



EVERVILLE

THE FIRST PILLAR

ROY HUFF

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Roy Huff

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This book is dedicated to my good friend, Tony Miloni.

BEGINNINGS

Feeling a bit queasy, I decided to stop by the school clinic just to make sure I wasn't coming down with something. Whatever it was that was making me feel this way prevented me from walking at more than half my usual brisk pace. I pondered whether I was depressed for some unknown reason, whether I was genuinely ill. Hesitantly, I walked through the grassy corridor to get to the main entryway. As I was standing in front of the oversized door, I noticed how the large gold entrance looked out of place. Just as I touched the cold metallic handle, I began to feel faint.

There was no line at the front desk. I quickly scribbled my name on the sign-in sheet and hurriedly whisked away into the examination room. After being asked a series of questions, the doctor said he wanted to check a couple of things and needed a blood sample. I wasn't afraid of needles, but I frequently became light-headed whenever I had my blood drawn. I think sometimes I just forget to breathe.

Moments later, I felt my consciousness slipping away. It was as if I were falling asleep in the air with the wind at my back and facing up at the sky.

I awoke in near free fall. The smell of wet earth, vines, and something I could not quite place was palpable. I seemed to be in some sort of narrow earthen passageway, a tunnel of sorts that seemed to go on forever. Was I dreaming or perhaps dead? I felt as if I were blind. Deep blackness surrounded me. There was not even a flicker of light. I must have been falling for what seemed like twenty minutes. Finally, the passageway slowly opened. I could see the darkness giving way to a murky brown. Gradually, lighter shades began to appear. Eventually, I was able to make out shapes and colors. They seemed to be going by so fast. Then all of a sudden, I struck the ground with a smack!

I landed in what appeared to be a massive pile of leaves, but upon closer inspection, it became clear the pile was not made up of leaves at all. It was definitely organic, but from what, I was not sure. Slowly, I began to get my balance. My knees were weak and trembling, but I managed to stand up on the edge of the pile and slowly walk away.

A few feet in the distance, there was a small stool and a wooden crate. On top of the crate, there was a bowl filled with some kind of fruit I didn't recognize. Next to the bowl, there was a small note that said "Breakfast," was all it said. I hardly recognized the odd markings on the bowl or the unusual shape of the crate. I may have paid more attention if I weren't so hungry. My stomach was growling more than usual for having only skipped one meal. It must have been all the energy I expended falling down the tunnel. Whatever it was, I could wait no longer.

I picked up a piece of fruit and slowly sank my teeth in. The fruit was wet, sweet, and had a texture similar to a pear. The taste was unique but with hints of apple, grape, and watermelon. Greedily, I ate one after another. Before I knew it, I had devoured the entire bowl. My appetite being satiated, I took a moment to look at my surroundings. The room was nothing special. The ground was made of hard-packed dirt, and the walls were made of earth. It was as if a giant mole had dug a series of passageways. I took a few steps and looked ahead into a large opening. The room was connected to a colossal passageway. In the entrance of the passageway, there was a wooden sign. The sign simply said, "Welcome to Everville."

Looking at the torches hanging on the walls, I slowly walked through the passageway. The flickering light was surprisingly bright. The top of the ceiling was about the height of a ten-story

building and about as wide as half a football field.

~~As I walked, I began to hear the sound of shuffling and scurrying. In the corner of my eye, noticed several figures walking in and out of the shadows. Then a tall slender figure began to emerge~~

“Good. You’re here.”

“Where is here?” I asked.

“Here is Everville. We are somewhere between here and there, sometime between yesterday and another day. There will be time for questions later. Right now, we have a lot of work to do. Come into the workshop.”

The passageway seemed to go on forever. I walked through a series of massive cave-like earthen catacombs. We came upon his workshop. The sign on the door said, ‘The Keeper’s Workshop.’ The door creaked as we entered.

I looked up and gazed upon the endless books that surrounded me. They were displayed on shelves that were built into the walls on both the left and right sides of the room. The shelves were vertically stacked as far as the eye could see. Each manuscript was categorized and labeled in a surprisingly efficient manner. On the wall directly in front of me, there were unusual-looking objects of all shapes and sizes overflowing in all sorts of crates and boxes. At the bottom was a large desk that sat in front of a mysterious-looking door.

We hurriedly walked towards the desk. The Keeper reached up and grabbed a rectangular shaped object from one of the crates. He pointed at some characters that appeared on the screen of the object and said, “See. It’s all wrong!” I tried to make out what was on the screen, but the characters were unrecognizable. It was like some sort of ancient language I had never seen before. I asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Everything is wrong. I don’t know if we can fix it.”

“Fix what?”

“Fix everything. Everything is out of balance. It is going to take a concerted effort to bring back balance to Everville.”

The next thing I knew, I was back in the examination room. I awoke to the smell of a strong odor the doctor had used to wake me up after I had passed out. It took me a second to get reoriented. I thought to myself whether or not what I had experienced was real. It seemed like forever, but only a few seconds had passed.

I was left to ponder about the possibility. Was I really that sick, or was there really a place called Everville?

ORIENTATION

I was staring at the letter for what seemed like twenty minutes. ‘Freshman Orientation’ was all my brain could process. I couldn’t shake the experience I had the day before. The doctor had explained that I had a touch of food poisoning, but the memory seemed too real to be just a hallucination. Besides, I’ve had food poisoning before and it never affected me like this. Was that even possible? I had never heard about people seeing things that weren’t there when they were really sick, but I wasn’t sure if food poisoning qualified. Still, for the time being I thought it best to try and forget about the whole thing. I didn’t want people thinking I had gone completely nuts after just one week away from home.

Freshman Orientation

Dear Owen Sage:

Easton Falls University welcomes you Thursday, August 2nd to the 87th annual freshman orientation. We hope to assist you in your transition here; we want it to be as smooth as possible. To that end, we offer freshman orientation at the location listed below. While not mandatory, attendance at freshman orientation offers several benefits. First, you will have preferential registration over non-attendees. In addition, you will receive guidance from a vast field of counselors and experts ready to assist you in planning your program schedule and in techniques for becoming a successful first-year student. Finally, representatives from a variety of campus clubs will be offering information and membership applications. Please come join us, and help us make your transition to Easton Falls University an easy one.

Sincerely,

Dean of Undergraduate Student Affairs
George Swifthouse, Ph.D.

I had always been the type of person who attended orientations. It wasn’t that I was eager to impress, it’s just that I thought I would miss something important. This time, however, my experience in the school clinic must have shaken something deep inside my core. I almost decided not to go, but I needed priority registration to make sure I got all my classes. More importantly, I wanted to meet up with a couple friends whom I hadn’t seen over the summer.

I put the letter down and looked out the window. My dorm had one of the better views. Easton Falls was one of those New England schools with massive walkways, gigantic trees, and impressive gothic architecture. That was one of the reasons I was so drawn to the school. My fondness for the school had rubbed off on a couple of my friends, much to the dismay of their parents who had their hearts set on their alma mater.

From my window, I could see the main entrance to the school and the historic oak tree. The tree towered over the students who passed nearby and blocked just enough of the sunlight to shade the administrative building. The shaded sidewalks in the view of the stone statues depicting the school’s

founders from atop the admin building added an unmistakable mystical quality as one walked through campus center. Gazing across the walkway, I began to feel a little more like myself.

I had been reading a lot about dreams after my incident. I was starting to convince myself that my experience in the examination room was some kind of lucid dream. I had read a book on lucid dreaming by an expert at Stanford University who explained how events from one's everyday life could slip into the dream state. It was the brain's way of recording information that had been experienced the prior day. In a lucid dream, the dreamer becomes aware of the dream and starts to shape the dream in the way they want it to unfold. Perhaps the magical quality of the campus architecture had seeped into my brain. When I passed out, I must have fallen into the dream state and my brain was incorporating what I had seen into the dream. At that moment, I decided that I would think of something much more interesting to do in the dream if it happens again.

Enough with speculation, I thought. I needed to rest my brain. A long nap might help do the job, so I closed the window and sprawled out across my small dorm room bed as best I could. It didn't take long before I had fallen into a deep sleep. I was starting to repeat my experience and seemed to be aware of that, or at least I thought. I must be dreaming!

"OWEN! Wake up!"

Startled, I jumped up. I half expected to see The Keeper or someone else from Everville, but it was just my good friend Dante.

"Come on, man; we don't have all day! We're going to be late for orientation if we don't hurry. Besides, they have pizza. If we're not at least a little early, we're only going to be left with the scraps."

I glanced at the alarm clock and realized I had forgotten to set the alarm and had slept through the whole day. It was already tomorrow!

Dante was even more uptight than I was. I'm always punctual, but he likes to arrive an extra ten minutes early just to scope out the scene. I was a little irritated that I had overslept, but I figured everybody needed it anyway so it was probably a good thing.

It took me all of two minutes to get ready. Then, we headed over to meet up with my other best friend Anika.

Anika was smart, funny, and very cute. She had a knack for always knowing the right thing to say and didn't take crap from anyone. All three of us had been friends since grade school. Dante and I fit together very well, but to those who didn't know her, Anika seemed out of place. Dante and I both had been crazy about her during different periods in our childhood. I'm sure Anika knew, but we never had the gumption to talk about it. Besides, we had a good thing going and we didn't want to screw with it. Dante's mom used to call us the Rat Pack.

Dante and I had pretty uneventful childhoods. We both grew up with our moms who had been divorced since before we could remember. When we were little, our moms would take turns babysitting us. It was like we were brothers or they were sisters or something. I think we both worked pretty hard at school to make our moms proud.

Anika came later. We met her in fourth grade. Her parents were divorced too. Shortly after her parents divorced, her mom died. That's when she moved to our neighborhood and came to our school. She was really quiet at school that year, but we spent that whole summer hanging out together. After that, it was impossible to separate us. Ever since then, we did everything together.

"Hey guys! Give me a sec."

Anika grabbed her purse and a couple of other things, and we headed off to freshman orientation.

I looked at Anika's purse as we walked out of dorm and realized it had the same markings that were on the bowl of fruit I had eaten during my experience in Everville. Some of the pieces started

coming together, or so I thought. Content to forget the whole thing, I gazed across the walkway at the large mass of students gathering around campus center.

Dante and I briskly walked over the tables to check off our name, pick up our nametags, and grab a slice.

“Mmmm. Pepperoni, mushroom, and extra cheese!”

If there was one thing Dante could not resist, it was pepperoni, mushroom, and extra cheese pizza. Neither could I, for that matter. Dante and I scarfed down a couple of slices before we heard one of the administrators making her way through the front and begin to speak.

The next hour seemed to pass by so quickly. I could hear what was going, but my head seemed to be in a different place. Dante and Anika spoke to me on occasion, but I didn't notice anything they said. My mind was fixated on the symbols that I saw on the fruit bowl. My subconscious started to put together some of the pieces of the puzzle I didn't immediately recognize. The markings on the bowl, the fruit and Anika's purse were also on the screen of the device that The Keeper was reading in his workshop. My mind wasn't even thinking about whether Everville was real or not. It seemed only to be trying to decode the meaning of the symbols.

Eleven thirty at night seemed to arrive sooner than usual. My mind still seemed to be in a fog and I was fighting to keep my eyes open, but it was a losing battle. Before I knew it, my eyes were sealed shut.

“Oh. You're back. It's about time!”

I knew precisely where I was. The Keeper's Workshop left an impression that was impossible to forget, and it was just as it was before.

I remember thinking about trying to take control of my dream the next time I thought I was dreaming. Well, it didn't seem to be working. I tried everything. Flying didn't seem to work. Thinking really hard about all my favorite foods didn't seem to make them magically appear, and things couldn't seem to disappear either!

“What are you doing? We don't have time for any of that silliness. I told you; we have a lot of work to do!”

BACK AGAIN

I took a deep breath. I realized I was either completely nuts or there was a huge part of the world I simply didn't know about. I stopped believing in fairy tales and magic when I was six years old, so if I was going to believe any of this was real, it was going to take some convincing. For now, I decided just to see where this Keeper was going to take me.

As I passed through The Keeper's doorway, The Keeper guided me to a smaller room hidden from view. As I approached it, it breathed an unmistakable odor of age, and seemed darker, more mysterious. The room was much larger than it seemed from the outside. Scrolls and papers were haphazardly strewn across an infinitely long table next to an oversized bed. The room was surprisingly large even for someone of The Keeper's impressive stature. The Keeper quickly shuffled through the first half of an old stack of papers precariously placed on the corner of the table. Eventually, he found what he was looking for and gestured for me to take a look.

"This is where the breach occurred," said The Keeper as I looked at his lanky finger, which pointed to a few odd-looking characters that I didn't understand.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Well, it means we have less time than I anticipated."

"Less time for what?"

"Less time to repair the breach and restore balance to Everville, of course!"

"What exactly is out of balance?" I asked hesitantly.

"Why, everything!"

Not seeming to be making any progress figuring out what was out of balance, I decided to change my line of questioning.

"Well, how do we fix it? How do we restore balance to Everville?"

"We have to repair the breach!"

"How do we do that?"

"We will have time for details later. What we need to do now is get everything in place and prepare for the event."

The event, I assumed, was something to do with repairing the breach. At least, that is what I suspected.

"What can I do?"

"You have to bring everyone together and then make sure you are ready. I'll bring the learner device."

"What's the learner device?"

"So many questions!"

A short, interesting-looking creature approached and handed The Keeper a small button. The Keeper pressed the button, and it began to unfold into a small strange-looking rectangular box with a handprint on the top.

"Give me your hand."

I gave The Keeper my hand, and he placed it on the device.

Within less than a second my mind was transported to someplace else. Some people say that ju

before you die your entire life flashes before your eyes. This must be what that feels like, except I didn't recognize any of what was flashing before me. It also seemed I was experiencing the mind of the universe itself. Within seconds, I began to understand what The Keeper had been talking about. The event, the breach, Everville being out of balance, the strange markings I had seen at different places, and so much more all began to make sense. Suddenly, I began to sense something else. I started to understand the seriousness of what The Keeper had been talking about and why The Keeper had been so anxious.

All at once, the power of the device became clear to me. I was being imprinted with all the information about what was going on, including all the thoughts and memories of the people connected to The Keeper. I could access their memories at will like some kind of computer, but it was more than that. I was actually reliving the experiences and understanding all of the emotions and important aspects of the memories as if I were there in that moment in time.

The longer I was connected to the device, the more I understood. The Keeper was old, really old. I saw so many experiences and so many people he knew. It was truly overwhelming. I felt like I was gasping for air, and I began to go into shock. Just then, I was filled with a sense of urgency and determination. I saw everything and everyone at once. I knew that this was more than just a dream or a hallucination. The Keeper and everyone helping him were holding the fate of our world and other worlds in their hands. An ongoing struggle between The Keeper and some other force began to slowly emerge. There was no question that The Keeper represented a benevolent force for good, and the struggle against The Keeper was decidedly darker.

The Keeper's helper removed my hand and took the device, but the thoughts still lingered in my mind. It seemed I was still able to access all the information that the device had allowed me to see.

"Good! Now we can begin the preparation."

A group of twenty helpers appeared to step out of a wall within the hidden room inside The Keeper's Workshop. The learner device had provided me with specific details of all the people who worked with The Keeper. I knew these twenty helpers were a race of creatures known as The Fron.

The Fron were small and not very agile, but they were friendly and clever. They were short, thick, and hairless. The Fron had tiny little eyes and very large ears that gave them an exceptional sense of hearing.

Sako, the leader of The Fron, stepped forward and approached The Keeper.

"Keeper, They are intruding on all fronts."

"Yes! All fronts," said Sako's assistant.

The Fron called Sako's assistant Toe. While certainly friendly, Toe was not as clever as the rest of the Fron, but he made up for it with his charm. Toe was not quite middle aged for a Fron, which would be something like tens of thousands of years in our perception. He once had a family with two small children, but They had made his family disappear in a major conflict that had occurred some time ago. One of Them had tricked Toe into sending his family into The Other In Between, a place where those not forgotten go when they have no time or place.

"Sako, how many have we lost to The Other In Between?"

"It's bad, Keeper! We have lost another 15 percent of the population."

Them, on the other hand, had been growing in number for quite some time.

The Keeper and the Fron are protectors of Everville. They reside in The Other Place, The Other In Between. There is a constant struggle between the two worlds. The breach The Keeper mentioned earlier, created the losses to The Other In Between that They had somehow managed to inflict on Everville. If allowed to grow much larger, the breach would mean serious problems for all times and all places.

My alarm was so loud and shrill that I always got startled and jumped up when it went off. The knowledge from the device seemed to fade. I could still recall some of it, but only what I had specifically pondered while in Everville. I needed more time in Everville to fully understand how and why I kept being pulled into Everville. Why did I need to help repair the breach?

A_{WAKE!}

I slid to the edge of the bed with the full intention of standing up. Pressing my feet firmly on the floor, I slowly began to rise. After making it about halfway up, my knees buckled and I found myself gently falling back towards the bed. I felt weighed down with the events that transpired in the dream. It was certainly a lot for my brain to process. Hesitantly, I tried a second time to stand, this time with more success. I slowly walked towards the window, opened it halfway and inhaled the fresh morning air. I felt compelled to tell the world about what happened, but I also knew this was not the best course of action. In the world as we know it, the imprint from the learner device only seemed to provide me with enhanced intuition. Fortunately though, I did keep all the other memories from each visit to Everville.

There was a knock at the door.

I walked to the door half-dressed and barely awake. Anika and Dante looked amazingly energetic, especially for 7:30 in the morning.

“What’s with you Owen?” Anika said, looking at me with a funny gaze. “College hasn’t even started yet and you’re already having trouble waking up!”

Of course, the trips to Everville seemed to be robbing me of my sleep. I didn’t quite feel like explaining the dreams I had been having...not yet, anyway.

“Owen, we’ve been looking at which clubs we’re going to join.”

“Clubs?”

“Yeah! I’ve always heard in order to make the most out of college you need to be active and involved with extracurricular activities.”

Of course, Dante’s idea of extracurricular activities was the chess club or perhaps some type of community service.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I grabbed some of the pamphlets from the orientation and a couple of them seemed interesting. I was thinking about the Art Club and the Echo Club.”

I took the brochures from Dante’s hand and quickly scanned the pages. The Art Club looked interesting. It was not your typical high school fare for sure. Actually, it seemed a little too urban-cool for Dante’s taste. It was, however, something Anika would be interested in. Then, I began reading the brochure on the Echo Club. After reading the brochure, I still didn’t quite get what it was all about.

What’s this?

“Oh, that just seemed intriguing to me for some reason,” Anika said with a smile.

“I don’t quite know what it is either, but I guess we’re going to find out. They’re having a meeting in an hour and we’re going!”

“It’s kind of early for a meeting, don’t you think?”

“I guess so. Let’s grab some coffee on the way. There’s this fantastic little café by campus center close to where the club is having the meeting.”

Coffee sounded fantastic to me right then.

“Okay. Let me grab my stuff.”

We walked the large mostly empty corridors of the dorm and outside to the open expanse of the

campus. I began to feel energized by the blue sky and warm sun as it beamed down on my skin. A cool breeze and abundant shade helped take the edge off a typically hot August day. We approached the café Anika had mentioned, and she was right. Easton Falls Café was chiseled into the stone wall above the entrance. It was rather impressive. It had an antique charm combined with a very polished feel. There were glass tables with a unique configuration. Wooden engravings covered the walls and other very interesting décor. There were a few college students sipping on coffee who seemed unusual and pensive, especially for a week before classes. I also noticed that an older gentleman appeared to be looking at me. He seemed familiar somehow and turned away as he noticed my gaze.

“What can I get for you?” the barista said with a certain charm.

“I’ll take a white chocolate mocha.”

“And you, Miss?”

Anika stayed silent for a few seconds.

“I’ll take the house special.”

“Fantastic!”

I looked at the chalkboard and began reading the different drink specials. The house special was apparently some type of latte with a secret house syrup. I’ve never heard of a secret house syrup in a café. It seemed to add an extra air of mystery to an already intriguing little place.

We took our coffee and headed off to the meeting. We arrived after a short walk. The combination of the coffee and walk had left me refreshed and energized.

“Welcome to the 87th year of the Echo Club!”

Eighty-seventh, I thought to myself for a second. That’s the same age as the university! That’s pretty good for a club. I was even more interested now.

“For all of those new faces here today, we’re going to give you a chance to find out what we’re all about at the meet-and-greet this Friday.”

“That sounds interesting,” I said to Dante and Anika.

“Yeah! It sounds like fun!”

“Well, I guess we have nothing else to do,” Dante said unenthusiastically.

The president of the echo club continued to speak. Numerous names and congratulations flowed off his tongue. Once again, I found myself slipping into a half daze missing just about everything he was saying. After about half an hour, I still had no idea what the club was about or if this was something I would ultimately be interested in.

“Refreshments are in the back and feel free to introduce yourself to others in the room.”

Dante rushed to the food table. It was a fun sight to see. Dante always acted like it was a competition to get to the food first.

All of the food looked appetizing. There was quite a selection for a club meeting. It seemed to be extravagant for such an informal setting. There was some typical food that one would expect, but also some international dishes that I didn’t quite recognize. The food looked unusually appetizing. Just then, I noticed it – the same fruit I had seen in my first visit to Everville!

I was starting to feel like there was a connection between the club, the university, Everville, and all of us. I still wasn’t ready to share my suspicions with Dante and Anika, but my curiosity was in overdrive and my attention was fully engaged.

After the meeting, we walked out and headed back to the café. Dante suggested we attend the Echo Club meeting later in the evening. It was being held in the town center not too far from the university around six p.m. The club was situated near a cluster of art galleries that populated downtown. The number of galleries was more than one would expect for a town that size.

As I continued to walk, I noticed my pace slowed. I felt myself being pulled away. I immediately found myself back with The Keeper.

I thought for a second that this time it was different. I didn't even need to be asleep to be taken away. I began to feel a sense of urgency to this visit. The Keeper gazed down in my direction with a worried look.

“You need to be careful. They have made many inroads in your world.”

The Keeper took out the device. As I placed my hand on the cool, smooth surface of the learning device, I could see the vast expanse of The Other In Between.

THE OTHER IN BETWEEN.

The sky was a dull dark grey. There was no sun, but a faint light directly below the horizon gave the sky enough illumination to make the land visible. The Other In Between was forever locked between half day and half night.

I saw a gathering place in a great wilderness. The multitude of souls seemed infinite. In every direction one could see, the souls spread out over a seemingly barren wasteland. They were crowded together shoulder to shoulder and appeared motionless at first glance, making no progress in their movement. Looking closer, however, I could see an almost imperceptible motion. I noticed that it came as the masses adjusted to the new arrivals that continually appeared. The longer I looked, the clearer it became that the arrivals were appearing at a faster pace.

There was no life in their faces. The eyes of the horde lacked any signs of emotion, but the masses somehow seemed to exude an unmistakable sense of sorrow. The sight made me sick to my stomach. I could smell the stench of despair even though the masses themselves seemed completely unaware.

My perspective of the hoard began to shift. I could see the edge of the wilderness. As new arrivals appeared, the wilderness itself expanded. It was getting bigger, and the longer I looked the faster it grew.

I could see a barrier around that vast wasteland. It seemed like an impenetrable void. Beyond the void, I could see eight separate lands surrounding the wasteland. The wasteland was the center of a nine-part world each separated by a void. Surrounding the nine-part world was another void that stretched as far as I could see.

Then my consciousness was drawn to one of the souls in the void. It was Nissa, the wife of Toe. Her face was expressionless like the rest of the masses. She gazed ahead with a blank stare completely oblivious to her plight and the others around her.

The learner device then took me to a different time and place. It was the home of Toe and Nissa in the land of the Fron. They lived on a rolling hillside covered in green grass and white flower-like plants with patches of various colors strewn across the hills. I could see deep purple, vibrant orange, crisp pastel colored pinks and lavenders with a smell I cannot adequately describe. It was the most unique and pleasant aroma I had ever experienced. It was light, but evoked powerful and positive emotions. I felt a sense of optimism and hope.

I saw hundreds of what looked like strange little butterflies. The insects were translucent and shimmering little creatures with spherical wings that reminded me of soap bubbles gently changing shape and color as they were blown by the wind. They hovered around the patches of color between the green and white across the hillside.

I watched one of the insects fly until it reached the hillside cottage where Toe and Nissa lived. At first glance the house seemed unremarkable: textured brick walls with a thatched brown roof. As the insect creature flew into the cottage, I noticed the inside walls were mostly earthen structures with quaint windows and handcrafted furniture.

I then heard the voices of young children playing, quickly getting louder. Two young children entered and began playing some sort of game as they chased after each other around one of the small tables in the center of the main room. They were laughing and cheerful.

I could see Nissa in the kitchen making several different dishes that all looked extremely appetizing. She gazed at the children and smiled as she continued preparing dinner.

Without warning, the mood changed. The wind suddenly began to howl. I could hear the rustling of leaves on the tree branches on the side of the hill below the cottage. The two children and Nissa began to slowly disappear.

Within a matter of seconds, the wind had stopped and the cottage was empty. Toe's wife and children were now in The Other In Between.

A great distance separated each of them. There was no confusion on their faces. There was nothing at all. The instant they arrived in The Other In Between, all emotion and sense of self had been taken away. They were no longer individuals living in a happy home. They were now part of a collective mass, a hopeless, emotionless, mindless, oblivious horde that populated the barren wasteland in the center of The Other In Between.

I could see Toe's face. He was in another time and place in the presence of Them. Them allowed Toe to see what had happened. Instantly, Toe realized he had been tricked. The expression on his face evoked a feeling of terror, sorrow, and dread. I could feel his emotion and the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

His dread quickly turned to hate. I could feel the anger and hatred in his eyes. Toe's eyes seemed to grow and expand beyond what seemed physically possible. His hairless head wrinkled up, and the skin on his face turned a deep purple. He opened his mouth and made a sound that I will never forget. It was something between a yell and a growl. The sound was sharp, sad, angry, and full of rage. It penetrated the vast expanse and echoed for what felt like minutes.

He stumbled and fell to the floor. He looked drained. Every last bit of strength seemed to drain from his body as all he had ever known and loved had been taken from him.

The Keeper immediately felt Toe's loss across the vast expanse. He gazed through his portal wall and saw what one of Them had done to Toe's family.

The Keeper yanked Toe from Them and brought him into his workshop. Them did not care. They all felt a sense of delight in his pain. The member of Them that tricked Toe grinned with a sense of pleasure and satisfaction in his achievement, and I could sense a blackness, a void with a shapeless pair of eyes staring back at me.

I thought to myself about what Them had tricked Toe into doing that enabled Them to send his family to The Other In Between. Why was Toe even talking to Them in the first place?

The Keeper took my hand off the learner device. I understood the sorrow and pain of Toe. I also felt the sadness and despair that engulfed the wasteland of The Other In Between.

"Them are very cunning and deceitful," said The Keeper.

"Them will find ways of controlling those in your world that are susceptible to their ideas. You cannot allow yourself to be influenced by Them. You must be very careful."

The burden of this knowledge seemed too much for me to bear. The Keeper sensed my emotion.

"You are stronger than you think. You have a strength that stretches between there and here and now and then. All of Everville is behind you and the number of allies in your world is more than you know."

Those words gave me some solace. Still, my heart felt heavy and I was gravely concerned about my possible success. I still was not even clear on what I needed to do or why I was so important. What did I have to offer to defend Everville or the world as I knew it? I felt completely overwhelmed.

Instantly, I was back with Anika and Dante. Like each of my other trips to Everville, no time had passed while I was gone.

BATTLE LINES.

Battle lines were drawn. The forces of both sides rushed together with an overwhelming howl. The galloping of the horses made the ground tremble with the force of a thousand earthquakes. The deafening roar of the stampede grew louder and louder as the distance between both sides grew smaller and smaller. The menacing sky grimaced as the inevitable clash approached. The generals of both sides rushed ahead of their massive armies. They eagerly drew their swords in anticipation of the fight. As the swords were lifted, the battle cry of the meeting armies drowned out even the sound of the stampeding horses.

Anika spoke and drew my attention away from the movie being played on the storefront window television.

For a moment, I imagined being in the middle of the fictitious battle. Perhaps this was what awaited me at the conclusion of this journey I now found myself on. I found solace in the notion that it might be possible to fight a battle without actually fighting, or at least I hoped that was the case. Everville is somewhere else in the unknown time and space, maybe there could be a way to mitigate the damage being done by Them by making use of that knowledge.

I continued to walk as Anika and Dante carried on a conversation to which I was completely oblivious. I shifted my thoughts to the handcrafted streets that surrounded us. With each step I took, I gazed at the brick-like appearance of the sidewalk. I noticed the chiseled features of each grey stone. Each stone was clearly meticulously carved and placed carefully in the ground. The stones seemed to blend seamlessly with the surrounding buildings.

Slowly, we came upon the grouping of buildings that housed the Art Club. Artwork gleamed out of nearly every window from galleries located in the first and second floors of the building. Every type of artwork imaginable seemed to be shouting at me. Before my senses could finish processing the eclectic mix of art that surrounded us, a figure standing in a doorway captured my attention.

“Are you here for the Art Club meeting?”

“Yes,” said Anika.

“Please, come on in. I’m Drusilla and this is Zee.”

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Anika, and this is Dante and Owen.”

Drusilla leaned against the doorway. She wore an elegant dark purple dress that complemented her perfect figure. It was sexy but subtle. She clearly had a fashion sense that equaled Anika’s and the body to boot.

I had to turn my eyes before she noticed I was staring. Dante didn’t bother; he had a childish grin on his face that gave him away. Drusilla was clearly enjoying the attention. Strangely, Zee seemed to enjoy it even more.

“Come on in. We have tons of food and drinks,” said Zee.

We sat down in the back next to the refreshments, or rather, Dante sat down in the back and we sat next to him. After a few seconds, I started to collect myself. I looked around the room and was rather impressed with the artwork hanging on the walls. This gallery seemed a bit different than most of the others close by. The paintings were all portraits. They looked as if they were from all different time periods. They were so exact in their representations that it was hard to distinguish the paintings.

from photographs.

~~“Thanks for noticing,” Zee said as he saw me looking around the gallery focused on each painting.~~

“These portraits are of all of the past Art Club presidents. I’m sure you recognize that one over there.”

I glanced over in the direction he was pointing and looked at the painting. It was the spitting image of Zee. It was exact in every detail. Whoever painted it was clearly gifted and meticulous in his approach.

“Who painted these?”

“Professor Samil, or Professor S. as I like to call him, painted the most recent ones. His father and grandfather painted the others when they were professors here. Professor S. is the professor of art history. His class is wonderful; you should take it if you have the chance. He’s standing over there next to your friend Dante.”

I recognized Professor Samil from the campus café. I couldn’t help but feel a little spooked by his appearance. His clothes were rather worn and seemed outdated by over a century. He had facial hair growing in varying lengths and a grey beard that reached his stomach.

Dante, fixating on the assortment of cheeses and dips, was oblivious to everyone around him.

“Oh my god, these dips are the best I’ve ever tasted in my life!”

They certainly did look appetizing. I dipped a celery stick into one of the dark colored dips and took a bite.

“Wow!” was all I could say after I took a sample of the dip.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Same here. I think I saw you at the campus cafe.”

“Yes. I believe so. Can’t keep me away from my morning Joe.”

His voice sounded even older than he looked. It was low and scratchy; it sounded as if it had been sitting on a shelf for decades then dusted off just to speak to me. There was something about him that intrigued me, but I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. He had a foreboding presence, though that could just be his poor fashion sense. Zee approached the front of the room.

“Thanks again for coming everyone. I think you will all find that the benefits of the Art Club are second to none. We are one of the oldest and most prestigious clubs on campus and boast an alumni list that has more politicians and Fortune 500 CEO’s than any other. There is certainly more to do here than just learn about art. I think you will find the connections at this club can be a stepping-stone to fame, fortune, and power to all of you that desire it.”

That certainly caught my attention! Anika glanced over, appearing to read my mind. Even Dante managed to look up at me after having his face firmly focused on the food table since we arrived.

The room erupted.

“YEAH!” was the collective scream across the room. Clearly everyone else had a better understanding of this club than any of us.

“We will be holding our annual Roundabout on the first of the month. For those of you who are new, you would be advised to meet with one of our other members to get more details. The annual Roundabout is a cherished tradition and is very competitive! The winners and two guests will get to spend a weekend at the Hamptons courtesy of Professor S. We will talk more about the specifics at the first official meeting to all members next week.”

“Holy crap!” I thought to myself. I definitely want to know more about this Roundabout.

“After this week, the battle lines will be drawn. Choose your teams carefully.”

REVELATIONS

I wasn't sure what to make of what just happened. I felt honored and excited about the opportunity. Of course, I had no idea what the Roundabout was, but regardless of whether or not we could even win the Art Club exceeded my expectations!

Anika looked at me and said, "That was odd."

"Really? In what way?" I asked.

"I don't know, but I just got kind of a funny feeling from that place."

"Yeah. Me too, but it seems like a great opportunity. What do you think, Dante?"

"I think it's awesome and I can't believe how good the food was!"

"The food was unbelievable. It had a magic all its own."

"So I've been meaning to talk to you guys about something."

"Yeah? What about?"

"Well, you know. It's about my experience and I keep having these dreams."

Anika looked at me pensively and asked me, "Are you okay?"

I told them everything I knew. After listening to me ramble for about 20 minutes Anika looked at me and said, "Oh my god!"

Then, Dante started telling me about how he knew someone that I could talk to.

"I have this uncle. He kind of knows a lot about weird things. He used to talk all the time about ghosts, magic, aliens, and stuff. Listen, just talk to him for ten minutes. Tell him what you told us. Maybe he'll have some answers. If not, you just wasted ten minutes. He lives close by, so I can give him a call, and you can talk to him about it tonight."

"Sure. Why not? I suppose it's as good a place to start as any."

"Great!"

An hour later, we were at Dante's Uncle Jack's home sitting on the couch.

"So tell me about this experience of yours."

Half an hour passed before I finished. I had now told the whole story twice in the same day. I certainly hoped I had done the right thing. I mean, I didn't want everyone I'd ever known thinking I was a total nut job.

"Well, Owen, I want to tell you about something I heard quite some time ago. When I was about your age, I heard some rumors about something similar. Some classmates of mine in high school were talking about how one of their friends was having these visions and dreams. I didn't get all the details but I did hear about how certain people, places, and things were conduits for good or bad from the other side or from worlds outside our own. Some people knew about these people, places, and things. They were able to take advantage of this and even visit these other worlds.

"I can tell you this; not everything is as simple as it seems. Even science can only tell you so much. Thousands of years ago, people would call what we have today magic. Maybe certain things have unknown properties that somehow allow energy or thoughts to travel from one place to the next."

"Ok. This is what we're going to do. Don't tell anyone else about this the next time you have one of those visions until you've got this thing sorted out. In the meantime, I'm going to see if I can contact those old classmates I was telling you about."

Anika looked at me and said, “You know this is really cool!”

~~“Yeah! This is fantastic! Maybe you’re some kind of superhero or something!”~~

“I don’t know about that,” I said to Dante.

“The Keeper didn’t say anything about superpowers and it seems like we’re in some kind of trouble that needs to be fixed.”

“Well, Anika and I will be your sidekicks! Just let us know when we can help!”

“Thanks Dante. It’s nice to know I’m not alone in this.”

THE KEEPER

The Keeper slouched over his desk. His thoughts visibly weighed him down. Alone in his office, his body spoke the real worry he was reluctant to show in the company of others. Intense dread and uncertainty clouded his emotions. He could hardly focus on finding a solution to the problem that vexed Everville.

He frantically searched his shelves in the hopes of a solution. For now, it continued to evade him. His only hope was to try what had worked in the past, but the problem had never been this bad and victory was by no means certain. They have never gained this much power and there had never been so many lost souls in The Other In Between.

The Keeper, like all other Keepers, had once been a Fron. A Fron with a pure heart and patience could sometimes manage to glimpse a small piece of truth that eluded most everyone else. The universe's secrets are so vast that even a small amount of true understanding transforms forever the soul of the Fron that possesses it. This is what had happened to the Keeper.

It's very unusual for someone to possess both the strength and pureness of heart to comprehend one of the seven pillars of truth contained in the universe. These are the pillars that lay the foundation for understanding how time, space, and free will work.

The Keeper was happy when he lived as a young Fron. His spirit was infectious. Whenever other Fron were around him, they would always end up feeling happy and content. If they were especially sad or upset, The Keeper could always change their mood for the better. It was this happy optimism that would one day provide the perseverance needed to help lead him to the revelation about one of the seven pillars of truth and his transformation into The Keeper.

The Fron, like other species in Everville, did not experience time as those of Earth did. They were able to live outside time and experienced a seemingly infinite existence. They did not age after middle age and they didn't die under normal circumstances. They did sometimes, however, move on to other types of existence.

Bitterness, jealousy, hatred, and many other negative emotions existed, but were not very common with the Fron. For the most part, they were a happy species. Their focus was on family and friendship.

Unlike the Fron, The Keepers bore great responsibility. They were entrusted with maintaining balance in the universe and preventing Them from destroying the natural order of things.

The Keeper had now lived longer as a Keeper than as a Fron. His understanding of the universe was great, but he only knew two of the seven pillars. Most Keepers only knew one. It was rumored that one Keeper might know three, but no one was certain. The Keeper did not try to learn all seven pillars. He instead, tried to understand why and how Them behave the way they do. If he understood this, he thought he would make a better Keeper.

They had tried many times to gain control of Everville through various methods. Each time was different. Whatever method they were employing this time seemed to be working. Even The Keeper was noticeably rattled, and this vexed him greatly.

The Keeper thought back to his days as a Fron when he was called Carwyn. He could see his childhood home in his mind like it was yesterday. The inside walls cast shadows longer than what seemed possible. He loved that about his house. The cedar beams ran through the center of the room.

and accentuated the medium brown matte finish that had slowly melted away throughout the year. The dining room was a massive space that was very common in the homes of most Fron. This was where they would host large celebrations. The Fron celebrated nearly every occasion and made very good use of the dining facilities.

The Keeper could still smell the aroma escaping from the earthen stove that was built into the partially underground wall. That was the secret to the flavor of the Fron's baked goods. Every kind of food imaginable and unimaginable was cooked in that stove. He could smell the oak, hints of butter, and subtle sweetness that permeated every ounce of food he had eaten while growing up in that home.

The land of the Fron was typically in perfect balance. Nature, the sky, the ground, the plants, and all inhabitants were usually free of pain, worry, and stress. Sometimes, however, cracks would appear when Everville was out of balance. Darkness from The Other In Between would slip through causing temporary imbalances that would result in a sudden gust of wind, a brief rainstorm, a rockslide, a downed tree, or a minor injury to one of its inhabitants. Usually, the cracks were small and temporary. They provided a reminder to the Fron to remain vigilant and appreciate the life that was available to them.

The Keeper thought back further to the first memory of his pet marmook Dagda, a small furry creature that was a common household pet of the Fron. Dagda scurried into Carwyn's arms. He picked up the creature gently and ran his small hands through the soft wispy auburn fur. Dagda purred and licked Carwyn's face.

He had rescued Dagda when he was strolling in the woods. Dagda had an injured leg from a fallen branch. The creature still felt a nagging pain from the injury even after it had fully healed. Carwyn could sense the pain. He felt sorry for the marmook and wished badly that he could give his new pet some relief. The young Fron's parents were happy to see him take an interest in the injured animal. Kindness and empathy were traits held in high regard among the Fron. They were happy to see their son exhibit such virtues.

He thought back further to the moment he saw the injured marmook. There had been a piercing howl that quickly spread through the Deep Woods. It was a sound The Keeper would never forget. The chilling air made his hairless arms uncomfortably cold. Daylight seemed to vanish and Carwyn began to sense that something was wrong. Sounds started coming from the ground beginning as a slow deep rumble and gradually getting louder and louder until the sound was almost deafening.

He decided to turn back. The cold howling wind, the rumbling ground, and the darkness grew more pronounced. He picked up his pace. A third of the way back through the Deep Woods, he saw a glimmer out of the corner of his eye. Then, he heard a sound. A slight whimper and a rustling of the leaves gave away the position of Dagda. It was trapped underneath a large branch. Carwyn approached Dagda, and he reached down to free the injured creature; it was visibly shaken and trembling. Dagda looked up at Carwyn as if to ask for help. Carwyn obliged. A sudden large gust of wind blew violently. Dagda winced then hid his eyes with his tiny little hand.

At that moment, the ground gave way. Carwyn and Dagda were dropped into a massive hole that opened up beneath them. Underground tunnels were visible for quite some length before they disappeared in the darkness. Here, it was quiet. They had fallen from the land of the Fron above, one of the eight lands around the center of Everville, into the center of Everville, below ground.

For now, the young Fron decided to leave the Deep Woods and take Dagda with him. They returned to the collapsed entrance. After a tremendous amount of digging through the collapsed ground, they made their way to the surface.

When he arrived home, his parents were greatly relieved. The intrusion of The Other In Between was felt in every corner of Everville. It had been the largest incursion experienced in quite some time.

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