

# BENCHES



GLENN SLADE CLARK, JR.

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# BENCHES

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**GLENN SLADE CLARK, JR.**

CLARK  
INK<sup>LLC</sup>

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## **Benches**

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The man hadn't been walking on the road for very long, when he came upon some benches. Seated upon these benches were other men and women who invited him to sit down. They scoffed at the other people who walked past, ignoring their invitation, ignoring their warnings that the road led nowhere, that there was no point to it. It sounded sensible to the man, so he sat down. He admired the bench, how solid it was, how very firm. He read the words etched into the arm rest at his side: "All things end." He was

relieved to finally have it written down somewhere so definitively.

The whole time he'd been walking, he'd had his suspicions. All those people talking about what lay beyond the end of the road. All those people basing their lives upon it, to be sure that they would get to go on to the *next* road. How did *they* know? They'd never *been* to the end of the road. Surely once the road ended, that was that. The road was ended, as all things ended. Those people were delusional. They simply couldn't accept that the road was a great accident, that their ideas about a road beyond were simply a comforting fiction, designed to ease the minds of those who could not sleep knowing that they had to one day face true finality.

He found himself shouting out to people who passed by, warning them, trying to get them to sit down with him and not waste their efforts on the journey to find the road beyond. "*This* is the only road! We've got benches here. Sit down, and relax." He was friendly in his invitations, but it seemed so many people, who had made up their minds already, would have nothing to do with what he was saying. They wouldn't listen to him at all. They scoffed at him as they passed, and he was deeply offended by that.

It didn't matter what they thought though. Not really. He had found what he was looking for. His journey was

done. He was content. He was comforted by the solid bench upon which he now sat and the others of like mind who sat with him.

Time passed, and then he heard something strikingly sad. He heard the sound of a dog, crying. He looked up from his bench, and he saw that this dog was only a puppy—dirty, alone, pawing against the bars of a cage at the pound. His heart went out to the puppy. He got up and went over to it. A harsh woman greeted him, holding a syringe. “What are you going to do to him?” the man asked.

“I’m going to euthanize him. He’s got no one. He’s a stray.”

“No!” said the man. “He’s just a puppy. His whole life’s ahead of him!” He couldn’t stand the thought of a life so full of potential for joy being cut short and ended in bitter sadness. “I’ll adopt him.” The man reached down, the bars fading away, and he lifted the puppy up into his arms. The puppy was thrilled and licked the man’s face relentlessly.

The man walked a little farther to a place where he could buy the puppy a leash and some food. He put the food down, and a bowl of water, and the puppy feasted enthusiastically. The man clipped on the puppy’s collar and leash, and they walked a little ways on. The puppy got bigger. He grew into a healthy dog with a shiny coat and a tail that never stopped wagging.

They hadn't been walking very long, when a young woman approached, enamored of the dog. She soon noticed the man at the other end of the leash, and the man certainly noticed her. They fell in love. They talked a great deal, though they disagreed on one major point.

After a while, the man sadly saw that the collar at the end of the leash was no longer attached to his dog. The dog was gone. He held the leash, and he wept for the dog, who had vanished from his sight forever, he knew. The woman tried to comfort him. "He's not gone. Not really. He just found the end of the road. His journey has taken him to the next one now. You'll see him when you get there. He'll be waiting for you. Dogs always find the next road much sooner than humans." She smiled and hugged the man tenderly. He loved her, even though she was wrong. It was the fact that she was trying to comfort him that mattered most.

"There is no road beyond," he said. "The dog is gone. The only comforting thoughts I have are that, while he was here, he had a good walk. He wagged his tail and was well fed. He was happy. He's in my memory now, and nowhere else. I will remember him, but I will never meet him again." He wept fiercely, as he held the woman, and she didn't argue anymore, because she loved him. She only held him and told him how she would miss the dog as well.

The man put the collar and the leash in his pocket, held the woman's hand, and walked with her.

Not much time passed, before the woman stopped and sadly looked the man in the eyes. "I have to go now."

"But why?" the man asked defiantly. "It isn't right. It isn't fair! How can you leave us *now*? We've barely started our journey together!"

"So you do see the journey?" She smiled.

"Not the way that you do. I see our walk together. Nothing more. I'm not walking with you to the road beyond. I'm walking with you here and now. That's all that matters to me."

"But I've come to the end of this part of my journey," the woman said. "I have to go to the road beyond. God is waiting for me there."

"Then God is an evil creature!" the man protested. "That's why I've never believed in God! You always say that God guides us on our journey, that God loves us unconditionally, but how can that be! How can a loving god be so cruel! How can God take you away from me, when you still have so much to do *here*! I won't believe it. It's chance. It's dumb luck. And the world is darker now. I want never to hear about this vile God of yours again." He sobbed, and she held him, comforted him.

“Shh. I love you. I’ll be waiting for you. You still have someone to walk with. Someone who needs you. Be good to him. Don’t tell him that my journey has ended.”

“But he’ll know that you’re gone.”

“I’ll be with him. I’ll be with you. I’ll see you on the road beyond.”

The man wiped the tears from his eyes, and the woman was gone. He knelt down and picked up the ring she’d left behind. “No, you won’t. There is no road beyond,” he said to himself.

He heard a sad sound then. A child, crying. He turned and saw a little way up the road a small boy sitting on the curb and quaking with tears. “Daddy!” the boy cried out.

The man went to the boy urgently, picked him up, and held him tight. “I want Mommy! Where’s Mommy?”

“She’s gone,” the man said softly.

“When will she be back?”

“She won’t.” The man struggled for the right words, finally deciding that only the truth would suffice. “I wish she could come back too, but she’s gone.” Seeing the boy’s terror, the man kissed him and rocked him in his arms. “While she was here, we had a good walk. We laughed and smiled. We were happy. She’s in our memory now. Remember her, but understand that we will never be with her again.”

“Not even on the road beyond?”

The man stifled a response. Instead he held the boy still more fiercely and simply asked, “What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” the child answered. The man said nothing more.

The man held the boy’s hand as they walked on. They walked to the store, where the man bought the boy food. The boy got bigger. They walked on to another store to buy the boy clothes. They walked on to school, so that the boy could learn. As they walked, the boy held the man’s hand less often, striking out on his own from time to time, but always coming back.

The boy was a teenager now, and he had plenty of his own ideas about things. As the man walked with him, they came upon some benches. There were people sitting on the benches, calling out to them, inviting them to sit with them, scoffing at the people who walked past them without heeding their warnings that the journey did not end with the road that they walked now; that if they didn’t agree with what they were saying from the bench, the road beyond would not be opened to them at all.

“Is that true, Dad?” the boy asked.

“Is what true?”

“If we don’t think like them, will we be rejected from the road beyond?”

Angrily, the man answered. “No. They’re just trying to manipulate us, to get us to sit with them and help them be less afraid. You’ve grown enough now that we can talk about these things. There is no road beyond. They just want our money, to polish their benches.”

The boy was troubled. “What about Mom? I’ve always thought she must have gone on, that there must be a road beyond, where she’s waiting for us. She told me so when I was little, just before she went away.”

The man held back tears with remembered pain. “We never agreed on that.”

“Mom believed in something beyond, just like these people. She believed that God was with us, embracing us and guiding us on the journey.” He listened to the shouts of utter faith from the various benches around them. “They all say different things. Which one did Mom believe?”

The man looked around, studying the divergent dogmas etched into the many benches. All of the benches had words of God, of faith, of living good lives, of avoiding sin. But they each had different ideas about what it meant to live a good life, about what it meant to sin. Some of them were hateful and contrary. They made the man feel sick, reminding him why he’d never sat down at their benches of Faith before. The benches were all labeled, some Mormon, some Catholic, some Methodist, some Buddhist, some Wiccan,

some Baptist, some Muslim, some Jewish. The varying labels went on and on. The man could spend his entire life worrying over their dogmas, trying to read each one and learn which one truly had all the answers, if he let himself. And he would come to the end of the road having gained nothing, for none of them had all of the answers. He agreed only with their declarations that people should live good lives, that people should do no harm. He simply couldn't reconcile that declaration with the hateful, judging words of some of the people shouting from the benches to those who passed them by. He knew that they would shout at him as well, and he wondered if his son was going to join them.

Bravely deciding to let his son make up his own mind, he pointed to one bench in particular. "There. She believed in that one."

Puzzled, the boy asked, "Then why did she keep moving forward? Why didn't she stop and sit down at their bench?"

The man shrugged, a twinkle in his eye. "Maybe because she fell in love with me, and I believe in none of it."

The boy eyed the people at the bench suspiciously. "Her beliefs weren't as limited then. She saw the journey beyond the bench. I think these benches must not be meant to sit down and stop at. They offer a place to rest and listen,

but the road goes on beyond them.” The boy kept walking, and the man followed.

Just beyond the benches of Faith, they came upon another set of benches, and these looked very inviting to the man. These were like the same bench he’d sat upon when his journey had begun. These benches were for the men and women who knew better than the ones on the benches of Faith. These people had probably sat down here, some of them, *because* of the hypocrisies of the people sitting on the benches just behind them. There was a part of the man who missed sitting on the bench and having all the answers. He missed not having to defend his thoughts to people who disagreed with him. He wanted to sit down, and he wanted the boy to join him. He waited to see the boy’s reaction, as the people on the bench shouted out, inviting them, scoffing at the people who passed on in spite of their warnings that there was no road beyond, that God was not waiting for them, that they were all alone on the road, save for each other.

The boy stopped and listened. Like the benches before, most of these had words etched into them of living a good life, being kind to your fellow creatures, doing no harm. And like the benches before, some of the people sitting upon them were shouting out hypocrisies, judging, criticizing, hating.

The boy looked to the man, wondering.

The man nodded. "This is what I think."

"You do have a Belief then. You do have Faith. Faith in a narrow minded dogma of *nothing*. Just as the others have their faith in a narrow minded dogma of *something*."

"It's not dogma, Son. It's being realistic."

"How?"

The man removed the leash and collar from his pocket. He removed the ring. "These are relics of the people that I've lost. They are gone. Do you see my dog? Do you see your mother?"

"No," the boy answered.

"I loved them. I remember them. My memory of them is so vivid and wonderful. If I were like the people on the benches of Faith, I would hide in the lie that they aren't really gone. I would take comfort in the fiction that there was a road beyond, though I've never seen it. In reality I have no idea what the end of the road looks like, because I've never been there."

The boy nodded. "Then how do you *know* that there's nothing?"

"Because it's the most sensible answer."

"Or is it the easiest? Is it a comfortable contrivance that gives you permission not to dwell on something you can neither see nor understand?" The boy grew taller.

The man's hair began to gray just slightly. "That's an interesting point."

The boy came to an understanding all his own. "All dogma is narrow minded, and all narrow-mindedness is dogma."

A middle aged man approached them then, walking among the benches that were of such comfort to the boy's father.

"Hello, sir," said the boy with a grin. "You look amused by what we're saying."

"I am," the man said, offering his hand. The boy took it, and the man explained. "I'm a thinker. I don't want to sit down at any of these benches, but I do love engaging the people on them in conversation. You strike me as a thinker yourself."

"I am," said the boy.

The middle aged man pointed back at the benches of faith. "That's my church. That one right there."

The boy was delighted. "That was my mother's faith!" Then, catching the contradiction of the man, the boy asked, "So why aren't you sitting down with them? Why aren't you at church? How can you be both a thinker and a man of the church?"

The man regarded the benches of atheism around them. "There are thinkers who mostly agree with these," he then

nodded towards the benches of faith, “and there are thinkers who mostly agree with those. There are even thinkers who mostly agree only with themselves.” He laughed. “I am a thinker who mostly agrees with that bench over there, but I’m not sitting down to go to church. In fact, I’m in church right now. Would you care to join me?”

“I would.”

The boy walked down the road with the thinking man, ever in sight of his father.

The boy’s father watched, knowing that his son had found his own way, knowing that the boy would come back as he always did, to walk a little with his father. The man looked at the benches, and he thought to sit down. Before he could, however, his cell phone rang in his pocket, and he answered it to the upset sound of his son’s voice. The boy had been arrested.

The man passed up the benches for the time being, and he walked on ahead, to the police station. The boy had been caught with some of his friends in an abandoned house, smoking marijuana. The man rolled his eyes and was angry. He took the humbled boy under his arm. “I did that too, once or twice. It doesn’t make you a bad person. It was simply a bad decision. We all make them. Unlike the people of Faith, I won’t judge you for it, but because I love you, I will hold you accountable. Consequences must be faced.”

The boy nodded quietly. The man knew that the boy would make more bad decisions, because he was a boy.

To the man's surprise, however, the boy did not face judgment from the middle aged man either. The middle age man agreed in all that the man had said to the boy and helped to hold him accountable for what he had done and to make amends.

The man decided that the boy's choice in friends was not as hypocritical as he'd feared. Still, he felt sorry for the boy, that he was pursuing a belief in the road beyond. He worried that the boy would lose sight of what mattered. He worried that he would be forgotten and that the joy of the simple journey without a destination would be lost on the boy.

The boy went and came back, went and came back. He grew, and the man was helping him with his suitcase. The boy was going away to college. The man held him and wished him well. He said goodbye, but knew that the boy would be back.

The man found a mirror, blocking the road, once the boy had gone. He stared at himself. He had much more gray hair. He had wrinkles beneath his eyes here and there. He thought about the end of the road. How much longer until he found himself there? How much longer until all of what he was, all of his memories, all of his beautiful but pointless

journey along the great road ceased to exist, became nothing?

The man stopped there for a time. He worried. At last, he walked around the mirror. He moved on.

The phone rang.

“Dad,” the young man, his son, was in tears. “I’m hurting. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I think I need to get to the hospital.”

The man went up the road as quickly as he could and met his son in a hospital room, waiting there for the doctor. The young man rocked back and forth in pain, but still found a way to laugh about it, making jokes about what the problem could be. “I hope it’s just a kidney stone.”

The man laughed. “No, you don’t. I hope it’s your appendix. That’s much easier to fix.”

“But I could die.”

“You’re going to be fine. You’re here. You’re with the doctors. You couldn’t be safer. They’ll find out what’s wrong with you.” *Please, the man thought, don’t tell me you have to go.*

The man walked on with his son, as the doctors diagnosed him. He was so relieved that it was in fact the young man’s appendix, and they removed it, and the young man was fine. He moved on. The man moved on.

As the man found himself walking forward, he crossed paths with his son again and again. He helped the young man with money, gave him advice, and every time, he moved further ahead. There was never any time to sit down at a bench and just stop and be as he was.

The man's son went in so many directions, and the man followed him there. Sometimes the young man would pull the man forward simply by inviting him to share a cup of coffee and talk about the world.

The man was having coffee with his son one day, when he noticed the younger man had begun to get a bit more gray hair, he noticed a wrinkle beneath his son's eyes, here and there. He began to dread the end of the road, but finally chose to let the dread go. This was all the purpose he needed. The end of the road was inevitable, but there was no sense in dwelling on it. Once he got there, it would be over. Nothing more to say. Why not say the most he could and do the best he could while he had the time and energy to do it? He realized that was how he had come so far from that bench he'd once been seated in. He'd made a good journey of it, and he would continue to walk and think and experience life and be a good man until he reached the end.

As time went on, the man made a discovery. His hands were shriveled. His hair was thin. His walk had become a

shuffle. The end of the road was before him. Where he once looked ahead to the future, he now saw only darkness.

He turned to his son. "I have to go now."

"But why? It's not fair! You were walking just fine."

"I know." The man chuckled. "But all things end. I've never had any illusions."

The younger man, struck with grief though he was, put a reassuring hand on his father's shoulder. "I'll see you again. We'll meet on the road beyond. It's what I really think."

"There is no road beyond," the man said. "Just take comfort that, while I was here, we had a good journey. A beautiful journey to nowhere. I was happy. I'll be in your memory now, and nowhere else. Remember me, but we will never meet again."

The younger man wept fiercely, as he held his father. "I'm so sorry that you think that, but I have always respected your ideas. I can't imagine this road without you."

"You still have people to walk with. People who need you. Be good to them. Don't tell them that my journey has ended."

The younger man looked to his family, picked up a young boy of his own, who was weeping and asking for his grandfather. "You know I won't. Because it hasn't. We'll meet again. On the road beyond."

The man watched as his son knelt down and picked up a collar and leash, his mother's ring, and a picture of himself with his father. All that the man had been. The man realized then that he'd gone; that he had crossed the end of the road.

Vaguely, he saw images, heard voices from the road. He saw his son, standing among the benches of Faith, as voices told him that his father would not meet him on the road beyond, because he'd never believed in it, never embraced God. He heard his son telling them that he thought otherwise. The man saw him walking on with his family, and he was happy. He turned to face the shadows, and there were benches there, facing the road he'd left behind.

The man saw people in the benches, staring back at the road, calling out to people who rarely heard them, trying to stay involved. They invited the man to join them, to sit with them and not let go.

The man looked beyond them, and he saw another man up ahead. He wondered if this were simply the last dream he would ever have, or if he was in fact still on a road. A road of shadows. The man ahead did not seem to be darkened by the shadows that hung over the benches; rows and rows of benches, facing the road behind him.

"Who are you?" he asked, and found he'd moved ahead, to where the other man stood.

"I am you," said the other man. "And I am the road."

“Are you God?”

“I am.”

“If this is real, am I to be punished?”

The other man laughed. “Not at all. Not unless you choose to be. But you’d be on your own. I don’t punish people. It’s all a matter of choice, as it’s always been.” He regarded the benches and the people upon them who didn’t seem to notice him at all.

“But I don’t believe in you. I’ve spoken out against you throughout the entire journey. My dying words were that the end was the end. That there was no road beyond.”

The other man smiled and put a warm hand on his shoulder. “You’re right. There is no road beyond.”

“What?”

“It’s the same road as before. It just keeps going. You say all things end, and that’s one way of looking at it, but the truth is: all things change.”

“But, am I allowed to keep on going? I didn’t believe!”

“You did believe.” The other man laughed lightly. “You believed in your dogma of nothing. But you also believed in life. You believed in standing up for smaller creatures, you believed in loving your wife, you believed in loving and not giving up for your son. These beliefs kept you moving forward. The traps along the road are the benches, you see. If ever you sit down, the road will call to you, try to get you

up, try to get you moving forward again so that you don't get stuck. Some people just get stuck. Relationships and the choices you make along the way bring you closer to the next step of the journey. Now you're here, and you can either sit down and look back with these ghosts in the benches of Shadow, or you can come with me, to the next part of the road, where shadows have no power."

The man was beside himself with wonder. He was also curious, suspicious. "If the road didn't end, but only changed, how does it change from here?"

The other man shrugged and offered a warm smile. "No more benches," he promised the man. "There are none to be found on the road ahead."

"And what's to keep me moving forward?"

The other man gestured with a welcoming arm, showing the brightness of the road ahead. "Old friends on new journeys. There is still so much to learn, and there are still so many to love and be love by. But as with everything along the road, it is your choice. You can still stop right here. These are the last of the benches. You can stay here, if you'd prefer, with those who can't let go of the way things were, of the way they thought they out to be, or you can answer the call of your spirit and continue the journey. Only, know that if you choose to go ahead, the road will

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never end. No bench will ever settle you. New experiences will greet you over every horizon.”

The man saw a woman in the distance, running along the road with a little dog. They called out to him, and he walked forward, taking the other man’s invitation. “I’m not afraid to be proved wrong.”

The other man patted him on the shoulder. “That’s because you’re a thinking man, and thinking men are inexorable.”

They walked ahead together, into the light of the road without benches, and the man was reunited with all who had gone before him. They’d been waiting for him, just as they’d promised. And the journey began anew.

## About the Author

Glenn Slade Clark, Jr. is the author of eleven books, including the novel *Cry, Wolf: Shadow of the Werewolf*, the short fiction anthology *The Great Debate*, the Gothic horror series *The Chronicles of Nightfire, Texas*, and two fantasy series: *Metrognomes* and *The Legends of Nod*. He lives in Dallas, Texas, where he is currently hard at work on his next book.

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