

# The Waking Road,

by Krin Van Tatenhove



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*Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?*

– Matthew 20:22

He must have been running, because when he opened his eyes he was desperately catching his breath.

He found himself in a hall of mirrors, each reflecting oblong images of himself. A funhouse? A county fair with carnies hawking stuffed toys and goldfish? A scene from a cheap horror movie?

If so, then why was the music streaming overhead so personal, a playlist of his favorites from decades? And how was it possible to hear each melody simultaneously but separately?

He glanced down and laughed at his attire. Combat boots, faded Levi's, rodeo belt buckle, paisley silk shirt, a chain around his neck dangling a silver picture locket. An orange band around his wrist read *Sicut in caelo, et in terra*.

Dreams had *always* seemed lucid to him, parallel dimensions hidden beneath the skin of wakefulness. He had recently begun to keep a dream journal—first with fragments, gradually lengthening into whole narratives. The simple practice of recording what he remembered increased his awareness and volition at night, a sense of being able to choose the arc of his storylines.

But if this was a dream, it was clearer than any he had experienced.

He stretched his arms, flexed his neck, took a deep breath.

*Okay, bring it on. I will drink this one to the dregs.*

The light around him began to flicker from deep within the mirrors, like an old movie countdown at curtain time. Then

came a strobing flurry of images, rapid-fire scenes from his life, as if he were flipping through dozens of private photo albums.

Riding a tricycle on his neighborhood sidewalk. Dressed up for the first days of school, his mother statuesque behind him. Fishing with his father and brothers at a mountain lake. Hugging an old tabby cat named Tiger. Hiking with the Boy Scouts on alpine trails. Camp fires, faces flickering in the light. Neighborhood football games in the vacant field near his home. Chafing in church pews during Sunday worship. Hymns, communion wafers, Lenten candles. Waving through the window of his first car, a beater Mustang with a killer sound system. High school classrooms, hallways, teachers and peers. Friday night lights at football stadiums. Saturday night parties, beer glasses lifted high. Hugging his girlfriends. Making love to them, graphically. Drunken walks along Hollywood Boulevard, neon lights piercing his eyes. Graduating from high school, then college. His first acid trips. His first marathon. Hiking, always hiking past mountain peaks, streams, flowery meadows. Wedding photos from both his marriages. Making love to his wives, graphically. Empty booze bottles clutched in his hands. Receiving his graduate degrees. Different homes with driveways, front lawns, smoke curling from their chimneys. Thanksgiving and Christmas celebrations, tableaus of aging kinship. Holding his own children at various ages of their lives, their faces looking up at him with expectation.

He closed his eyes to escape the intensity.

*I see it.*

*All too clearly.*

*Why does my smile fade with each passing year?*

He felt, once again, as if he'd been running, sweat rivulets dripping down his back. When he opened his eyes again, images swirling around him, he knew it was time to move. This was not over. There was somewhere he needed to be. He felt a longing that was both melancholy and wistful at the same time.

Down the mirrored hallway to his right was a green exit sign above a solid red door. As he walked to it and hit the crash bar, words from a T.S. Eliot poem flashed through his mind: *I have measured out my life in coffee spoons...*

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A dirt road stretched as far as he could see. It looked as if no one had traveled it for ages, its tracks barely visible, grass and wildflowers the only median. Towering trees lined both sides, nearly impenetrable, like stepping into a rustic green cathedral. Far above, beyond the spires of foliage, a blue sky shifted with clouds, Vs of silhouetted geese heading in a direction away from him.

He looked behind him. The house of mirrors had vanished, replaced by another ribbon of road unwinding to the horizon.

That's when he noticed his shadow splayed on the ground. It seemed to have a life of its own—dodging behind him, then ahead, then to either side. It mimicked his movements, but with its own personality, tethered to his body but never staying in one place. He toyed with it, raising his arms at right angles. His shadow followed suit but added a wiggling of fingers. He lifted his arms straight above his head in a Rocky Balboa pose, holding them still. His shadow mimicked him but pumped both its fists.

*What the hell?*

He looked both directions on the road. Which way to go? He lifted his eyes to the migrating birds and decided to follow their course.

The lucidity of the dream reached an even more intense level. Time seemed to elongate, as if he were walking for hours, days, even decades. Bright sunshine and clouds by day, his shadow darting around him; moonless starry skies by night. It was like being trapped in a time loop. An inner metronome drove him onward, and though his body never fatigued, he grew weary of the endless chattering of his thoughts. Hashing over events, decisions, unhealed memories. Grading himself, his successes and failures, the scales always tipped to lacking.

*It's like that Zen story of the man on the galloping horse.*

*Where the hell are the reins!*

Plodding onwards, his mind buzzing, he tried to focus, to reach a center of stillness, but the best he could do was to view his inner dialogue as a witness. And what struck him with more magnitude than ever before was the incessant repetition, cerebral ruts carved in the tissue of his mind, a bondage of customary consciousness, the chains of insistence on self.

*It has always been this way.*

*Always.*

*As far back as I can remember.*

Like a dream within a dream, he recalled waking up in his childhood home. It was after midnight, a trilling of crickets and frogs coursing through the screen of his open bedroom window. Even then, the racket inside his mind kept him from enjoying the serenity of a summer night.

A pang of sorrow clenched his heart. So much time squandered, frittered away, like shell husks beneath the wires of a caged bird!

The locket against his chest grew warmer, nearly hot to the touch. He reached down and opened it to see a baby picture of himself. It morphed to childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, finally merging into the grizzled countenance of an old man before dissolving back to infancy. This time, the baby was crying.

He snapped it shut, filled with a leaden weariness that seeped into every bone and organ of his body. He sighed, lowered his chin to his chest, and loosened the grief stored inside him. It erupted with a force so overwhelming that he stopped, fell to a sitting position, and let his tears flow out in a torrent. Some of them streamed into his open mouth and tasted like the sea.

He lost track of how long he sat there in a paroxysm of pain and relief.

*Help...*

*Help me...*

*Please...help me.*

He focused on his breathing, filling the recesses of lungs. Slowly he began to feel calmer, and as he did, he saw flashes of red, yellow, and blue in the trees, birds flitting from one branch to another. Their songs were clearer now. Sweeter. He also heard the susurrus of wind in the foliage, waves of air gently crashing around him. From the sky came a chorus of geese, a celebration of instinct leading their journey.

*Keep moving.*

*There's something ahead.*

*I have to find it.*

He stirred himself, got to his feet, and continued along the road, his shadow dancing around him, now making no pretense of being dependent on his movements. Gradually, the wall of trees began to thin out, and through them he could see meadows alive with wildflowers. Some of the open spaces had large pointed stones rising from them, often in circles, sometimes in crisscrossed lines. Brightly colored prayer flags fluttered from their peaks.

Then he came to his first intersection, another dirt road angling to the right. It coursed through a meadow, climbed a small hill, then disappeared on the other side.

He smiled and thought of a Led Zeppelin lyric.

*Yes, there are two paths you can go by, but in the long run,  
there's still time to change the road you're on...*

*Why not?*

*I'm tired to death of the same direction!*

With a sense of anticipation, he angled to the right. The sun began to set, first a few, then billions of stars breaking through the twilight. He noticed a flickering glow from the brow of the hill, as if a great fire were burning on the other side. When he reached the summit and looked down, he saw its origin. Spread out below him were dozens of yurts, each with a torch near its entrance. They formed around a focal point like spokes on a wheel, and at the center was a roaring bonfire that sent sparks like fireflies into the night sky. Seated on large stones circling the blaze were dozens of people.

Relieved to see them, longing for human interaction, he made his way a bit anxiously down the hill. As he drew nearer, they all turned to look.

“At last!” said a man with long raven hair. “The guest of honor!”

“Weary pilgrim, fresh from the quest, renew your tired bones,” exclaimed a woman, then laughed and rubbed her shaved head.

“Yes!” said another man with an exotic headdress. “Welcome to your inner circle! Have a seat!”

The man gestured to a vacant stone, so he sat down and slowly looked around at the others. They were naked, their bodies covered with vibrant tattoos inked by a master artist. The images glowed from within, archetypal shapes from the panoply of sacred history. Aztec mandalas, Maori koru, Catholic icons, Tao symbols, Wheels of Dharma, Hindu Oms, Pentacles, Eyes of Horus, Stars of David, Flaming Chalices. They shifted and shimmered as if underwater.

All of the circle participants had small earthenware cups in their laps.

“Do you like the artwork?” asked a woman with hair piled like a turban, her voice filled with mirth. “It’s the effort of billions.”

“Exquisite,” he said. “But who are you?”

The woman laughed.

“We’ve always loved that about you,” she said. “Not only your good taste, but your need to define, explain, categorize. I bet you know every dance step before you take it.”

“Or every brush stroke before you make it!” chimed in a man seated across the circle.

“Or every word before the poem spills out of your mouth!” said a woman sitting to his right.

“I’ll drink to that!” said the woman who had originally spoken, causing an uproar of laughter in the circle. Clearly the leader, she raised her cup as the others followed suit.

“Well?” she asked. “Are you going to join us?”

He then realized a similar cup had materialized in his hand, filled with a steaming liquid.

*I will drink of this dream to the dregs.*

He lifted the cup to his lips.

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He vomited repeatedly, a purging like his roadside tears. His vision grew watery and his nose cringed from the acrid odor. When it seemed there was nothing left to flush from his system, he lifted his eyes to see that the bonfire was gone. Instead, the same people now surrounded him in dance. They held torches in their left hands, their right hands extended towards him, palms open. Pulsing music filled the air, coursing through his body, a bass beat overlaid with a singular chant from the dancers.

At first, he couldn’t distinguish the words they repeated, but gradually every syllable became clear, altered lines from a Yeats poem he had once studied.

*Among birds and beasts and humans  
There is one that is perfect and at peace.*

They kept repeating the phrase, growing in volume, and then he saw that their hands were gesturing for him to join the

celebration. For some reason, it made him laugh. Again, Yeats, a line drawn from the vaults of memory.

*Yes! O body swayed to music! O brightening glance!  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?*

He began to move his arms and legs, ungainly at first, then synching with the rhythm, his body grooving with an inner ratchet. Immediately, he became aware of his shadow. Only now it was shadows, plural, split into numerous dark figures. They cavorted around him in crazy geometric patterns, as if he was the center of a kaleidoscope. At first it was fascinating, each of his movements altering the pattern, but the shadows began to feel heavy, like moss on his propeller, glue on his eyelids, cobwebs on his thoughts, a straitjacket constraining his liberty.

He dug deeper to gain more strength, shaking his arms and legs in an effort to free himself, but the shadows entangled him further. He glanced around the circle of dancers. They were smiling and nodding as if his struggle was perfectly natural. The woman with the turban of hair shook her dreadlocks free, lifting her face to the night sky as she cried:

*Among birds and beasts and humans  
There is one that is perfect and at peace!*

Gathering all his remaining strength, he stretched his arms wide then moved them inward, trying to embrace the shadows and pull them together as one. It worked! They formed into a single dark apparition that extended on the ground before him in the flickering light.

And then, that single shadow—alive, sentient—did a strange thing. It lifted its hand and gestured for him to follow.

He blinked and turned his head away, but when he looked back there was no mistaking the signal. The shadow was beckoning him.

*And as we wind on down the road, our shadows taller than our souls...*

*I will drink of this one to the dregs.*

He again spread his arms wide, an unfurling of wings both powerful and expansive. Then he dropped face first into the shadow, like freefalling into dark water or tumbling into an abyss.

\* \* \*

A man's voice came out of the darkness.

**Where are you going?**

*What do you mean, where am I going?*

**Where are you racing with your relentless, galloping thoughts?**

*I'm moving forward, of course.*

**Are you really?**

*Yes. I believe I'm making progress.*

**Then why do you keep returning to the same sense of wanting, the same lack of serenity? Why, after all this striving, are you still so discontent?**

*It's my nature. No...wait. It's more than that. It's human nature. We are meant to keep searching, to keep pushing into this mystery we never understand.*

**Understand?**

*Yes, understand. Fully grasp.*

**One finger at a time.**

*What?*

**Grasping dissolves by releasing one finger at a time.**

*But what if I don't want to let go? What if these things I'm clutching are the substance of who I am?*

**One finger at a time. Dissolving.**

*If I dissolve, what remains of me?*

**One finger at a time. The ascent is in the descent. The resolution in the dissolution.**

*Descent? Dissolution?*

**Yes...**

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A childhood memory materialized. His family had taken a five-day cruise in the Caribbean, stopping at an island for snorkeling. His father insisted that he join him on a swim above the reef. He was reluctant, but he put on the mask and flippers, obediently paddling along the surface with Dad. Beneath them, brightly colored fish chased each other through coral alcoves.

Suddenly, the ocean bottom dropped, revealing murkier depths, shoals like shifting shadows. Fear gripped him, a sense of impending doom. He balked, wanting to turn around. His father tried to edge him onward, an expectation tinged with harshness, unreasonable, but he refused, splashing back to shore on his own, emerging with a sputtering mouthful of seawater. This time, as the memory replayed, he saw again the chiaroscuro of oceans depths falling away beneath him, and though a surge of adrenaline ran up his spine, he took a lungful of air through the snorkel and dove downwards.

Deeper, deeper, his legs imbued with a new power that drove him into the unknown.

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Darkness.

Not emptiness.

Like swimming through an inky stream of plasma. Pressure against his body, but comfortable. No pain. The pulsing of his heart and the rhythm of his breathing merged with the fluid dark.

He heard music, as clear as the tunes at the house of mirrors, a surreal jukebox. This time, the psychedelic solo from Hendrix's *Are You Experienced*, echoing around him.

*We'll hold hands and then we'll watch the sunrise  
from the bottom of the sea.*

The music faded, replaced by the voice again, radiating towards him through the liquid. It sounded like his father's voice, only fuller, less authoritative, suffused with love and grace.

**Darkness is the cradle.**

**Reach out and receive the gift.**

**I am here.**

**I Am.**

He reached out both his hands, but realized he was tightly clutching what felt like rough stones, their edges biting his skin, growing heavier by the second.

He uncurled his fingers, an opening of dark petals that blossom where only claws scuttle, one by one, letting the weights sink away, dissolving into the depths.

*Yes.*

*I Am.*

Immediately, he rose like a beautiful Bathysphere towards the surface.

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He found himself back on the main road of his dream. Gone was the campfire and his fellow dancers. Rolling out on both sides of him were green, undulating hills, dotted here and there with solitary trees. Far ahead, he could see that the tracks ended, merging into a radiant blue, clouds swirling above.

He continued and soon he could smell it. The brine of the ocean. Gone were the migrating geese that had dotted the sky, replaced now with seabirds wheeling against the breeze. Drawing closer, he could hear the distant crash of the surf.

Finally, he came to a cliff overlooking an ocean. It was near sunset. Frothy whitecaps frolicked in every direction as a strong breeze cooled his face. He looked down at the beach and saw a circle of stones around a blackened firepit. Their arrangement was exactly like those at the campfire where he had danced.

*When was that?*

*An hour ago?*

*A lifetime ago?*

He felt drawn to the beach, but the only pathway was steep and covered with rock outcroppings. He picked his way slowly down the slope, making sure of each foothold before giving it his full weight.

He finally reached the sand and made his way to the fire ring. The ashes at the center were cold, and since the breeze was

getting cooler with the setting sun, he felt the need to kindle a bonfire. But how? He had no matches or other source of flame.

Instead, he sat on one of the stones while the sun went down, preternaturally serene in the gathering darkness.

*Breathe.*

*This body, this soul, this mind, have travelled with me very step of the way.*

*Breathe...breathe.*

Stars were beginning to poke through the twilight when he heard clamoring voices from the cliffside above. He turned to see the silhouettes of hundreds of people holding torches above their heads in the gathering gloom. They began to make their way down the cliffside, a snaking ribbon of flame moving towards him.

As they got closer, he noticed that each them was also holding firewood. The first face that came into focus was the woman with the dreadlocks. She smiled and nodded at him as others flowed around her to deposit their armloads of wood into the fire ring.

“We knew you would make it,” she said.

The man with the raven hair stepped up behind her.

“That’s right,” he said. “The plodder becomes the pliant. The shadow becomes the igniter. The fist becomes the acorn!”

The woman laughed, reaching out to him with her torch.

“Here,” she said. “You have the honors this time. You are the keeper of the flame. You always were.”

“Thank you,” he said. “But really, who are you?”

She only laughed, then bowed, then curtsied, then let loose a short howl at the sky.

He also laughed as he took the torch from her, turning and holding it against the pile of wood that now towered in the middle of the ring. Within moments the bonfire was blazing, sending swirls of smoke and sparks into the sky.

As if on cue, the gathered ones began to dance, singing a new song that made no sense, the words inchoate, tugging at the edge of his consciousness.

He felt a strong urge to pull apart from them, so he walked to where the surf met the sand, ebbing and flowing with its gentle rhythm, grinding stone into the silt of ages. The dark sea stretched before him., glittering with the reflections of more stars than he had ever seen.

The water suddenly shifted into a mosaic of funhouse mirrors, then just as quickly changed back into a single reflective surface.

He took a deep breath as the words of the chanting dancers behind him suddenly became clear, words from another Eliot poem.

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

Something like an updraft, or a geyser of warm water, welled up inside him, a wave of peace, grace, serenity, as if issuing from underground, even the core of the earth. Simultaneously, the picture locket on his chest began to tingle with warmth again.

*Should I open it?*

He gripped it with his right hand, pulled it until the chain broke from his neck, hurling it as far as he could into the sea's embrace.

Then he fully awoke.