

# The Storyteller

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*Once upon a time, a little boy grew up surrounded by stories and storytellers. The tales shaped the person he would become as an adult. The boy's mother often read to him and to his brothers for long stretches of time. And when she needed a rest, they would plead for her to read to them just a little more. They never wanted her to stop. They had discovered a kind of magic.*

*There came a time in every tale - in every good and true one - when you forgot you were listening to a story. From that moment, the reality of the story became your reality. If the plot involved excitement, or sadness, or fear, or happiness, or anger - you felt these emotions as you entered deeply into the details. You heard and saw the characters, became their friends or enemies, or even entered into their lives and experiences and thoughts - or perhaps they entered into yours.*

After the story was over - or stopped - there were times, for the boy, when the magic would linger. His mind would refuse (or would be unable) to let go of the powerful connection with the narrative. He would relive moments of it, but he would also find himself in the landscape of the setting (geographically, emotionally, or chronologically) free to roam and explore - and to narrate his own tale as part of the larger story.

The boy's father told many stories. He came from a family of storytellers, who could conjure a good yarn from nearly any experience or memory. They loved best telling stories that made people laugh, but they could also tell very frightening tales. The boy's father and the boy's uncles loved especially telling mythic tales about their father, who became a legend of a man in these myths. The boy could never quite tell if the stories made the legend or if his grandfather (who died of emphysema when the boy was young) had truly been legendary.

Perhaps it did not really matter. And the really good stories made it impossible to tell the difference, because of the magic, which lingered in his life. He loved the yarns his father and his uncles told, and he particularly studied how they would tell them. How they would look you in the eye, and read you while they spun the tale. How they would lower their voices to make you listen to the really important parts. (You could make the words louder by lowering your voice.)

The boy paid attention to the way they would build the story from the start, where they would introduce you to the characters (and how the description would prepare you in a way for what was to come, but you wouldn't realize that until the end of the tale). Then in the middle, they would complicate things, and that's when they captivated you, because you *had* to know how this character with whom you felt a kind of kinship was going to make it out of the darkness of their (your) difficulty. And the best endings were the ones that didn't *have* to be. And didn't actually *solve* the problem, because that's where the magic began - where you would find yourself in the story, in a version you created, forging a new path to an ending that had yet to be told.

## ***Walking On the Railroad***

You could become lost in a story.

When the boy was very young, he would walk with his little wagon to the railroad tracks behind his house to collect railroad spikes. The way he would collect them would be to test each spike until he found a wiggly one, which he would wiggle back and forth until it came out of the tie. Then he would put it into his wagon and test the next spike. And after a long time, walking slowly down the middle of the track and testing spikes, the boy would carry a wagonload of spikes home and dump them into the back yard, behind a shed.

When the boy's father would find the spikes, he would be angry with his son for going to the railroad tracks. Walking on the tracks was too dangerous for a little boy, and the boy's father was really far more frightened than angry, although he was angry that his son was not frightened of the railroad tracks as well. So he told his son a story one night at supper. To frighten the boy.

It was a story of a boy who went down to the railroad tracks to collect spikes. One day, a train came. It grabbed the boy and its terrible screeching wheels cut off the boy's arm. And to give the story added punch, the father tied one of the boy's arms behind his back during supper so that he could live the story even better, because he was the boy in the story that had not happened yet, but might.

At first, the boy was angry. He had heard the trains rumbling past in the distance, but in all the times that he had walked along the tracks, he had never seen one rush past him while he collected spikes. Sometimes he wondered why. He had seen trains, of course, and he loved them. They weren't scary at all, they were exciting. He could not imagine that a train would snatch a boy and steal his arm forever. And he was glad when his father untied his arm and this bad story was over.

But the magic had just begun.

That night, as the boy watched a spotlight sweep back and forth across the night sky through his bedroom window, he heard a train whistle, like the old trains he had seen in cowboy movies. After the whistle echoed in the night, he heard the bell and the whump of the steam pistons that drove the huge steel wheels of the locomotive. And then he saw the light at the far end of the street. The black steamer itself chugged into his vision and up the street, as if it would pass the house.

But it did not pass the house. It turned into the driveway and filled the air with noise, just like a train coming into a station gets louder and louder until it becomes everything that you are hearing and seeing - and smelling - until it becomes all that you can sense. And this train, black with a red cow catcher on the front, came relentlessly up the stoop and crashed through the front door, filling the house with light, smoke, and a terrible noise.

The boy saw the light race across the hallway and then explode into his room as the train turned toward him and he leaped into his bed from the windowsill where he had been watching it in the night. And of course it rolled into his room, crashing through the doors and walls and ringing its terrible bell and blowing its terrible whistle, chugging as if alive. And when it rolled over the bed where he cowered, it did not stop with his arm, but swallowed up his life in smoke and noise and an earthquake that shook the house to pieces as it took him.

The next night, the train came again. And the night after that. It came every night until the boy's family moved away from the house, and by then the boy had a hard time sleeping when the train did not come anymore. Such was the power of a story that you didn't just listen to - you lived.

### ***Conjuring on April Fool's Day***

It was later in his life that the boy would discover the word *raconteur* to describe his father and his uncles. By then, the title would also describe the boy, as he settled into the rhythm of a good story at school, surrounded by his classmates, in the neighborhood with friends, or at home with his family. *Raconteur* was a word that very few people actually used - and fewer still knew what it meant. But the boy knew. He had read the word in a story, of course. And it fit.

For one thing, it sounded like a conjurer, which was what all good storytellers were. They conjured meaning with the tales they told. Their tales took people places and changed the fabric of reality - made a new reality. Stories had the power of creating new ways to see the reality around us - they reshaped our world and created new worlds. One of the oldest tales the boy knew told how the world was made by a master *raconteur*, who spoke the world into being and it was so. All gifted storytellers could speak worlds into being.

One day (it was April Fool's Day) the boy went to school and told a story that created a new kind of world. He knew that on April Fool's Day, people played tricks on one another for fun, and so he thought of a great trick involving a story. The tale he told that April Fool's Day was about a fire. This fire had destroyed his family's home in the night. The night before April Fool's Day. They had all nearly died in the smoke that filled the hallway and bedrooms, but somehow, they had managed to escape the flames when their German Shepherd awakened them all by barking furiously. They had been saved but their home and everything they owned had been destroyed by the fire.

The boy told this story to his friends, and some of them told the story to their teachers. Before long, lots of people were telling the story (it was a good story). And the boy forgot to let everyone know that it was only a tale he had created to fool everyone on April Fool's Day. When he went home on the bus, he realized that he had never told anyone that the story about the fire had never really happened.

That night, people called his mother and father and asked if they could do anything to help in the wake of the terrible fire. They didn't think about whether or not the phone would still work after the fire had destroyed the house, but such is the power and the magic of stories. By that time, of course, the boy realized that he would have to tell his parents the story about the fire. They were angry with him when he told them. Angry and worried. They told the people on the phone the real story, and the next day the boy told many of his friends at school about a fire that never happened. But in a way, it *had* happened.

Years later, the boy's father would call his brother on April Fool's Day and tell him a story about how a load of lumber they had carried into the mountains had been stolen. The tire on the trailer had been damaged and they had left the trailer load on the side of the road for only a day and then the boy's father had gone back to repair the tire and to tow the lumber to land they owned in the mountains, where they hoped to build a cabin. But now, someone had stolen the lumber.

When the boy's uncle heard the story of the lumber thief, he threw his phone down so hard that it broke his toe. And that was when the boy's father told his brother that he had made up the story to celebrate April Fool's Day. So the lumber was really okay, and had not been stolen. But the boy's uncle still had a broken toe. And you might say that in a way, the story had broken his toe.

But it wasn't really the boy's father's story that broke his uncle's toe. From the moment the brothers had decided to leave the lumber on the side of the road, the boy's uncle had been telling himself a story about lumber thieves, searching for helpless trailers of lumber stranded on the side of the road. It worried him, even though he tried to tell himself another tale, about a man who worried too much about something that would never happen. And the stories competed in his mind, until his brother called and told him a tale that confirmed his worse fears. That made him feel like a fool.

The boy learned early that the most powerful tales were the ones that tapped into the power of stories the listeners were already telling themselves, like some larger narrative that was more powerful than the storyteller. Sometimes you stumbled onto these stories, these larger tales that unleashed their power in people's lives when you told them. But other times, you would know about what a story could do, and telling the tale was like riding a huge tidal wave - thrilling and dangerous. You were never in control. All you really did was ignite the larger story, and you never knew what would happen next.

Someone could get hurt.

The boy discovered a rule about his stories. He learned the rule as he told more and more tales, and as he read more and more. In order to be good, a story had to be true. While a storyteller could never control the outcome in the listener, the storyteller could always tell it true, so that even if it hurt, it would lead people in a way that was better than a lie.

Or so he hoped.

### ***Lost and Found***

There was the time the boy's grandmother came to visit from far away for a week in the summer. The family members who lived near her warned the boy's family that in recent years, her mind had begun to lose its grasp on the world. She would need watching. To keep her safe and grounded in reality. When the boy's parents told him this story, he was both sad for his grandmother and afraid to be with her alone. Keeping someone grounded in reality sounded like a difficult job for a teenager.

One day, he was alone with his grandmother in the kitchen, where they were drinking tea. They weren't completely alone. The dog was with them, a Bassett Hound that had a lot of Pitt Bull in him. And he was bored and hot, and could not get to the tea. So he began to hump the boy's grandmother's leg. Now later, when the boy told this story, he would find a euphemism for what the dog had been doing - he would say that the dog got frisky, or that the dog did what dogs can do, and wink at his listeners (who would supply the salubrious details themselves). This was a trick all storytellers learned.

As the dog humped the grandmother's leg, both the grandmother and the boy became momentarily transfixed by the dog. At one point, the grandmother looked up at the boy and said, sweetly (in her Alabama accent), "I think he wants a piece of ass." At this point in the story (when the boy told it later) the boy did not search for a euphemism, but told it just as he had heard it, with her sweet southern accent. In most of his stories, at least around family, he did not cuss. So the word "ass," especially when coupled with everything that his listeners had already been thinking, took the story from being merely interesting to a level of intensity for which no listener the boy had ever told it to was prepared.

When the boy told the story the first time, he was sitting at a supper table around which many of his family members had gathered. The meal was over and everyone was enjoying a round of stories for dessert. This was a new story no one had ever heard, and the boy himself had not told many stories to his family - he was just coming into his own. In a way, this story was his debut, his way of telling his family, and especially his father, that he was now a teller of stories, and not just a listener.

The night the boy told this story for the first time, he was sitting at one end of the long supper table, in the dining room, and his father was sitting at the other end. His father loved his mother, the boy's grandmother, with a devotion most people reserve for the gods. So when the boy said the word "ass," it had an electric effect on the boy's father, who could not see a way out of the story that would be good, especially if this story were true, as it purported to be.

He looked at the boy, his firstborn son, with a helpless fury. And when the boy saw his father, across the table, he realized for the first time what the story was doing to his

father, the fear and the pain that this moment must be causing him. So anxious had he been to tell the story (which was in fact a very good story) that he had neglected to think about the place he would have to take his father before they got to the end. For just a moment, he was unsure that he could tell the story well enough to undo the damage the story had already done to his father.

But only for a moment.

With all of the power he could muster, the boy, who was becoming a man, looked at his father across the miles of that supper table. He looked with eyes of love and also of power, in a way that told his father, "Put your trust in me; I am a good storyteller. You have taught me well." And there must have been something in that look, in the confidence the boy exuded as he warmed to his story, that calmed his father enough not to leap across the table and end the story prematurely.

Such is the spell that stories cast. They are like a journey into a magical cave, guided by the storyteller who alone knows a path through the maze. Once you enter into the cave, you have little choice but to follow. As bad as things get (and all stories must in some significant way take you to a place you would rather not go), once you have entered the cave, and the magic has taken over, you have no choice but to trust your soul to this guide, who alone knows a way out - a way home.

This is why we like stories so much. Not because they take us home (where we were when the story began), but because they return us by a different and frightening way. We are mysteriously drawn to that place from where we are not entirely sure we can return. So it is not home we seek, but this magical place in the darkness of the cave. It's a place of fear, certainly, but it's also a place of a deep knowing that cannot be understood in the comfort and safety of home.

It's a place where you discover a kind of home in the darkness.

So the boy continued his story, just as he had experienced it that summer at the kitchen table, when his grandmother had reached into her glass of iced tea, and carefully extracted a piece of "ass" (as she pronounced it, in her sweet southern accent) and gave it to the dog, who happily chewed the instant coolness up. That was all he wanted. A piece of "ass" in the summer heat.

Now when he told the tale at the table, everyone erupted in laughter borne of intense relief, including the boy's Dad. The relief they felt came from many directions all at once. The boy had proven himself a raconteur, if a gutsy one. He had brought them home after confounding them all in the cave. The boy, who was a teenager, had managed to remember himself before his elders, who for a moment (in the cave) wondered if he had lost his mind along with his respect when he had so carelessly tossed out that forbidden word, evoking their worst fears of his reckless sexual awakening.

But there was so much more than that. The boy's story had found a way to redeem an aging woman they had given up for lost. They had feared she was losing her mind, and his story told a larger tale of misunderstanding and laughter and joy. In a very real way, the grandmother had been lost - and it took a story (and a hound, of course) to find her and bring her home to her family. It was a tale they had been desperate to hear. And they laughed until they cried that night around the table.

But was the story true? As powerful as it was, especially that night around the supper table, it could not stem the very real tide of the boy's grandmother's dementia, lucid as she may have been at the kitchen table (was she?). The tale blinded them all from the truth in front of their eyes. It created a narrative they were so desperate to hear, they would do anything to make it true. So even though the story was good, perhaps it had not been entirely true.

But the story of the boy's grandmother was not so much about truth as it was about our inability to know the truth - this particular tale celebrated *doubt* by making fools of its listeners (who laughed at themselves for their foolishness in the end). So the tale had also been entirely true - and by raising the certainty of doubt, the story created the possibility of hope.

If they were wrong about the ice - if they never saw *that* coming - then they could be wrong about other things as well. Perhaps even the doctors, in all their wisdom, could be wrong about their mother and their grandmother, and the disease that threatened to take her from them. Certainly in the midst of that sadness, they had laughed again. And the laughter had been real enough.

So perhaps the story was as true as it was good.

### ***Prophetic (Self-Fulfilling) Truth***

Part of the trouble involves never really knowing the truth of a matter. Sometimes, you need to tell a story in order to discover the truth, or to discover more of the truth than you knew before you told the tale. Stories gave you a way to look at an event, or a person, from a new perspective. People call this perspective omniscient, but it isn't all knowing. The truth is, you have to do a lot of guessing. And a lot of that guesswork is bound to be wrong. So telling the truth involves telling a lot of lies - that you don't know are lies until you tell them.

Storytellers mitigate this problem by telling ancient stories, in which the truth of the tale is a more or less settled thing. But even in the ancient tales, truth has a way of shifting around, or eluding your grasp. Because truth can never be tamed, for one thing. And because truth mocks all who refuse to struggle to find it. But the real reason is that truth knows us, and is never completely known by us.

All storytellers know this, and yet they continue to tell stories, even though they know they will never find the truth. Truth is in the telling - the very act of searching and

struggling is a kind of truth. Myths and fables cast off the pretense of narrating truthful events even as they seek to demonstrate (or explain) larger truths. Parables operate in a playful, shadow world, using the shadows of pantomime to shed light where listeners have gone blind.

Myths are truth writ (and told - usually around a fire) large. While no listener would mistake a myth as a bare account of actual (truthful?) events, the mythic tale provides a path to navigate the world, and to understand how the world works in a new way. And if the path serves as a reliable guide, the myth tells a truth that is truer than bare reality, because it draws us out of our limited perspective of "reality".

Of course, all this talk of truth and reality and struggle sounds a bit too esoteric, but the old saw about how a self-fulfilling prophecy determines reality brings it all into rather sharp focus. The story goes like this: a man walks into a diner near closing time. He is dressed in working clothes and looks tired and disheveled. From the moment the waitress sees him, as he absent-mindedly takes the menu from her and orders coffee (black, and keep it coming), she pegs him for a lousy tipper.

She lives out this narrative in the course of the meal that follows. In all the little details (the mark of a good story) she lives out her prophetic narrative, waiting until he asks for more coffee, finding other things to do than check on him, and perhaps even forgetting to put the dressing on the side. He becomes a character defined by the story she is living out. And, it should come as no surprise, when he leaves the money on the table for the bill, the tip turns out to be as lousy as the waitress ensured by her prophetic wisdom that it would be.

But if the waitress decided to tell herself a *different* prophecy about the man, well, who really knows? But certainly, she would live out that different story, one of generosity and neighborly good will, in all of the little details as she served him his supper. He would apologize for coming in so late, but work was terrible. And she would commiserate ("I know what you mean, Honey") as she tops off his cup of coffee, chatting him up like some regular. And when she forgets to put the dressing on the side, she apologizes and gets him another salad, with the dressing like he likes it.

And when he leaves, he not only tips her generously, he walks as if his soul as well as his body has been nourished in the warmth of the diner.

And maybe a tale like this one lays it on a bit too thick, for the sake of simplicity. Or maybe not. Maybe this narrative tells it true - reveals the power in us all to live into the stories we create to navigate our lives. These may be the most profoundly powerful stories, not about the past, but about the present, even the future. And like the ancient tale (myth?) of the raconteur who spoke and it was so, our stories about any specific future have a way of shaping the future into which we live. And not only our future, but the future of everyone around us.



Or so the boy learned, as he became a man. After traveling and searching around the world, across vast, empty oceans of space and time, he discovered the narrative that would define the rest of his life, under a dusty canopy of stars. He would collect and share stories - the truest and best stories - that had the power to define a future that would change the world for good.

The man knew that such a dream would strike others as overly ambitious, or smack of pride, but he would not let these reactions, these counter-interpretations define him or his dream. He nourished himself on the biographies of other master raconteurs who had spun tales of majestic wonder that brought healing, forgiveness, and new life to places of darkness, disease and death.

When he steeped himself in the ancient tales, the man probed for the ways in which the tales had formed, in order to understand the genesis of ancient wisdom - how the tales and mythic truths came to be. Not satisfied with mere meaning, the man sought to understand meaning *making*, especially in the heart of darkness. He believed that if you could prove the power of a story in the darkness, then no situation or place of hopelessness would be immune from the transforming power of a story.

For the man, death marked the very heart of darkness, the place where the power of a story would be tested to the very limit of its capacity to bear light. There was a story about death and life beyond, which had captivated the man when he was a boy. But as he grew up among communities that claimed to gather around this master tale, he lamented the tragic contempt with which the listeners treated the story because of its familiarity. Its power had been lost in the telling.

But not merely in the telling. Its power had been lost because few people understood the profound sense of loss that gave birth to the story. Having been nurtured on the story alone, most people simply had no idea about that dark place in the cave from which the tale had emerged to create a way where there had been no way. So like the people of Hamelin, they refused to pay the piper his due, well-assured that all was well. They forgot - perhaps they never knew - that the story lost its power if no one bothered to listen, or even to tell the tale, no matter how majestic it may once have been.

So the man sought to return to the place where the story was born, the place of utter darkness and loss, in order to rekindle a sense of the tragic power of the tale (when no one alive had any idea how it would end). This was delicate and dangerous work, because for it to be real, the man had to risk the security of the tale he knew to rediscover the need for the story. He had to sacrifice the story itself to follow a path of despair where all such paths naturally led. To the darkness and danger of the cave.

### ***The Death of the Master Storyteller***

It all began with a master storyteller, a raconteur perhaps beyond compare, although saying so echoes the stories of his later renown. So perhaps he was not beyond compare, for to truly discover the power of the story, the man had to grasp the

disquieting irony that the stories later told were not really about this storyteller, but about so many who came after the Master Storyteller (including the man himself).

Where it really all began was in the wake of a public execution of the Master Storyteller. There are things more powerful than death, or even the threat of death. Among these are the things that crush hope. And it was this hope-crushing power that had brought about this very public and humiliating death. It was the end not only of a life, but of a story that his life had kindled. In fact the story had become so much larger than the Teller, the Teacher - larger even than even the people who followed after him. And with the relentless ring of the executioner's hammer, the story had died.

They had ridden the tidal wave of the story into the maw of the beast, claiming power they insisted had been wrongfully taken from them. Crowds gathered to cheer them on, as crowds will do. Mostly crowds gathered to hear the raconteur speak his spellbinding tale of hope. How mesmerizing he was in a crowd, connecting with each person to make them feel as if he were addressing them, acknowledging their concerns, touching their wounds with the healing balm of his words. He could exasperate those who thought they knew him well - he was mercurial and moody, given to outbursts of anger or compassion for no apparent reason. He confounded their expectations, which was why so many could not help but follow him wherever he went. No one could figure him out.

All the portraits that survive of him have been overlaid with a deep varnish determined by a story he never thought to tell in his tragic life, so it is impossible to know what he was (truly) like. Perhaps we can taste a vestige, a hint of the effect he caused on others, through the only thing we can know for sure: he died because people with power were either annoyed or fearful enough to silence him and the movement he created by executing him. This we know, and it may be all we can know, apart from the story birthed in his death.

He antagonized. Perhaps he also mesmerized. Such a man would have been impatient to wait for change, so he initiated change, telling a story of an extraordinary realm especially for those whom life neglected and trampled. He taught versions of this story wherever he went, but he also lived out this story as a homeless wonderer, surrounded by vagabonds. He lived on the margins and touched the marginalized. When his travels took him and his band from the hinterlands to the capital of the known realm, those in power, who marginalized others, swiftly killed and silenced him.

Which was typically the end of stories like his. There had been other wonderers, crying out in the wilderness, surrounded by bands of mongrels and miscreants. And when they, too, had been killed, their followers crawled back home, disillusioned and bereft of hope. The powerful knew about the power of stories. They silenced all other tales that sought to compete with their own. Their killing machine ground up the bones of the pretenders so that even their memory was extinguished with their body - tossed on a waste heap and lost to eternity.

In the wake of his death, those who followed him scattered and hid, fearing for their lives. But it was only a game they played. They knew in their hearts that he had been the movement, it's wisdom and power and reckless courage. No one was looking for them. Some of them looked in vain for his body, but they could not find it. They cowered in the darkness and crept home to the hinterlands where he had found them, returning little changed by anything he had tried to teach them.

As the numbness wore away, in the daily routine of a life they had known before he came, they found themselves remembering him, like some seed between their teeth, impossible to dislodge and sometimes painful. They would stop in the middle of some task (sweeping the floor, mending their nets, or especially when eating or drinking - how he had loved to eat) and say to themselves, or to anyone who happened to be nearby, something he had said while he lived among them. Some quirky saying that meant little when he said it and that did not make much sense even now, after weeks had passed without him. Yet it stayed with them - wouldn't let them go. Made them smile in the darkness and aching... loneliness (how they missed him, and the life - so much life! - they had known when sitting or walking with him).

And even though he was gone, he had marked them all - those who had followed him for a time, brief as it had been. They would get together around a low table and soon they would be regaling one another with stories. Stories of him. What it had been like to sit at his feet. The maddening pace he kept, as if driven by some demon in the desert. The anger that rose like a storm in him, and just as quickly passed from his troubled face to convey a peace such as they had never known. And the hope - always the relentless, passionate hope, that they were so close, not far, from that realm he described as if they were already living in it.

He was dead, surely, but no one had seen a body, right? They would fall silent at the table when one of them said out loud what they were all thinking, after the laughter subsided and each of them slowly wiped away their tears. Then they thought what no one of them dared to say - it's as if when we gather here and remember, and tell the stories again, *he is still among us*. But we are no longer sitting at his feet. He has become part of us all - and we have, collectively, become him.

Dare we say it? He *lives* among us still.

Short as his time had been with them, he had infected them all with his compassion and hope, and now, it seemed, also his reckless courage. They were restless and no longer satisfied with the life they had known before he came into their lives, inviting them to follow. Come and see. Now they were different, walking among a world gone blind and they alone had the ability to see - hope, and the healing, transforming power of compassion. In spite of his death, they could not unsee what he had shown them.

His quirky sayings littered their minds. They exchanged them like secret greetings whenever they met, visited one another, or passed in the streets. While they mended their nets, or hauled in a catch. There was one misty morning, near the shore, when

they were exhausted from toil, having caught nothing, when one of them refused to quit. Let the nets down once more, he pleaded with them. And when they did, the nets filled with flopping fish, so much so that they were unable to pull them into the boat.

That's when he saw him. On the shore, by a fire. He tore off his shirt and dove into the water, leaving his mates to struggle with the net and the straining boat, swimming like a man possessed for the misty shoreline. What had he seen? They wondered. And as they hauled the boat and the net full of fish to the shore, they found him weeping by a deserted campfire. And no one broke the silence, even as they ate a breakfast of fish cooked over the coals, until the mist had risen with the sun.

We can never fish again. He said simply. He was here. He is always here, and he will haunt us until we return to the city. This is no longer our home. He is our home. And for a moment, his mates sat in wonderment, thinking they were no longer listening to their brother, but to him. To the Teacher. That little speech was something he would have said, sitting dreamily by the fire, before abruptly getting up and setting off for the next village. Something he would have said.

And no one said to their brother, he wasn't here, surely, you're dreaming. It's just a story we all want so badly to be true. You're tired from a too-long night on the water and hauling this catch of fish. He is dead. No one said this, nor even thought it. They heard the man and they knew they would return to the city where they thought hope had been lost, or perhaps, where it all had really begun. They worked silently to gather their last catch of fish. And then they went to find the others.

What happened next is the stuff of which legends are made, of course. At first, there seemed to be no need for a story of any kind as they reunited in the capital and continued to experience a living presence among them where he was conspicuously absent. They were larger now, all of them, because of his presence among them - in them. And for now, there was little need for explanations when everything was so fresh and vibrant and exciting and more than a little frightening.

But in the course of the story, years passed, and gradually, fewer and fewer people remained who could tell the legend that now surrounded this mythic storyteller who had found a way to defeat death. The movement of his followers grew, fueled by those who joined and were adept at weaving new myths into ancient ones. All of which came after the experience in the utter darkness where hopelessness had threatened to consume their hopes. Letters circulated among them, written by another fiery teacher, who reminded some of them of the Teacher (who by now had become a kind of King).

In the face of these new voices and stories, some felt the need to collect first the sayings of the Storyteller/Teacher/King, and then to build around these teachings a story of the year that only a few remaining among them had spent with him, before he was taken from them. He grew large in the telling of these tales, at least two of which added a highly symbolic myth of his birth, ordained in the cosmos, so that it would align more closely with the ancient stories.

And what to do about the story of his death? It consumed these narratives as no other detail of his life among them. How else could the ones who still remembered convey that reality of how life had arisen for them all in the midst of his death? Here, too, the ancient tales and myths guided them to speak that which is unknowable. They began the mythic version of his life among them as it had really begun, at the end on the beach after that gigantic (miraculous?) last catch of fish. And it ended at the beginning as well, where the women searched in vain for his body.

Everything else was merely decoration, elaboration.

At its heart, this narrative inverted everything. The last honored, the poor feted, the blind seeing, the lame dancing, the prisoners freed, the mute singing and the dead alive. Enemies loved and families rejected. Kings overthrown and beggars ruled in this realm of reversal. In time, of course, many (most) in the movement would rush to tame the tale's tone of violent upheaval and revolt. The realm retreated beyond any life that anyone could know, and all the violence smothered beyond recognition as metaphor for an invisible, spiritualized battle of the air.

And what of the Master Storyteller? What the tyrants could not do, his followers accomplished. They buried him in platitudes and poetry, flowers to adorn his life rewritten in a story unrecognizable to anyone who had known the tempestuous Teacher of a soon-coming realm of promise and possibility. But they were all silenced by death themselves now. And so the movement matured from heady days when women, slaves and shepherds joined the fishermen and tax collecting outcasts at the head of a table now reserved for men of "worth".

And yet. And yet... every time the story failed to tell him true, every time they laid him low, he rose to new possibility among each new generation of followers, hungry like tender for the flames of his vision to ignite their yearning for life full to overflowing. The story always rooted in his life in the midst of death - light in darkness of the cave. Where hope in hopeless places grew, the lost were found, in him. He rose. And rose again. To lead another ragtag bunch into the heart of darkness, dancing, celebrating a realm of restoration and reversal that finds us all, regardless, loved and whole.

This, then, is the story that found the man who loved stories, who searched among the tombs where darkness reigned, and all hope died. He had known the words by heart but none had seeped into his soul before the Storyteller sought him out to call him to return and live the story once again that lived in him. To look up at the dusty stars and see a world of children borne of promise, heal the sick and banish demons of despair - the Storyteller beckoned. To live in the realm of reversal all around wherever those who followed walked and made the darkness light.

*Once upon a time, a little boy grew up surrounded by stories and storytellers. The tales shaped the person he would become as an adult. The boy's mother often read to him and to his brothers for long stretches of time. And when she needed a rest, they would*

*plead for her to read to them just a little more. They never wanted her to stop. They had discovered a kind of magic.*

*There came a time in every tale - in every good and true one - when you forgot you were listening to a story. From that moment, the reality of the story became your reality. If the plot involved excitement, or sadness, or fear, or happiness, or anger - you felt these emotions as you entered deeply into the details. You heard and saw the characters, became their friends or enemies, or even entered into their lives and experiences and thoughts - or perhaps they entered into yours.*