

# FALLS THE SHADOW

*Move Toward the Light*



STEPHEN O'REILLY

FALLS  
THE  
SHADOW

BY

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**B**ETWEEN THE THOUGHT AND THE TRUTH  
**B**ETWEEN THE ACTION AND THE PROGRESS  
**F**ALLS THE SHADOW



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FOR JULIE, GRAY, AND EVYN



## PRELUDE

Where do we go when we die? Anywhere? Do we dissolve into the great energy source that makes up the universe and creates and fuels all life? Do we lie in the ground and rot, food for worms? Game over? Do we glide to heaven to be with an all-powerful God? Or are we recycled, re-energized, restructured, and passed back through some sort of filter to the physical world we left behind, a new person, a new being, a new personality with the same old soul?

If we continue on, life after life, what is our inevitable destination? Who were we? Why were we? What did we represent? Life after life, soul regurgitated into body after body, we travel through time ... or are these lives stacked, like records in a jukebox, existing at the same time, yet playing out in minds restricted to linear thought by the physical plane?

Goal? This is not important. Journey. Now, that's the thing; the stuff that makes the lives worthwhile. The foreplay of the afterlife. How and where we make the journey, what we represent and why, these constitute the essence.

Is it ever over? Does it ever begin? Does it matter?



# 1

## AWAKENING

Darkness. The darkness of the void. An emptier darkness than modern humans can ever hope to describe. Technology, religion, analysis, and cold, ubiquitous logic have destroyed the ability. Ancient man, crouching in the dark, had no need to imagine it; he lived it. Fear, rising like tiny, tightly packed air bubbles, forced him to seek safe places with the immediacy that only a fight for survival can bring. Yes, the empty blackness of ancient man—of man before fire—that is the void.

It is a blackness of which we can, and often do, dream ... whether we know it or not.

When primitive man felt the void, he crouched trembling against a solid wall of cold stone and slept only when his body could no longer fight to stay awake. He would fight sleep with his mind's agitation, despite his fatigue. The blackness is as dark as the pit of the stomach, as fathomless as the pupil of the human eye.

It is the dark vacuum of nothingness from which we all come and to which we all must return. The house and home of color and form and energy.

It is the place where everything and nothing mingle, fuse, are born and die . . . the place of endless spirit.

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The entity awoke confused; its head—what it thought was its head—hurt. It was enveloped by the empty blackness. The emptiness, the darkness, was within it, too—in its heart. It permeated its mind and soul to the depths. For an instant, for that semi-permeable moment of awakening, it was Hobbes' blank slate. It was man before sin, a lost Adam in a sea of black ink that seemed only to be waiting to etch upon his soul the history of evil.

Slowly, stiffly, instinctively, it extended its right arm. It heard its elbow crack as the limb straightened. It spread and stretched its hand and fingers into the darkness, grasping for whatever might be within its reach. It welcomed the delicious ache of muscles long dormant . . . or perhaps never used. The blood flowed as surely as its elbow creaked and muscles groaned; it flowed as smoothly as cool river waters slipping over slick, black rocks for all eternity.

*Am I blind?* it suddenly thought. It surprised itself by the mere act of semi-polished thinking . . . a sentence, a question . . . a smooth, continuous flow of thought. A breath of completeness. *Am I dead? . . . Buried?* it continued, not really thinking, not conscious effort, just thoughts coming to it from the void, shot into it like bullets from a gun buried in black mud. It blinked.

Then, self-mocking, yet curious to really know: *Am I God?* There was no answer . . . from nowhere . . . in no time.

*God*, it mused, murmured, wondered. It could feel its facial muscles forming a smile. This did not seem foreign or alien to it.

*Such blackness*, it uttered inside itself to a mind it did not know, a soul it could not recognize, an intellect it was only beginning to grasp.

Groping within itself, within the darkness that was everywhere and everything, left it feeling cold, alone, and without depth.

Alone, it pressed in on itself. Answers vaguely, dreamily, seemed important. It could feel its brain begin to heat up inside its skull as it strove for organization, for pattern. The bone was a cauldron for its molten thought.

With a flourish and surprise, its dizzied mind blinked and asked of itself, *Wait . . . what . . . who am I?* That very question then shot, lightning-like, into its mouth and out to the walls surrounding it with frightening alacrity. Its voice, the aural manifestation of its inner turmoil, was crackly, hoarse, and strange to it.

It sounded so new, yet at the same time so old: "Who the hell am I?" it said, louder this time. Its surroundings lent its voice a somewhat stentorian timbre. Momentarily, it was vaguely impressed.

Then panic quickly set in. It burrowed deep into the skin at the nape of its neck and settled in like a tick, raising the short hairs there to attention and prickling the skin around them and down its back. Its back . . . the thought caused its eyes to swivel in their sockets. In the dark.

*Oh*, it whimpered inside its whirlwind head. *Ohhhhhm*. It curled up into a fetal ball and tucked its head in tight, humming softly to itself. No echo, no reverberation around or inside its skull.

"Think," it then said aloud. The sound of this word awakened something in its mind; it pulled its head up like a turtle rising in safety, cocking his head.

Something stirred deep within it and began crawling and buzzing out, like residents of a previously undisturbed wasps' nest that a child has naively and recklessly prodded with a long stick. Something was becoming recognizable and oddly familiar about the sound of its voice.

Suddenly a switch buried deep inside its mind clicked. The darkness inside, which had until now matched the perfectly heavy darkness surrounding it, began to dissipate, weaken, and dissolve. Whisper-thin threads of light reached out into the void of its mind, joining and coiling and growing: its mind was evolving into more than a collection of simplistic linear thoughts.

The new thoughts raced at incredible speed, followed and accompanied by and within images and sounds. It was an intricate, spinning web of thought, three-dimensional, alive, and thrumming with a life all its own. These new sensations were vivid and fleeting, racing yet somehow lingering just long enough to offer a glimmer of recognition: faces of women and men, sounds of music and children, blinding sunlight and tall trees, leaves, shiny guns, pages of old books, wrinkled faces, the roar of machinery. Wind and rain and tears. The sounds rose to a deafening pitch in its head.

It funneled the rising panic down into a tiny corner of its mind, and then shoved an imaginary foot over it, muffling it; it held its breath in mock, prepubescent anger. It refused to lend credence to the panicky feelings just now. The images took precedence. It felt they must. They demanded attention. They were so fascinating . . . if only they made more sense, more of a pattern.

It managed to focus on a few faces, not necessarily recognizing them or labeling them with names and easy-to-remember associative images or icons, but at least allowing a moment here and there—a pause, if you will—for a spot of detail: a scar, a blemish, a hair style, an expression, perhaps a hat, or facial hair. One woman's face, in particular, seemed comforting and known to it. Then the face was gone, just as quickly as it had arrived, replaced by a succession of other faces in this quilt of portraits unfolding in its mind.

It could almost smell the forest it envisioned. It nearly choked at the puffs of smoke coming from the exhaust pipes of clusters of noisy automobiles packed sardine-like onto a decaying road. It almost gagged at the sight of the animal, turned inside out, lying on the forest carpet. The race of images in its mind became dizzying. It had to fall, but felt there was nowhere to fall. It curled up again, tighter this time, forcing its physicality to work for it and tamp (or at least slow) down the rush of visual imagery. Its joints, most prominently its elbows, cracked with the strain.

After a while—it had no way of knowing how long—it recognized a heat and began dragging its thoughts back to the dark

question at hand, the problem it had managed to escape for a moment with the long string of internal imagery: its existence. The pain of its existence.

The heat, it discovered, did not come from its brain; the heat came from somewhere else in its body—a body it was in the process of rediscovering. It groped for its chest, its ribcage, and arms, ran its hands down over its tight, hairy stomach to... his penis, felt his hard thighs, the hardness of his kneecaps, and finally his calves, the bones of his ankles, and his feet. He brought his hands back up to his face and held it, cradled it. He could not picture it, but he was glad it was there—that *something* was there. He smiled in the darkness. Not because he was glad to be a man, but because he was glad to be something, anything, a physical life with distinct features.

He could feel, pinpoint, the persistent heat deep inside his mid-section. He could feel it rising in his cheeks, too. He reached up with both hands and touched his face again. His hands were cool and his cheeks were warm. Very warm. He could not picture his features. He was clay and his hands had not yet molded the fine features, the lines, the contours. There was no context in which to sculpt.

Then his knees began to ache. He now realized he was kneeling, and the surface below him was smooth and unyielding. He reached out with his arm again. His elbow did not crack this time. A curved wall met his fingers—it was hard, cool, and porous. He felt sure it was familiar, perhaps stone of some kind, perhaps something he vaguely remembered as ... concrete. It was all around him.

“A tunnel,” he thought out loud, lifting his head as he spoke. He now recognized the strange acoustic quality his surroundings attributed to his voice.

*Yes, a tunnel*, he corroborated internally. He nodded.

“Ha, ha!” he shouted, instantaneously joyous. It was comforting to have a thought based on the concrete sensations he was receiving. He settled into the thought, lingered on what little comfort it offered.

“So, why am I here?” he spoke, sampling again the acoustic qualities of the tube. There was something confining about the sound he heard. Something more confining, upon further reflection, than he expected from a concrete tunnel. There was something dampening the sounds he made . . . something more than the substance of which the tube was constructed.

“Definitely,” he said, and then added internally, *a simple tunnel would sound much more . . . vacant, more . . . hollow. There would be more of an echo . . . I believe.*

*So, he wondered to himself, a self he was not sure he could yet trust, what could it be?*

“I’ll just have to find out.”

At first, climbing over dead bodies did not affect him at all. They were dead, after all, and posed no threat to him. He felt their faces with his hands and knees, their midsections, breasts, legs, buttocks, and hairy heads as he crawled over them, subtly squeezing his own body against the roof and sides of the tunnel. He came to another gap—in addition to the one in which he’d awakened—in the line of bodies.

His mind flipped and folded idea after idea, trying desperately to figure out the whys and wheres and hows of his situation. Games of the mind. It can keep itself so busy for so long . . . while the body works.

When he’d first decided to move, he’d felt around and discovered the bodies on either side of him: the face directly behind him, the feet directly before him. He’d immediately decided to follow the direction in which they seemed to point. It made perfect sense. It was not the least bit surprising to him that there were more bodies after those first few, either. That, too, seemed to make perfect sense. What didn’t make sense was the very basic physical fact that they were here, and that he was among them.

What had happened? Who were all these people? Where was he? It was enough to keep his mind busy while his body began the dubious task of crawling and climbing. It also served to divert his attention from the unsettling feeling of crawling over that flesh and bone. He was grateful the bodies were firm, not soft or rotting.

So when he reached the gap, he rested. He closed his eyes and could sense the odd, unsettling presence of the bodies. There was no smell.

Without realizing it, he'd been straining to see, willing his eyes to pierce the shield of darkness. It felt good to close them, to rest and cool them. He rubbed his lids lightly with the meaty sides of the knuckles of his fists.

The moment he closed his eyes he knew he would not reopen them for some time. Fatigue was settling into his muscles with lightning speed, pulling him back into the fetal position from which he'd awakened. The images in his mind stopped dancing and the cool darkness inside him slowly and wholly enveloped him. He smiled and welcomed it; he settled into the space, which seemed to suit him perfectly. More discoveries could wait.

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