PARALLELS

 What if there existed alternate realities parallel to the one we commonly know? Recent scientific discoveries in the realm of quantum physics beg that question.

 Luke Heston was a twenty-six year old Ph.D. candidate at M.I.T. in Boston, specializing in parapsychology. Born and raised in Billings, Montana, Luke was always keenly fascinated with the untapped potential of the human mind. If we indeed only use roughly 10% of our mental capabilities, what was secretly occurring within the other 90% of our brains? Such important grey and white matter was unlikely to be wasted in benign inactivity, Heston believed.

 While attending an international conference in his field in Geneva, Switzerland, Luke fell into discussion with other world experts in parapsychology. They had all given their rapt attention to the same lectures and research papers on such topics as meditation, hypnosis, kundalini yoga, mind-altering chemicals, telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, reincarnation, psychoactive plants, and radical diets which included prolonged fasting. Presenters had come from India, Peru, Romania, China, Russia, the U.K., and the United States. What Heston was most interested in, however, was whether any one man or woman had proven or at least experienced the existence of an alternative reality.

 Professor Ernest Galway of the University of Western Australia in Perth was the first to speak up.

 "Well, young man, you ask an important question. The simple answer is nobody knows. Certainly, nothing has been written up and published in any official journals. Yet, that is..." he added with a smile, peering over his half-lensed glasses.

 Dr. Arjun Vihaan from Mumbai was next.

 "Luke, I seem to remember that there was a man once who was formally educated in our field, but who renounced academia and instead became a recluse from society some years ago on an island in the Mediterranean. But I can't recall his name at the moment."

 "Are you by chance referring to Professor Orin Pernell?" interrupted an attractive older woman from Hong Kong named Su-Lin Kee. Her name tag indicated that she was a Distinguished Fellow currently teaching at the HK University of Science and Technology. "The story there is that he was in a terrible accident that put him in a coma for eight months. He was riding a rented motor scooter and was hit head-on by a wayward truck on a blind road curve in rural Greece. He was air-lifted by medical helicopter to Athens. Doctors were convinced that he would never live -- or if he did, he would be reduced to being in a vegetative state. Yet miraculously, he survived. Upon release from the hospital, he claimed that he had had an extraordinary experience in a parallel universe, and sought out living the remainder of his days peacefully in one of the world's so-called Blue Zones."

 "Forgive me, but I am unfamiliar with that last term. What exactly is a Blue Zone, Dr. Kee?" Heston asked.

 "It's a special place where the local men and women live well into their late 90's and early 100's," Su-Lin explained. "Their longevity is based on several factors, such as a simple healthy diet, living in a beneficial climate, having a consistent level of daily exercise, coupled with a strong social connectedness and a lack of modern hurry and stress. Blue Zone inhabitants also credit their traditional yogurt, or mineral hot springs, or special honey, or wine or herbal tea as helping extend their lives. Science has been studying all of these unusual claims, of course. Incredibly, these BZ people never seem to get sick or contract serious diseases or need any kind of hospitalization. They live actively and happily until just a few weeks before they simply slow down and then die of natural causes."

 "Exactly where are these Blue Zones located?" Luke wanted to know.

 "I can answer that one, Su-Lin, if you like," Galway offered. "In fact, a friend of mine -- Dan Buettner --wrote a book for National Geographic back in 2012 on this very subject. Blue Zones are found in specific areas in Okinawa, Sardinia, Costa Rica, on a Greek island called Ikaria, and even in the 7th-Day Adventist town of Loma Linda in California. Perhaps your mysterious Orin Pernell is living in one of those places."

 Luke Heston thanked his three colleagues, then contacted his research advisor, Dr. Polly Turner, back at M.I.T. He told her everything he had learned in Geneva -- especially about Orin Pernell -- and asked if he could extend his time in Europe while he did some more sleuthing. If he could just locate and interview Pernell, perhaps he could find out more about the man's rumored 'parallel universe' experience. Polly was likewise intrigued, so she agreed to a two-week extension for her student.

 By searching on the internet, Luke learned that Pernell had taught for seventeen years at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. He was 48, recently divorced, with two grown children. He was fluent in Greek, Latin, Italian, and English. Orin was originally from Split, Croatia. He resigned his teaching position three years ago, following his near-fatal accident and recovery.

 Heston assumed that Pernell would choose either the Blue Zones of Sardinia or Ikaria, seeing as he knew those languages and was probably most familiar with the Mediterranean basin. Sure enough, after more internet searching, Luke found out that his man was rumored to be living somewhere in the small town of Evdilos on the Greek island of Ikaria, which was off the coast of Turkey in the Eastern Aegean Sea. The closest Greek island to Ikaria was Samos, and the closest Turkish hub to it was Kusadasi, the port city which led to the famous Roman tourist ruins at Ephesus. Luke learned that Ikaria was named after the mythical Greek character Icarus, who flew too close to the sun while wearing wings made from bird feathers attached with wax. The wax tragically melted in the increased heat, and Icarus fell and drowned.

 Heston booked a flight the following morning from Geneva to Athens, then took a 55-minute connecting flight on Olympic Airlines to Samos. From there, he caught the one-hour Hellenic Ferry to Ikaria, which left from Karlovassi and went directly to the town of Evdilos, which was where Orin Pernell was apparently living. Luke had no exact address, but he figured that by asking the locals, someone would know and help him find this elusive mystery man.

 It took Luke about four hours -- using his Google Translate app on his Smartphone, for he couldn't speak Greek -- to finally locate the simple house of Orin Pernell. He went up and knocked on the door.

 When the door opened a few moments later, Luke noticed that Pernell was tall but walked with a cane. He was wearing a loose, long-sleeved, white cotton tunic with baggy khaki shorts and brown leather fisherman's sandals. His tanned legs had significant ribbons of scarring from his tragic accident three years ago. His face also showed evidence of his past motor scooter injuries. Although he was clean-shaven, his grey hair was long but swept back and tied with a ponytail. His eyes were glacier blue and clear. He was surprised and a bit wary at having an unannounced visitor.

 Heston quickly introduced himself and apologetically explained to Orin precisely why he had come. "I promise not to intrude too long on your time, Professor, but I need to know exactly what happened to you when you were in your coma. Please, sir...I must know," Luke asked politely but insistently.

 Pernell gazed carefully the intent stranger, then closed his eyes and rubbed them, took a deep breath, slowly exhaled, then said, "Alright, young man...in our mutual interest in finding the truth by relying solely on science, we can talk. But do call me Orin. I'm not a professor anymore, as you probably deduced. Come in. Will you take tea?"

 The living room was tastefully furnished with a few pieces of functional yet comfortable furniture, the walls painted in matching earth tones, blending with the three oriental carpets on the floor. There were a half-dozen tall wooden bookshelves, crammed with many volumes. In the corner was a large desk with an intensity lamp and a laptop computer. Stacks of papers were neatly arranged nearby. The arrangement of several house plants added splashes of vivid color to the clean, airy, and light feel of the room. On the walls were two framed lithographs by David Roberts, featuring dramatic renderings of ancient Egyptian ruins circa 19th century. There was a fireplace in the corner for occasional use in the wintertime, but right now in July, it was hot outside yet blessedly cool indoors -- the whitewashed adobe home exterior offering its traditional, beneficial insulation against the harsh Greek sun.

 Pernell slipped into the kitchen, then soon returned pushing a small wheeled cart with his right hand while steadying himself with his cane which he held in his left. The serving cart held a plate of feta cheese chunks, a pot of refreshing mint tea with two cups, and some wedges of fresh pita bread basted with wild honey.

 While they enjoyed the refreshments, Orin wanted to know first all about Luke and his latest researches in his parapsychology studies. After listening for thirty minutes or so, Pernell then cleared his throat and began telling Heston about his stunning coma experience.

 “The last thing I remember about that day was the truck speeding around the curve on my side of the road and the shock of it hitting me. Then, I was in a coma for 243 days. My wife assumed I would never regain consciousness, so she divorced me and has since remarried. I have no hard feelings about it, and we still stay in touch. When I awoke, my body had already been repaired as skillfully as possible with metal pins and screws in my bones. I still need to take pain medications, and may need to do so for the rest of my life. I lost my spleen and one kidney, and also suffered liver damage. The doctors said it was a miracle that I lived. I was glad I had worn a helmet, which is not mandatory by law in Greece. The police determined that the truck driver was at fault, driving recklessly after consuming too much ouzo at a local taverna. I had my lawyer sue the trucking company, and a sympathetic jury awarded me a sizeable monetary sum for my pain and suffering. I don’t need to worry about money anymore. I’m living here on Ikaria because I frankly want to live as long as possible. I’m studying the island’s lifestyle, and adopting their way of life. But I mostly want to live because I need to further research exactly what happened to me when I was unconscious for eight months. You see, Luke, I was absolutely living in a parallel dimension of reality all of that time…a true alternate universe.”

 Heston was fascinated. “Please, Orin, do continue,” he urged. “Exactly what was it like?”

 “It was frankly terrifying, because the entire world was a repressive totalitarian regime under the control of Communist China. The only language allowed was Mandarin. Somehow while I was there, I was able to speak, read, and write it -- yet I cannot now. What was left of the European Union, Australia, Canada, and the United States was a kind of feudal fiefdom whereby only Chinese-made consumer products could be purchased. This kept both employment and demand levels consistent within the Chinese One World global economic system. The other nations in Africa, Central & South America, the Pacific, and Asia were basically used as slave labor in factories and elsewhere. Any country showing the slightest dissent was threatened with nuclear annihilation, using a non-radioactive cobalt bomb. Privacy, civil rights, and all other freedoms were gone. Everyone and everything was under surveillance, 24/7. I was unsure what part of the world I was living in, and I didn't ask, so as not to bring undo public attention to myself. You see, everything seemed slightly unreal, almost like I was on another planet which was Earth-like. It's difficult to explain...”

 “How did you know that this was not an unconscious delusion, or a bad hallucination of some sort caused by your many injuries?” Heston wanted to know.

 “Because I saw myself everyday in my tiny block apartment building's bathroom mirror, and my wife was there with me too, and people called me by name when we worked together or conversed. I recognized and knew other people by name as well. Everyone was constantly afraid of being killed on the whim of the authorities – the secret police and the military. All of the details of daily life were precise. The calendars indicated the exact same year that we are living in now, even the specific months and days that I was in my coma. In my spare time, I read on the internet and at the library the history of what had happened and why. It was all there! The annihilation of the peoples of Russia and India. The mass sterilizations of so-called inferior races so as to keep the world population of non-Chinese down. The re-education camps. The propaganda initiatives. The eradication of any contrary thoughts and opinions. The abolishment of all religions. I lived there, working as a common hospital orderly, for all of 243 days.” Orin Pernell’s serious blue eyes bored into Luke as he paused to sip his tea. Then he continued.

 “Of course, when I recovered from my coma and shared what had happened, people thought I was crazy, and that I had imagined the whole experience. Soon, I quit my university job in Edinburgh and moved here. Over the last three years, I have tried to replicate the phenomenon. I tried meditation, hypnosis, purging diets and yogic fasting, controlled ingesting of psychedelic plants and herbs…you name it. I kept detailed records of everything I tried." He gestured towards his desk. "Yet nothing I attempted even remotely approached the life-changing event that I had undergone. My latest theory is that there is a minute portion in the human brain that can activate a kind of portal to other concurrent dimensions of reality. I have focused on a tiny brain portion called the striatum. It is responsible for ‘pattern separations,’ in that this part of the brain separates many features of an experience – detecting subtle differences in objects, places, and time periods. Luke, this may be the key, somehow. We might be able to 'switch off' our familiar pattern of reality, then shift into and enter another simultaneous dimension. But my best hunch is that one would need to undergo specific electroshock procedures or a medically-induced coma to recreate exactly what happened to me.”

 Luke then asked if Orin wanted to go back to the eerie, forbidding Chinese One World, or if he thought there were still other unexplored realms of alternate reality or parallel universes existing somewhere, somehow.

 Pernell shuttered. “I would never go back there. Unbelievably oppressive. But I am tempted to try for other dimensions, maybe…hopefully…some not as sinister. Unfortunately, my physical condition probably could not stand either an electroshock treatment or a medically-induced coma. Someone else would need to volunteer and report back.”

 Luke leaned forward in his chair.“Would I be a worthwhile candidate?” he asked in a somber tone. “I am still single, and my parents are both deceased. This could be a chance to make a historic breakthrough of significant scientific and medical importance. I am young and healthy, and I know how to do serious field research and then formally compile the results for the world's scientific community. Will you at least consider me?”

 Orin thought silently, long and hard, staring off into space while tapping his knee. "Are you sure you want to volunteer for such a risky undertaking, Luke?" he finally asked.

 Heston said he was absolutely serious, so Pernell continued.

 “Alright. There is a private clinic in Osaka called Zen Harmony. It's run by a former colleague of mine, a Buddhist monk turned brain surgeon named Yoshi Tsubaki. After all of the legal documents and disclaimers are signed, I’m sure he would agree to and then personally perform and supervise such an experimental, medically-induced coma. But again, remember that such a procedure can be dangerous, even fatal. You must understand this, Luke. Plus, the risk of death through failed resuscitation increases on average after a seven-day coma period. Do you still want to move ahead with this?"

 Luke said he did.

 So over the next two days, the men worked out the details of their agreement. Luke did not contact his advisor, Polly Turner, detailing his new plans. That would be done later, providing the procedure was successful. Packing their bags, Orin and Heston took the Ikaria ferry back to Samos, then flew from there to Istanbul. They then connected to Dubai on Emirates Airlines and finally arrived in Osaka, Japan. Twenty hours in the air left them both exhausted. They took rooms for a day in a traditional ryokan inn in the city to bathe, rest, and recover before heading to the Zen Harmony Clinic. Luke quickly adapted to eating with chopsticks, quipping, "We sure didn't use these back in Montana. Nor did we have any tatami mats or ofuros!" The following morning, they met Dr. Tsubaki, a short, smiling man in his late 30's with a shiny shaved head, wearing an immaculate white lab coat. The clinic was gleaming and state-of-the-art modern. Yoshi explained what would happen.

 Luke was given a complete physical to ensure his fitness for the upcoming treatment. He then signed the various medical releases and other legal paperwork that Orin had earlier outlined. An attractive team of young female nurses assisted the doctor in prepping Heston for the procedure, with all of its tubes, wires, and monitors registering heartbeat, body temperature, blood pressure and brain wave activity. Although naturally Luke didn’t understand the Japanese language, the women were in fact remarking aside on how much body hair this young man had as he was being undressed, seeing as most Japanese men were largely smooth-skinned.

 Finally, the moment had come. The electrodes were attached to Luke’s temples and chest after he had been sedated, and a precise power jolt rapidly and painlessly sent Heston to another realm -- a state of coma.

 When Luke was revived exactly one week later by Dr. Tsubaki, Orin Pernell was sitting at his bedside in a cheery, well-lit recovery room. Heston was still groggy yet voraciously hungry, but he was warned by Yoshi to go slow and easy with food, drink, and exercise for the next seventy-two hours. He was given more IV fluids and liquid nutrients by a pretty nurse while he told Pernell in detail what had happened.

 “By God you were right, Orin!” Luke exclaimed. "I did indeed go into another dimension of parallel reality. But it was completely different than your experience. My alternate world was just as strange and baffling as yours, though.”

 Pernell sat with rapt attention, gripping his cane.

 “I saw my parents alive again! I saw myself in the mirror, looking just like I am now. People knew me and I knew them. I was working at some kind of solar and wind-powered farm, and living out in the country somewhere -- I assumed in the United States, because everyone spoke Americanized English. I learned, incredibly, that the whole world had generally turned vegetarian. No meat, poultry, or fish was available to eat, but chickens were still raised for their eggs and cows for their milk. I learned that the world's environment could not tolerate the increasing use of animals for food anymore. Everyone ate fruits, grains, nuts, and vegetables – with some limited dairy products too. Also, all cars and trucks were gone – not just gasoline and diesel, but electric too. No airplanes either. Transportation was done using high-speed nuclear-powered rail lines and 'mag-lev' inter-urban shuttles. Like you, Orin, all of the calendars I saw were dated with our current year, and I existed during the same the month and days that I was in my coma. And rather than being a terrifying place to be living, my alternate reality was quite pleasant and peaceful. The planet was simpler but seemed prosperous and healthy. I saw no poverty, crime, or homelessness. Also, by hurriedly researching the world history of that dimension, I learned that there had not been any kind of war on earth in over 500 years!” Luke paused to catch his excited breath, his eyes wide with awe.

 "Amazing," Pernell replied. "Simply amazing..."

 "Look, Orin, I have to go back," Luke declared. "There is so much more to be learned about your theory of parallel universes with alternative realities. I need more time to investigate. I have to know if I can actually return to the same place I just visited, or whether I will wind up in a completely new reality. "

 Pernell called Dr. Tsubaki into the room for consultation.

 "Well," Yoshi replied after hearing the two scientist's request. "First we need to have Luke take some detailed cognition tests to see if any harm was done to his brain during the induced coma. You see, his physical body is young and adaptable, but anyone's brain can be easily upset or even damaged by any radical stressors. However, if he tests well, I see no problem in doing the procedure again after six weeks of completing Luke's current recovery -- keeping in mind that the same serious risks still apply."

 Heston cleanly passed the battery of tests that the doctor prescribed, so the next date was set for further medical and scientific experimentation -- the second voyage.

 Luke was prepped as before, and Orin left for the city for a week to write up a complete report of their initial findings. He would then need to wait until Heston was carefully brought out of his second induced coma. Where would he go? What would he learn? Pernell was anxious to know what news from another dimension Luke would bring back.

 But an emergency call four days later at Orin's hotel told him to rush back to the Zen Harmony Clinic as soon as possible. A unexpected development had occurred. Pernell hailed a taxi and was at Yoshi's side within twenty-five minutes.

 Luke's immobile body was lying under an orange thermal blanket as before in the operational chamber, with the same tubes and wires attached to his face, trunk, and limbs. But this time, the monitors were acting wildly -- beeping and flashing red with his heartbeat racing, his blood pressure up, his core temperature down, and his brain wave patterns racing and erratic. The assisting nursing staff was gathered at a far corner of the room, whispering among themselves, visibly concerned.

 "Something is very wrong here, and we need to bring him back now before it's too late," Yoshi declared. "The patient is experiencing some kind of severe danger or trauma, wherever he is at or whatever or whomever he is involved with. I wanted you to see this and be here, Orin, when I resuscitate him."

 Just then, all of Luke's monitors screamed emergency alert, and went flat-line, one quickly after another. Pernell was stunned with disbelief.

 Dr. Tsubaki rushed into action, expertly ordering his nurses in the precise steps to try and save Heston's life. Cardiac electro-paddles, adrenaline injections directly into the heart, and mouth-to-mouth CPR breathing were all desperately attempted...but all efforts were sadly, tragically futile.

 Luke was dead.

 When the Japanese authorities arrived, the Zen Harmony Clinic was temporarily closed for an official inquiry. It was allowed to re-open a month later, when it was determined that no medical malpractice had occurred. Dr. Tsubaki was cleared of any responsibility in the unexplained death of the young American. But he was reprimanded by the Japanese Medical Board and ordered to refrain from any further scientific experimentation using medically-induced comas.

 Orin Pernell was heart-broken. He notified Luke's M.I.T. academic advisor, Dr. Turner, that her Ph.D. candidate had suffered a fatal accident while studying in Japan. He was purposely vague in describing any specifics, but he did go on and set up an impressive scholarship fund in Luke's name for any future students in need who were planning on studying parapsychology.

 Orin took Luke's remains back with him to Ikaria, and had him buried in the local cemetery in Evdilos. He then wrote up everything he could remember into a lengthy, formal report. He was haunted by what the young man had possibly experienced just before his death. What had really happened? Did he visit the same dimension field as before, or a different one? Was he killed there? Or did he want to stay in the new place so badly that he somehow 'willed' his spirit to remain there while abandoning his body in our current reality?

 Pernell never gave up on his conviction that there existed parallel realities thriving invisibly beside our own in some kind of other dimension. But he refused to experiment any further to prove that belief. The tragedy of Luke's death was reason enough.

 Orin bequeathed all of his paranormal research papers to the University of Edinburgh, with the stipulation that they only be opened twenty years after his death. His last hope on his deathbed was that by then, mankind could move forward more safely with fully investigating his theory of parallel universes...

 THE END

 by Jack Karolewski

 December 29, 2019