up a small hand-held mirror, and our eyes meet.

Am I merely the memory of an insane old man reflecting on the life that led him to this lonely deathbed, or am I a young man seeing where my path may lead?

Which side of the mirror am I on?

My mind is now fully united with the old man's as our sensations slip from the decrepit body, and at that moment, I feel something grip me and pull me down. We scream together. The Demon has us.

The stage disappears and I am flung into the darkness as I weep for the old man.

## *Chapter Two*

### **THE TRANSIENT**

*I*n a panic, I tear myself away from this vision with all the strength I have and am thrown aimlessly into the abyss. I'm drowning in the darkness. I cannot breathe.

Have I died?

Forms come and go, the darkness coalescing into patterns and shapes before dissolving back into the abyss. All around me, I now see, appear angels and devils interlocked in an eternal cosmic dance of ebb and flow, creating complex mathematical patterns that shift as my perspective changes. I'm overwhelmed by the beauty of swirling, brilliant colors that my eyes have never apprehended. I recognize the patterns in everything I've ever known, and I understand that I've passed through life experiencing only a sliver of this infinite multidimensional beauty.

The fabric of reality is laid out before me, fractal shapes twisting within spirals, those spirals twisting within more spirals, each rotation transcending the last. It's in the forces that create this movement that the gods and devils can be seen. They don't exist in the static forms but are revealed in the movement of time.

The gods slumber, but their dreams exert tremendous perpetuating force on the movements of the abyss.

While they pull at the threads of the fabric of reality, they also live in the depths of the collective psyche. They exist where mind and matter meet and interact.

They are engaged in a beautiful battle that holds the entirety of the Universe together. I dare not make a sound for fear of waking them and becoming victim to their terrible power, or worse, disrupting the delicate balance they maintain. I watch silently as they battle blissfully and harmoniously, serene in their slumber and boundless in their efforts.

Icy cold and fiery heat consume me and my vision is deluged in pale blue and deep crimson as I pass through the conflagration that marks the passage from the oceanic space of dreams and myths to a place even deeper in the consciousness. This is a place of raw unformed potential from which springs all of our dreams and perceptions, and it appears as an immense void of pure nothing.

I put one foot into the void and see all of time and space stretch out before me. I gaze forward through time and I see the whole of the Universe consumed in fire and ice. The end.

I look back through time, and I see the same—a Universe consumed in fire and ice. The beginning.

It's a circle. A cycle.

No, there's more. As my perspective broadens, it gains another dimension and becomes a spiral, and each revolution has the potential for change.

Amidst the circle stretches the void, and visible on the horizon of the darkness, the center. The source of consciousness. It appears to me as a silent, gleaming city of crimson spires, perfectly still and infinitely peaceful.

I weep quietly for a time, for though I did not know it, this is what I've spent my life seeking. This is what we've all spent our lives seeking. Heaven. Eden. Peace. Liberation. It's the place of pure freedom, where the whole of consciousness can be seen.

I remember the cost of freedom. As freedom increases, so does the weight of responsibility. There is nothing more terrifying than true freedom, but I believe I'm ready.

I'm not the only witness, am I?

*No.*

As I recognize another mind in the void, we become one and I see through

new eyes.

I kneel at the center of a circle of tribespeople in archaic animal costumes. Primitive. No, not primitive, they are quite advanced, aren't they?

Am I looking forward or backward through time? These concepts no longer have meaning.

Directly before me, I stare into eyes of terrifying intensity. Antlers reach skyward from his head and a tattered hide drapes his shoulders. It seems I should be afraid of this man, but I'm not. I know him. I've been intimate with him. I love him.

I look down at dark, feminine hands. Breasts. I'm a woman. I'm nude. I want to cover myself, but I do not control these limbs. No, I'm comfortable here. I'm not ashamed of my nudity.

*Watch. Listen.*

They venerate me. Am I an object of worship? No, not worship. They show their gratitude. I'm a shaman.

No, this man is the shaman. I'm the oracle whose wisdom he seeks.

Why? It's because I've discovered something. I've seen into the depths of consciousness, and they trust me, now, to guide them in matters of wisdom. I channel the gods and tame the Demon. I've seen into the timeless place, and there I met other travelers. I met...

I return to the edge of the void as she vanishes into its depths.

Was she my guide or another explorer like myself? Am I to follow? Am I to cross the chasm and venture to that beautiful, quiet place at its center? How would I cross? Do I just leap?

As I struggle to understand what all this means, my thoughts obscure my vision of the light. I feel it slipping away.

And that's the answer. This place is always here within me, but it's obscured by the divisions and delineations we draw around our thoughts and experiences; the ideologies, the biases, the desires, and the fears. You cannot see the eye of the storm when you're lost in the storm.

I clear my mind and my vision returns, brighter than before. The spires call to me. But first, I must find my way across the chasm. I move in further and

ecstasy floods my senses as I feel the serenity ahead grow closer.

Soon, there will be no turning back—and with that flicker of a doubt, I pause.

I recall stories of near-death experiences. I've passed through light and now I've come to a place where I must pass through the abyss in order to reach eternal peace, and if my inner compass fails me, I could be lost alone in this chasm forever. Have I died? Could I be choosing death by continuing? I imagine my body, somewhere far away, gasping for breath while I'm in this place, so far removed from my physical enclosure that I can no longer sense its existence. I need to go back.

But if I go back, I may never find this place again. What if this is a test—my one chance to escape the purgatory of life? The spires are fading into blackness. If I don't go now, I may lose it.

I move forward and am completely enclosed in the dark void of the chasm. I know only one direction, and that's forward.

I remember the old man, near death. I felt what he felt, and no horror could compare to that feeling of utter aloneness. I could not survive that.

Is that where this path leads? Ahead waits enlightenment, but what if enlightenment so far removes me from society's shared understanding of the world that I can no longer relate to the people I love? To pass through this void and get to the source of consciousness is, I sense, to let go of everything that makes me *me*. Perhaps that's liberation, but to others, it would appear as insanity.

Or what if this is insanity right here? Waiting in the void, frozen with indecision until the Demon comes for me...

The Demon. That was how the old man ended. He was dragged...where? Here. Down into the chasm. I feel something like a tentacle embrace me and slowly tighten around me and I'm consumed by dread as I've never felt. I feel an eternity of shame, humiliation, loneliness, overtaking both my memories and my future, infecting all of it, stripping it of its innocence, joyousness, and love.

I fight my way forward. I must reach the other side. Only that place can cleanse me of the Demon's infection.

A voice calls.

Who is that? I don't recognize this voice, but I know it's someone who means everything to me back in the world.

I'm not ready for the light yet.

I turn around to fight my way back and see only darkness. I have no sense of direction except down, for that's the direction I'm being pulled by the Demon. As I descend, I try desperately to feel my body, but it's gone.

Where was I when I started this journey? A couch. When I laid down, there was music playing. I listen for it, but I hear only silence.

No, no, no. I'm trapped. I wail silently into the nothingness. Even the Demon has left me, for its job is done.

*I tried to warn you. I told you to listen. You never listen.*

An hour passes.

A day.

A year.

A lifetime.

My wail continues. I cry for the parents who are losing a second child and the sister who is losing a second sibling. I cry for the people I would have soon come to love. I cry for the art I will not create.

I hear that voice again. Where was it? I reach for it but find nothing.

I scream with all of the force of the Universe within me and I see the slumbering gods stir.

I scream again, and then again. I lash out and feel the pain of impact.

What was that?

I do it again. Pain. I do it again and follow the pain. I'm still in darkness, but the pain is a compass, so I do it again. And again. Over and over I lash outward and each time the pain grows more intense. A chorus of roars erupts. The Demon. The harder I fight, the closer come the roars.

The Demon's grip tightens around me, pulling me downward as my mind ascends. I feel myself torn in two. And then it all vanishes.

My eyes open and I finally hear my scream.

I'm back in my room. I gasp for breath. Blood streams down my hand from my knuckles and marks the wall beside me. The music has stopped playing, so

some time must have passed. How much time? For me, a lifetime.

I can still feel the Demon's grip, but it no longer pulls. It waits.

A door opens and people spill in. Who are they? My friends. I remember them, but they no longer feel like my friends. Imposters.

What is happening?

My memory of my adventure is fading. I try to understand it, and the more I attempt to put it into words, the more I know I'm corrupting the memory. I've already forgotten so much.

I do, however, recall a clear vision of a reality in flux, my perspective moving freely through the infinite and simultaneous coexistence of every possible configuration of time and space—and then I was lost. I found my way back, but not to the same world I left. It resembles my world in every perceivable way, but something is different.

I return to my life the best I can. These social rituals no longer make sense to me, but I pretend. I go through the motions and people seem mostly satisfied that I'm not an intruder in their world, though I am. I smile when I'm supposed to smile, and I cry when I'm supposed to cry, and slowly I begin to feel the emotions. I wear the mask well enough, but I'm not one of them, am I?

One by one, my friends betray me. I should have expected it.

I stick close to the friends who feel the most authentic, and the choice serves me well. I cannot go back to my old world, but I can rebuild my life anew. There is a certain feeling of liberation with the idea.

I know now that the place of perfect peace and enlightenment exists, because I've seen it for myself, and I want to go back—but I don't want to go alone. I cannot be the only person to have made this discovery. I have to find the others.

I can see clearly that I'm stuck in a trap of my own making, but I don't know how to escape it. The old man showed me: this will all happen again. I spiraled outward until I reached the chasm of no return and I panicked. My fear keeps me in the loop.

I feel a weight pulling at me and am reminded again of the Demon. I've brought it back from the void, and now I must defeat it or escape it, for that's the only way to cross the Chasm.

### *Chapter Three*

## **THE STORYTELLER**

*I*t's lonely here in this new world.

It seems a contradiction to be lonely while surrounded by so many people, but they cannot see who I truly am, and I cannot tell them I'm an imposter.

I want to share the experience I've had with someone, but I cannot find the words to describe it. I attempt to tell the story, but people always interpret it as an anecdote about a strange mental journey gone too far. I can't seem to make people understand. And if I can't make them understand, they'll never really know me.

Even worse, the experience is slipping from my mind like a dream decaying from memory, and when I attempt to record it, the words are as insufficient for my memory as they are for communicating to others. So instead of words, I find that symbolic abstractions are the way to connect the past, present, and future. I draw symbols that represent ineffable states of consciousness, and later, with focus, the symbols can help me to recall or return to those states. Some of my symbols—the ones that matter most—I place permanently on my flesh with scars and ink.

As I attempt to emulate the behaviors of the people around me and to anticipate their expectations, I realize I'm becoming an actor. I can never connect with others this way, for they could only possibly connect with the character I play. So I try dropping the act. I begin speaking what's truly on my mind, and I'm mortified by people's silence, confusion, and sneers. They find

my words filthy and heretical. They question my honesty and my sanity. They dismiss me entirely. I feel painfully isolated and alone.

I can see, now, the frustrating limits of language. Language was created to describe shared and easily communicable experiences, but what about a rare or unique experience for which no words have been created? How does one describe color to the congenitally blind?

It seems to me that an agreement has been reached by humankind about what constitutes reality, yet I see something different—something far more beautiful, filled with vast potential—and I see them shuttering out all of that potential in order to cling to the safety of the familiar and routine.

Or am I truly crazy? What is the difference between me and the people locked in psychiatric facilities for insisting that the world is different from what most believe? Why should I believe I've seen some truth that others have missed? What if it's all delusion?

If it is a delusion, my dilemma remains. I cannot connect with other people unless I somehow find a common language, and every experiment, thus far, has been a failure.

I'm at a coffee shop. When did I get here?

I'm playing chess. I'm losing. On the other side of the table sits the Philosopher. He has another name, but to me, he is the Philosopher, for our daily conversations have broadened my inquiries about the world. He used to be a professor at a local college but is now an addict with no home. He's a non-believer but has taught me more about religion than any preacher I've known. He's an anarchist but has taught me more about government and power structures than any teacher I've known.

On matters of religion and government, he has demonstrated to me time and again that we're living in the constraints of stories our ancestors told. Story is the structure from which we make sense of our world. Humanity survived by sharing stories that tell us how to behave in a way that is cohesive and collaborative. Without shared fictions, there could be no laws and no common principles. This is a necessity for civilization, but has gone wrong, for we've written these stories down and have forgotten they're products of imagination.

Most importantly, he has taught me the most empowering lesson possible: that I can live my own story in any way I choose. I can write and rewrite my own role in the stories we share and construct my own meaning. And if I can convince enough other people to adopt a different version of our shared stories, I can change the culture.

I don't have this skill yet, but the idea has inspired me.

"That's the third step toward understanding magic," he tells me.

"What are the first two steps?" I ask him.

"The first step is to know that magic is possible. The second step is to find the courage to rebel against the consensus so you can explore outside its boundaries. You've taken those steps.

"The third step is to understand how to rewrite the narrative and to accept the responsibility that comes with doing so."

"And what's the fourth step?"

"I don't know, yet. But when you're ready, I'm sure someone will be along to tell you."

I'm at home and my mind is aswirl with dizzying sensations. I hold a pen to a notebook but it doesn't move. I've been practicing for some time, but the words I write feel empty, powerless to propel the mind to those places prose cannot reach. The words need to invoke much more than they are able to describe.

There is a clue in my memory of the abyss. When I saw the center of consciousness resting peacefully across the chasm, the vision was momentarily obscured by my thoughts, doubts, and analysis. I must quiet my mind to find that magical state of consciousness from which words of magic will flow.

The Philosopher emphasized the courage of rebellion. Is that the answer? Must I let go of what I know and who I am and drift freely, as I did when I floated in the abyss?

The thought terrifies me, for it means venturing near to the Demon's home. But I have to take this risk.

I consider the most powerful stories I've encountered—the ones that affected me so deeply that my perceptions and even my very identity were changed in

some way. That change happened below the surface but affected everything above the surface. I need to dive below the surface. I need to find that place I encountered before I reached the chasm—the home of dreams and gods. That’s where myths are born, and what are myths? Myths are magical stories. I close my eyes and let my thoughts come and go, and as they pass by, I follow them back to their source.

I have the sensation of falling inward and find myself back in the darkness.

The Demon. I can sense it coming, but I hold myself steady and don’t succumb to the fear.

Drums. I open my eyes. An audience of expectant people sits on the ground before me. I’m once again a spectator in the oracle’s mind.

The Demon has followed me but hesitates. A circle is drawn on the ground, for the Demon is affected by certain shapes. The people around me don the masks of various creatures of the wild and the Demon becomes confused. I don a terrifying fanged mask of my own and look into the expectant faces of the crowd.

As the people of my tribe settle and the drums quiet to a low pulse, I begin my story.

*It was not so long ago that Lord Ota spewed fire from his crown and took our village, leaving but one survivor—my ancestor Sihta.*

*Sihta was a mother of three and a great wise-woman who had kept our people from many disasters, until now.*

*Why, she wondered, had Ota taken her people and spared her? A clue, she thought, lie in her dreams, for Ota had visited her three times in the past, first as a rat, then as a hyena, and finally as a spider. As a rat, he fed her from his stock of morsels when her body was weak and hungry. As a hyena, he lay his warm body atop her to shelter her from the cold. As a spider, he wrapped her in silk, suspended out of reach of hungry predators.*

*“Why,” she screamed at Ota’s fiery crown, “have you taken my people and left me alone?” Ota did not answer.*

*She climbed to the top of Ota’s fiery crown, for that was the entrance to the underworld where she hoped her people had been taken, and from which she*

*might save them, but she fainted from the heat and returned to her hilltop home, defeated.*

*For three years she lived by herself and was fed by the creatures she befriended, but those creatures were poor company compared to her tribespeople, and she could stand being alone no longer.*

*One night, she drank the dream elixir and put her torch to the edge of a circle of wood and lied upon its center. As she poured her sweat into the earth, she drifted further from the world of the living than ever before.*

*In the world of dreams, she met Ota, disguised as a wildebeest. Ota's body encircled her, protecting her from enclosing flames.*

*"Why did you take my people?" she asked.*

*"Because time will take you all, and I am time."*

*"Why didn't you take me?" she asked.*

*"Upon my fifth visitation, it will be your time, for I can no longer protect you."*

*"When?" she asked. His body was then consumed by fire and she awoke, surrounded by smoldering ash and unharmed by the flames.*

*Sihta did not want to wait, so she went to Raven, for she had seen that he was very clever.*

*"I want to travel to the underworld and find my people," she said.*

*"You cannot, for the passage is hot as flame, and in the depths, you will find a vast river that only Serpent may carry you across, and she carries only the dead."*

*"Then teach me to fly as you fly."*

*"Serpent will attempt to eat you if you try, but I will teach you to change your shape if you assure my repayment at some future time."*

*"I do," she promised.*

*Sihta learned from Raven to change her shape and found that as she became a raven, Raven became a man, and he was beautiful. "As you shift," Raven told her, "others shift in relation to you."*

*"This is a powerful gift, Raven, and I thank you."*

*Raven almost regretted his deception, for Sihta was very kind.*

*As she once again approached Ota's fiery crown, the heat blew painfully against her face. When she could come no closer, she changed her shape and became a scorpion and survived across the threshold.*

*She descended deep into the earth through the hole at the crown's center and continued until reaching a vast underground river. She remembered Raven's warning and could see a shape writhe just beneath the water's surface. Serpent's head broke the surface of the water and spoke: "I will not carry you across nor permit you to cross in any way, for the lands beyond belong only to the dead."*

*"Still, I must try, for my tribe has been taken from me and I must go to them."*

*"You may try, but you will fail, and I will consume you." said Serpent.*

*Sihta became a raven and attempted to fly over the river but was blocked by Serpent. "I recognize you, and if you attempt to fly over me, I will consume you. You cannot fly high enough to avoid my strike."*

*Sihta returned and sat at the water's edge to think. For three days she sat, and then came a small boy. As he approached, she could see that he was dead. She quickly became a louse and climbed to the dead boy's scalp, hidden by his hair. Serpent carried the boy across the river and then she crawled back to the ground and returned to the form of Sihta.*

*"Will you guide me the rest of the way?" the boy asked.*

*"I do not know the way, but I will try." She took his hand in hers and the two descended far into the underground depths of the land of the dead.*

*"There are so many dead," the boy said after some time.*

*"Are there? I do not see them." But then she noticed movement from the corners of her eyes. When she looked directly, she could not see them.*

*"Can you help me find my people?" she asked the boy.*

*"They are with us now, waiting."*

*"Can they hear us?"*

*"Yes."*

*"I am sorry," she said to her tribe. "I cannot bear children alone, so without you, our tribe dies with me. I've come to bring you home."*

*The boy listened for a moment, then said, "Time moves in but one direction,*

*your chieftain says. If you wish to be with your people, you must cross the river as one of the dead. Your tribe's time in the land of the living has met its end, as all things must."*

*Sihta had an idea, then. She recalled that transforming into a raven had caused Raven to appear as a man.*

*She shifted her form and became a spirit of the dead, and as she did, her people became visible. "You are now alive and do not belong here. You must leave. Bear children and continue our tribe. I will stay here and await your return."*

*Sihta's people left, but she was not alone, for the child remained by her side, and she raised him as her own, though he did not grow. And when the time came, her people returned and it was she who met them at the river and carried them across, taking the form of Serpent. The next generation of her tribe flourished, and her story would be remembered for many generations to come, for they would pass down her story as I pass down her story now, to you.*

*Raven was rewarded for his help with a banquet of flesh for every tribesperson to succumb to time and travel to the land of the dead, and we continue to honor our pact. Today, we give to Raven the flesh of Rolf, who gave us three children before his passing. It is his three children who will now carry his remains to the edge of Ota's fiery crown, where Raven will feast.*

Closing my eyes, I'm enveloped by the darkness and the Demon stirs once again. I return to the present and open my eyes to find before me pages of my own handwriting. As I read, the Demon's grip loosens, if only for a moment. With the help of the Storyteller, I've written something magical.

I burn the pages, for their work is done.

I frequently return to my memory of the Storyteller. I must learn to replicate her powers on my own, then use them to confuse and misdirect the Demon.

I recall how she shifted the collective consciousness of the group with her words in such a way that our world is forever changed. This is magic, and I can see the threads of reality that it can pull and shape. A powerful storyteller can imprison people within the walls of dogma or liberate them.

I study with monomaniacal focus, but I am not fast enough. The Demon is at

my heels.

## *Chapter Four*

### **THE MUSICIAN**

I sense that someone or something is helping me. As I travel through my life, at the darkest of times, a seeming chance will give me a little push, and pieces to a great puzzle are revealed at just the moment I need them most. Sometimes the puzzle seems solved in a moment of ecstatic revelation, but I soon realize I've discovered but a small light in a vast darkness and I'm no less lost than before. Soon, however, my unseen benefactor will lead me to a new clue. It might come in the form of the right song at just the right moment. Or maybe a story. A chance encounter. A conversation. A strange coincidence.

So many coincidences.

Who or what is leaving me these clues?

My perspective expands with new discoveries every day, but the more I discover, the more of an outsider I feel in every social circle. I'm crushed by the loneliness. I furiously attempt to rewrite my story as the Storyteller taught me, but the attempts only reach so deep. Something is missing.

The artful arranging of words has allowed me to wrench myself—and others, on occasion—free from unexamined beliefs about the world and the reality we share. But when people lose their beliefs, what will come in their place? New beliefs, often more vicious than the last, can spring up from the chaos. Worse, competing new ideologies create new tribal divisions.

To find freedom and unity, minds must go to places story cannot take them, and they must, somehow, be carried on a vessel that sets aside, if only for a time, their ideological differences and brings them together as one collective mind like

musical notes played in harmony.

In my search, I find more coincidences guiding me. With one such coincidence, I find myself in an abandoned room of a warehouse watching the Musician direct a circle of players in improvised sound that hurls my mind into an exciting new frontier.

It reminds me of something. As a child, I remember sitting in a room listening to records. I recall the music grabbing onto my mind and pulling me into its turbulent current so that my consciousness and the music became one. I was carried in the stream of music to fantastical and mystifying worlds born from the collective minds of the musicians who created them. I remember considering that if someone else's mind were to do the same, then our minds would occupy the same place.

And then the song ended. I returned to the room as the record needle clicked and whirred and clicked again back to its home position. Reality became stark, and I realized I had truly been away on a journey.

Stranger still, the music was not entirely gone. For a time, my mind had been immersed within the music, and now the music lived within me and I could take it anywhere. It was a part of me.

But what is this I'm experiencing now? Perhaps all musicians unknowingly dabble with the rudiments of magic, but this is magic performed by a master, and I'll never be the same. This music does more than just take me on an adventure. This music is a death and rebirth.

The rhythm slows and the Musician notices me. He seems to recognize me, though I don't believe we've met. He invites me into the circle and motions to a single drum. All melody ceases and the music is stripped to a singular but powerful beat. I smack the drum. It's simple at first, but then I find my hands accenting the beat in ways my mind is not expecting.

Bodies around the room begin to move. The room grows hot and sweat drips down my flesh. The beat grows intense and my hands beat harder, the rhythm growing more complex than I thought possible with accents swirling dizzily around a simple and powerful pulse.

I feel the familiar falling sensation and my eyes close, but the beat continues.

I no longer feel my hands beating the drum, but I can hear the beat, and it guides me out into the abyss.

The Demon lies still, entranced by the beat. I take a breath and let the music carry me further.

The darkness envelops me.

I open my eyes to find myself in a circular clearing surrounded by dense forest, beating a drum before the enthralled faces of my tribe.

They're wearing magical garb. Some wear antlers on their heads. Others wear horns. They attempt union with the creatures whose forms they've taken—to see through the eyes of the beasts.

The mind I inhabit stops jumping from thought to thought and focuses intensely on the pulse of the beat, and all the borders and delineations between bits of experience begin to dissolve. It is those imaginary lines, only, that separate mind from environment, object from object, subject from object, person from person, person from the fauna that I now sense listening to us from the woods that surround us.

We're one Musician. The Musician here is the Musician who led me here, and I'm also the Musician. In this moment, playing this beat, we're all united as one mind.

I'm united, also, with the listeners, and I feel their unconscious relief. My Demon is their Demon, also, and the Demon is placated. We can all enjoy this moment of respite together.

The Demon feeds on our loneliness, and the music unites us. It brings us closer, breaks down barriers, gives us comfort with one another, unified by nothing more than a pattern of percussion and harmony.

All music is capable of this, but certain music is powerfully magical, warping reality for musician and listener alike. It reaches deeply into the human psyche—lustful and driven by primordial psychic forces normally obscured by the interpretive mind and its compulsive need to control, understand, and seek meaning.

It's more than that, isn't it? It's also opening a door...to where? I step through, surrendering myself fully.

Time spreads out before me. My mind travels back...back...and further still, carried by the rhythm of the drums. The drums fade as I come to a time when humanity has not yet been born, and still, there is music to carry me, for the birds chirrup and the oceans roar with all the rhythm and variation of humanity's greatest musicians and more. Cycles within cycles, spiraling in complex patterns of rhythm, melody, and harmony. Everywhere I listen, I find songs, and when I listen to them all together, they converge to create the great symphony of the cosmos.

I've come to a time, now, before our earth was born and I listen to the violent movements of the stars as they form, condense, collide, and stretch through the vastness of space. This is music.

Now there are no stars, for I have traveled to the beginning: the very birth of the Universe. And what is the great explosion that began it all? It's the first verse of the great cosmic symphony. The Universe itself is music and dance. Humans didn't invent music—they attuned themselves to it.

From the narrow perspective that normally limits my perceptions, this music can be random and unpredictable, but from this cosmic perspective, I can see the entire pattern vibrating in harmony. Every song that ever will be is contained within this vast pattern of churning and pulsing vibration. It's the material that forms every star, every world, every life, and every thought.

I'm now one with the whole of the Universe—a loop of time and space. Loops within loops. My life is a loop within the loop of the Universe. In turn, a model of the Universe has formed within me. Within this model Universe I've constructed, I exist—a conception of myself. And that conception must have a model of the Universe in his mind, for he is a projection of me.

Ostinato within ostinato.

We all project ourselves into our internal worlds, but we forget that the consciousness we believe is our own is, itself, a projection. And outside of that projection is Unity.

But what if this Unity is, itself, a projection? After all, I thought I was whole before and am only now discovering how wrong I've been. How can I ever know?

The music ends and I return to the tribe. We are individuals again, isolated from one another's consciousness, but we know. We've had a glimpse of the truth.

To live well is not to adhere to any doctrine, but to dance freely to the music found in all the notes of our experience. The roles and the games we play are artifice—to be neither taken too seriously nor played too chastely, but to be played as fervently and earnestly as a child in a make-believe world.

The ritual comes to a close with a final chant and we sit for a time quietly contemplating before dispersing. Some stalk away to hunt as a pack. Others graze and eat. Some dance and sweat and make love in groups. Some scatter to forage. Their movements are directed by the music of nature, to which they've now become attuned, and that is why the tribe will survive this difficult world.

Time speeds to the present and I find the ritual has ended here in the warehouse room, as well. My hands rest gently on the drum.

As I return to my life, I find myself transformed. The Musician is me, now, even if I haven't yet built the skills to use my new understanding. I will.

The human mind is special, for its deliberative and delineative powers aid in the survival of the organism that houses its consciousness. But the cost of that power is isolation—a sense of self that is separate from those many other selves. Music helps to ease this pain by connecting the mind back, if only for a time, to the wholeness of the cosmic orchestra.

It occurs to me that my fear has subsided for a time. The Demon was placated, and I was given a rest, but my fear returns as I resume the duties required for my survival in this society. The Demon again claws at my ankles, but now I know: it has another weakness.

I carry with me, now, the power of music along with the power of story. Music can shape and unite our states of mind, and story can shape, guide, and disrupt our narratives. When story is infused with music, or when music is informed by a narrative, the magic is magnified.

Music connects us directly to the chaos of creation. Story helps to organize the chaos and give it meaning and direction. The two must become one if people are to be both united and free.

*Chapter Five*

**THE LIBERATOR**

I lie now on my deathbed.

I've come to the end, and I no longer know what is real. The cycle continues.

So many times, I thought I had found the answers. I tried to help myself and others rewrite and reshape the stories of our lives together, but I made people uncomfortable with my efforts and isolated myself further. I sometimes moved them with music, but again they were unwilling to follow me far, and the distance grew. Year after year, it became harder to connect with people, and I grew afraid to try. I'm embarrassed by the discomfort I cause in others.

My Creations were bandages for my decaying sanity for a time, but they couldn't stop death and loss. They couldn't make bearable the pain of those losses. Contact with other people, now, is not only embarrassing, but painful, for I know the inevitability of having them torn from me.

So I stay here in this room, hidden in my seclusion, living deep in my mind.

For a moment, I imagine that someone is with me and feel a flicker of relief, but a look around the room reminds me that I'm perfectly alone. This is how I will die. My stomach spasms with grief, but it feels far away, like it's happening to someone else.

I reach into my pockets and find them empty.

*What was I looking for?*

I cannot help but feel that the puzzle I've spent my life solving is almost complete. Those who preceded me in stepping off the familiar path left behind

forbidden scriptures for me to discover, revealing that reality is far vaster than we're led to believe and setting me on the path of exploration. I dove into the fathomless waters of consciousness to explore depths unseen from the shores of our regular awareness. The Storyteller gave me insight to mythical narrative and the ability to rewrite the story. The Musician gave me the insight to suspend our divisions for a time and become of one mind with others and with the Universe. And still, something is missing. I've hoped for a guide to show me the way to the fifth and final piece of my magical journey, but that person never came, and now I approach my death. It is too late.

I think I've always known where that final piece is, but never wanted to face it—it lies at that peaceful place I discovered in my youth, across the chasm I cannot cross—the chasm where the Demon waits. To cross the chasm would be to leave behind all I've known and all I am, and I do not believe I would make it across. Worse, I might get across and find that it has been a delusion all along, and I'll be isolated in that timeless darkness for eternity with the knowledge my life was wasted on the pursuit of a meaningless dream.

Perhaps—I hope—death will bring the answer. No, that's impossible, for the Demon already has its grip on me. As soon as I let go, I will descend. I'm old and tired and cannot fight it any longer. My damnation is now inevitable.

My mind is slipping away. Death is near and I cannot think clearly. I'm forgetting. I cannot forget. I need to think back to what led me here.

*Remember.*

I was a young child, once, and felt close to everyone around me. That was a good time. I was a part of the human community and a part of a family that made me feel loved. I felt safe, happy, and infinitely curious. There was no Demon chasing me.

Where did the road fork?

It was that night. I close my eyes and retrace my journey. I was just discovering the distances I was able to travel within. And then, one night, I lost sight of the shore. I remember coming to a theater stage amidst the darkness. The curtains parted to reveal a dying old man, lonely and insane. It was he who infected me with the Demon. It was me. This is the moment, and the young man

is watching me, now.

I've waited for many painful years for this moment when our minds would come together once again. I've marked my body with symbols to represent all of my most important states of mind, but I have none to represent a state of mind uninfected by the Demon's presence. Now, the young man is here watching. I can feel his pristine mind—his innocence and curiosity.

I feel my body beginning to release me and the Demon's tentacles tighten around me, pulling me downward. I have to hurry.

If I can keep alive this memory of an untainted young explorer, I may be able to hold onto it as the Demon attempts to take me. And if I fail, I might give the young man the warning he needs to take a different path. It will be the last symbol I ever draw; I'll make this one dramatic.

*The razor. That's what I was looking for.*

I reach beneath the pillow and feel it slice into my finger.

No. If I'm going to break the cycle, I must do something different. I don't know what's going to happen, but I'm not going to carve this symbol.

Maybe it's time to make peace with my fate.

I can feel the Demon's excitement as I allow my mind to relax, but that release of fear allows the dissolution of mental walls I hadn't known existed, and revelation pours in. I'm beginning to understand.

I've been obscuring the truth from myself all along. By spending my life looking for some guide to give me the answers I need, I've prevented myself from discovering that the final guidance can come only from me. Only I have the power to liberate myself.

I've had the tools I need but have been too afraid to use them where they're needed most, for I've been afraid of what I might find if I examine myself too closely. I've been afraid to accept that my loneliness has been of my own design. With eyes that see the world only from my own narrow perspective, I've been blind to how others have been hurt by my unwillingness to face myself. I don't exist in isolation, no matter how isolated I feel.

I chased rebellion and freedom and expected others to blindly follow me. But freedom is a lonely, terrifying, and uniquely personal path. My freedom is my

own, and others couldn't follow me if they wished to—it's up to them to find their own freedom, for that's what freedom is.

So how do I connect with them if we're each stuck on our own remote islands on individual journeys?

We build bridges.

When I write or tell a story, I'm attempting to impose my desires on the world. When I'm making music, I'm imposing my state of mind on the world.

To build a bridge, I need to be willing to look into their worlds along with opening a window into mine, and to do that, I must listen.

I thought I had listened to people before, but I see now that I haven't. I tried, but my mind always parsed their words for the bits that were relevant to me. I judged their words and filtered them so that they fit with my own understanding of the world. That's not listening.

I must use the skills I've learned to turn off, for a time, my chattering, judging, delineating mind and listen with the open and earnest curiosity I had as a young child.

If I want to understand the Demon, I need to listen to it, no matter how afraid I become.

My mind quiets and the Demon's voice rattles in my gut, filling me with dread. *Its voice*. It was always there, but I drowned it out. Its voice roars with anger and hatred...and something more. Terror. Grief. It hurts. It's excruciatingly lonely.

It's time to look my Demon in the face. I open my eyes and look into my mirror, and there it is, as ugly and terrifying as I expected, but I'm no longer afraid. The Demon's mask falls away to reveal my own face—as young as the first time I put on that mask.

I smile with ecstatic relief as I begin my passage into death. The young man, watching, is not afraid this time, and our minds join comfortably.

*Come with me. We'll cross the chasm together.*

As the old man's body relaxes into death's repose, I'm plunged into darkness. We dive together into the chasm and are caught by the Demon. We're no longer afraid, and the Demon becomes our guide through the darkness. My

own fears, once faced, have become my liberation.

As we travel, time spreads out before us once again. I see the birth of the human story. I see the birth of human music. I see the music of nature, the music of the cosmos, and the music of Creation. I'm at the very beginning, and now...

*Silence.*

Perfect stillness. Around me, I can see the roiling temporal chaos, but I'm in perfect stillness at the center of the cyclone.

There was never a reason for fear. There is no pain, here. I feel no loneliness, for the potential of every being that will ever exist is with me. Here in this timeless void at the birth of temporal consciousness, I see to its very end—the last individual consciousness in the Universe approaches death, and as the moment comes, that consciousness sees me. That consciousness is me, and as we join, the eternal loop of time closes.

From here, I can see reality forking in every direction into infinite possibilities. I'm at peace watching the play of life. Like the strings of a musical instrument, I can pluck at threads of reality. With a light touch, I can guide. I see so many people lost and suffering with demons in prisons of their own creation. I cannot coerce them, but I can help to illuminate paths hidden from their perspective, and I do so gleefully.

I look at my own temporal self, traveling so blindly through my life. With a great depth of compassion, I attempt to illuminate my own hidden paths—but I do not protect myself from suffering, for I see clearly now that it's through suffering that we find empathy, and it's through empathy that we find our way back to one another.

I always felt that some force was guiding me, and it was me all along. I just needed to listen.

I look at the earliest tribes of people and see that they were much better listeners, for their world was much quieter. But humanity progressively isolated itself from nature and from one another. We became lost in the noise. I attempt to illuminate the collective path of those suffering people, but they're not listening.

They will, eventually. I must be patient.

I must return. The old man has died, but I'm still young. I've awoken the

gods within, and I trust them to guide me so long as I listen. It's time to awaken and engage in my life.

This time, I know the way back. I just open my eyes.

There is no pain. There is no blood. My mind is at peace. I take some breaths and absorb what I've experienced. I look around and smile at the chaos of the world around me. This is my playground, and I'm going to enjoy it. I'm not afraid of it, for I've brought the stillness back with me. Wherever I go, my mind is at the center of this cyclone.

The old man spent much of his life wrestling with the question of whether he should chase individuality or subjugate his ego in the quest for Unity, and the two ideas seemed to be at odds. I understand now why the individual exists—to experiment independently and challenge the consensus, pushing and pulling it into a healthier shape, adapting and adjusting to help the organism-at-large to survive, heal, and grow.

But how do we find our way when we're responsible for our own freedom and there is no omniscient guide to lead us? We listen. When we become lost—and we usually are—we must be silent, and we must listen. Listen to others, listen to nature, and listen especially to the subtlest of impulses emerging from those unseen depths of our own minds.

We can have both individuality and unity by building bridges between us. We need only to be open to one another's experiences and perspectives.

So I continue to explore, and as I do, I listen closely. And as I listen, I create. That is the only doctrine that guides me, now—my only religion.

I'm no longer attempting to impose what I see as truth on others, for I can only seek my own, but we all carry pieces to one another's puzzles. At every moment, I'm listening for clues in the perspectives of others and, for my fellow travelers, I'm leaving clues behind that my perspective has revealed.

As we take this journey, we all must suffer through the chaos of life, but no one should suffer alone. We just have to listen.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Dane Clark Collins is an author and musician who currently resides somewhere in New Jersey.

His stories are sometimes fantasy, sometimes science fiction, sometimes horror, usually a mixture of those, and always weird for everybody involved.

His music varies widely, but tends toward psychedelic soundtrack music—accompaniments suitable for his fiction.

You can learn more about Dane at his web site:

[daneclarkcollins.com](http://daneclarkcollins.com)



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