SUBTERRANEAN

 The Palmer family was from Lexington, Kentucky. Jake, age 36, worked as a trainer at a thoroughbred horse farm. Trudy, age 31, was a substitute teacher at several local area schools. Tyler, age 6, liked to go by the nickname “Kip”, after a character in a favorite book. He was a first grader at Boone Elementary School. It was Spring break, so the family finally took their long-awaited trip to Mammoth Cave National Park, about a two-hour drive from Lexington. Kip was currently fascinated by rocks, caves, bats, and volcanoes.

 Mammoth Cave was the world’s longest cave system, with over 400 miles explored. Tours of the cave had thrilled millions of visitors since 1816. The cave was estimated to be over ten million years old. Yet unknown discoveries still surprised geologists and spelunkers.

 The family opted for the two and a half hour Star Chamber Tour, which included the famous Frozen Niagara formation. The group trekked through narrow, labyrinthine passageways, past amazing displays of stalactites and stalagmites. The air was a constant cool temperature of 54 degrees Fahrenheit, so the recommended long pants, sturdy shoes, and light jacket or sweater came in handy. Here and there were scattered pools of water, which had collected from steady drips from the ceilings. Kip was having the time of his life. “This is so much better than seeing it on TV!” he exclaimed.

 After the tour, the family was allowed a half-hour of free time before returning to the surface with their guide and the rest of their group. While Jake and Trudy rested on a convenient wooden bench near the underground gift shop, Kip asked for permission to do some exploring on his own. “Don’t wander too far,” his mom advised.

 After about five minutes, Jake heard his son call out from a distance: “Hey, Dad, come here!” Jake turned and smiled and said to his wife, “Stay here, we’ll be right back.”

 After using their voices for a few minutes back and forth to meet up, Jake found himself in a strange hidden tunnel area filled with rubble and cobwebs. No one had been in this spot for a long time, he guessed. He spied Kip in the dim, gloomy light.

 “Dad, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do it. It was an accident, honest!” Kip wailed. He pointed down to his feet. There was a grey rock, weighing about ten pounds. Under the rock was a pair of tiny human-looking legs. “He startled me. I moved back and I was starting to fall, so I grabbed for the wall and this hunk of rock broke off and fell on him. Is he going to be O.K.?” Kip pleaded.

 Jake didn’t know what to think. He bent down and carefully raised the stone off of the legs. Incredibly, underneath was a miniature adult man, perhaps seven inches tall, bearded, dressed in medieval peasant-style clothing, appearing to be from several centuries ago!

 Kip got down on his hands and knees next to his Dad. Suddenly, father and son noticed four more miniature bearded men similarly dressed, warily walking towards them from out of the passageway shadows. Jake and Kip were amazed, and both blinked in disbelief. “What’s happening, Dad?” Kip asked nervously.

 One of the four tiny men held out an orange-colored crystal of some sort in each hand. Each crystal was about an inch long and a quarter of an inch wide. The tiny man slowly approached father and son, nodded and smiled, then indicated that Kip and Jake should each take a crystal and hold it near their ear. When they did as they were instructed, they heard a clear voice.

 “Hello! Don’t be alarmed. Please do not touch our friend. We will pick him up and take him back down below. Only there can he be revived. But you must both come with us. Quickly!” the tiny man urged.

 Kip looked at his Dad, and Jake cautiously indicated that they would follow. The four little men each carefully raised a limb of their comrade and lifted him, then headed deeper into the tunnel. It grew darker. Kip and Jake had to crouch, then crawl as the musty passageway became smaller. Another of the tiny men removed a yellow crystal from his pocket, which when shaken emitted a strong bright beam of light like a flashlight. After several more minutes, the tunnel passageway enlarged in width and height so that now Jake could stand upright again. The miniature man with the yellow crystal placed it on the ground, and it illuminated a large rock-walled room. Another of the tiny men then removed a green crystal from his pocket, and his friends followed suit after gently placing their companion on the ground. Slowly, closing their eyes and clutching their green crystals near their hearts, the four tiny men grew in size so that they were Jake’s height. One of them then touched his green crystal to the chest of their still small injured comrade. He likewise grew to regular adult stature, and appeared to be regaining consciousness. The injured man shook his head to clear it, and stretched his muscles a bit, and nodded to his fellows that he was alright.

 “We will take your Listeners back now, because you can hear us at normal voice volume,” one of the men said, indicating the orange crystals. “Our friend will be fine, so the boy needn’t worry anymore. But you both still need to come with us. We are taking you on a special journey underground. All will be made clear to you when we arrive. It would normally take several hours, but if you hold these Shifter crystals, time will speed up to just a matter of minutes.” He offered both Jake and Kip a pink crystal from his pocket. “Hold this and don’t drop it. Here we go…”

 Suddenly, the images in the room of rock began to shift. Jake clutched Kip’s hand tightly as he noticed blurry, spectrum-like flashes of colored light and a feeling of motion –but a sensation of falling sideways rather than downwards. The air smelled inexplicitly fresh and minty. After a few minutes, the strange sensations stopped. The two Palmers refocused their eyes and looked around.

 Jake and Kip saw that they were in a new area which completely surprised them. A vast world lay before them, stretching to far horizons in every direction, with fields, forests, rivers, and even mountains in the distance. There was a sun, and clouds, and a blue sky overhead. But they had to be underground, Jake was convinced. It was like Jules Verne’s book “Journey to the Center of the Earth”, but without the dinosaurs. At least not yet, he thought.

 “Are you O.K., Kip? his Dad asked.

 “Sure, Dad…but…where are we?”

 “We will take you to an Explainer shortly,” one of the men interrupted. “By the way, the yellow crystal is called an Illuminator, and the green crystals are called Shapers. They allow us to change from regular form to miniature form and then back again. You are both probably familiar with the many legends and native mythologies around the world regarding tiny people like leprechauns, fairies, and pixies. Well, that’s us. We try to do our work unseen, but occasionally we get discovered. We secretly obtain important information on how humanity is doing – the good and the bad -- on Earth’s surface, then relay it back to our population in our world below. We use several major portals in cave systems around the world. In the United States, we use Mammoth Cave and Carlsbad Caverns. In Europe, we use Lascaux Cave in France, and in Iceland, we use Surtshellia. There are others used in Asia, Africa, South America, and Australia. There are two on every continent – except Antarctica – for a total of twelve portals.” The man speaking paused. “Look, here comes an Explainer now.”

 A man dressed in a home-spun wool tunic outfit, with flowing white hair and serene indigo eyes, approached Kip and Jake. He smiled reassuringly. One of the five men began to recount to the Explainer what had happened. “These two with us are still living beings. There was an accident on the surface, and one of our people was injured. We decided that the father and the boy had to come back with us so as not to cause a disturbance in their world. We couldn’t risk our world being revealed.”

 The Explainer sagely nodded and then spoke. “You have done the right and wise thing. You have kept our world safe and in harmony with the Creator’s wishes. The five of you can meet me here tomorrow at sun’s zenith. I will answer all of this pair’s questions, then you can return them to the surface.”

 After the five men said farewell and departed, Jake spoke first. “What did he mean when he said we were ‘still living beings’?” Jake asked. “He meant that neither you nor your son have died yet,” the Explainer replied. “By the way, what are your names?” After being told by Jake, the Explainer continued. “We really don’t use names here below anymore, so you can just call me Explainer. What I am about to tell you – to reveal to you both – will sound utterly unbelievable and fantastic, but I assure you that it is all completely true. Here are the basic facts: There is a parallel world underneath the surface of the Earth. It has been here since this planet was uniquely formed by The Creator billions of years ago. He made a special exception with the so-called universal laws of science here for us underground. The world above has its earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, and its floods and hurricanes. The world’s learned scientific minds over time have concluded that the Earth has a molten core, and that it could never harbor any life in the increasing heat and pressure as one goes deeper. But just look around you – they have been fooled by the Creator! Remember the Bible verse: ‘The kingdom of heaven is within’? Well, it is within – Heaven is within the Earth itself.”

 Jake and Kip looked around again, this time with more accute attention. They realized they were standing a few hundred feet up on a ridge, looking down into a valley. They saw what appeared to be an agrarian society from around a thousand years ago. They noticed men and women and livestock like cows and horses. They saw fields of crops and irrigation channels connected to streams and rivers. The sun was shining, and the weather was pleasant. No cities were apparent -- no factories, no automobiles, no tall buildings or steel bridges. Just small rural villages of stone or wood, connected by dirt roads. Wood smoke drifted lazily from some of the cottage chimneys.

 “Now, to directly answer your main question: All of the people who live here have died. In fact, all of the people who have ever lived on earth since the beginning of time are here now. When they died in the above world, they spent three days in peaceful transition in God’s blessed presence – kind of like a blazing yet totally loving golden-white light – then they appeared safely here where we are now. Any bad qualities or sins that they had during their lives have been permanently wiped away. Each person is met by an Explainer like me, and basically told what I am sharing with you now. Everyone here is here for eternity. If someone wants to leave our underground world and return to the world above through one of the twelve portals, they have that choice -- but because they are already dead, once they leave they are simply transitioned to black nothingness, alone forever. Consequently, I know of no one who ever desired to leave this special world.”

 “Do people get old here, or get diseases, or can they ever die again?” asked Kip.

 The Explainer smiled, his indigo eyes twinkling. “Good questions, my lad. You have a bright boy there, Jake! No, Kip, to all three of your questions. Men and women transition, then stay at age thirty here forever -- even if they died, let’s say, at age 90. If a child dies, they arrive here at the age they were when they died and never age. The marvelous thing, however, is that we retain all of our memories -- so for example if you died at age 100, you’ll enjoy all of your memories forever, yet in a healthy 30-year-old body. By the way, because we are spirit beings in flesh and blood bodies, we are asexual and cannot produce anymore children. Your Dad can explain more to you about that when you get older, Kip.”

 “What about technology?” asked Jake.

 “We have no need for it anymore,” replied the Explainer. We have no electricity, no computers, no cell phones. We know of their existence through our covert regular portal excursions, but we have all we need here already. We only need to eat one meal a day. We grow and harvest our own food, raise our own livestock, and fish and hunt using simple methods. There are no predatory animals or insect pests here. People can retain their former cultural languages, and we have blue Translator crystals that allow us to talk in any tongue. We also have a universal language, which is telepathically transmitted, should that be preferred. As you know, the world above is 30% land and 70% water; but here, those percentages are reversed. Hence – while we have plenty of both fresh and salt water – there can never be any overpopulation or famine or drought here. We have four mild annual seasons. We naturally have days of sun and days of clouds. We experience rain and snow. We rise at sun-up, work pleasantly and get our healthy exercise on our farms and in our villages during the day, then sleep after sunset. We are never idle or bored. Although we no longer need hospitals or medicines or schools or reading or writing, when we want to relax we simply gather and tell stories either from our former lives or from our imaginations. The need for ego or hatred or war or greed or prejudice is long extinct here. We are also in perfectly balanced harmony with our environment, so any pollution is unknown. People are still free to give thanks in their churches or temples or mosques here if they so desire. We realize now that all religions down through the millennia were simply people imperfectly striving to merge with the same one God-Creator. It was He who gave us humans this outstanding heavenly gift you see all around you. Come, my friends, let’s walk down to the nearest town together so you can get a better look.”

 “I have another question, sir,” asked Kim as they walked. “What about Jesus? Is he here?” Jake then added, “And what about Mohammad and Buddha, or Thomas Edison, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci? And how about history’s crazed mass-murderers and criminals like Caligula, Hitler, or Stalin?”

 The Explainer answered. “They are all here, both the former ‘cream of civilization” and its ‘dregs’. All are finally welcomed. All have been reborn. It is God’s wish and His mercy. You can use the pink Shifter crystals, which compress time and distance – allowing you to freely visit and wander anywhere in this world. You can meet Jesus, or any of your friends or relatives who have died once you come here to stay, Kip. Just remember: they will look as they did at age 30, so you might not recognize them right away, unless they died as children.” Turning to Jake, the Explainer added, “You might also like to know that our world begins about 50 miles beneath the Earth’s crust, and is about the size of roughly 90% of the total land and water acreage of the world above.”

 When they arrived at the village, it was humming with happy activity. The inhabitants were similarly dressed in belted tunics, leggings, and boots, though some of the women wore home-spun wool or cotton dresses. Children were playing or helping the adults with simple chores. There were a few scattered pets like dogs and cats, and several different animal pens with pigs, ducks, geese or chickens. Cows were being milked or were grazing in the fields. There was a blacksmith hammering orange-hot metal into various agricultural tools. The air smelled sweetly of dirt and dung and food cooking and wood smoke. Some of the townsfolk were chatting, or sharing directions for building or repairing, or laughing or singing. The overwhelming impression for Jake and Kip was of everyone smiling, healthy and content.

 The Explainer asked in a random cottage doorway if he could enter with some “temporary visitors” and perhaps share the one midday meal. The woman of the house greeted them and invited them in. “The food is almost ready, so make yourselves comfortable while I gather in the rest of the family,” she warmly added.

 Her family consisted of an adult Asian male from 3rd century China, an African adult female from 14th century Ethiopia, a Greek teen-aged boy from 506 B.C., and native American girl from 9th century Mesa Verde. The woman cooking the meal was an Incan from South America, circa 1100 A.D. Everyone gathered at a large wooden table in the center of the house. The meal was bountiful and delicious, with fresh-baked bread, roasted lamb, boiled potatoes, green beans, carrots, goats-milk cheese, crisp apples, walnuts, and honey. Because Kip and Jake were unable to telepathically communicate in the universal language of this subterranean world, a blue Translator crystal was placed in the center of the table. That way, the Palmer pair could ask questions and hear responses from all those present. When Kip asked, “Don’t you guys have any clocks around here?” the residents gently chuckled and explained how the sun and moon were all the timekeepers they needed. “We don’t need money or police officers or prisons here anymore either,” they added.

 After thanking the family and taking their leave, the Explainer took the Palmers around the rest of the village, meeting other random inhabitants as they explained their daily routines and division of labors. The father and son saw a grist-mill and a water-wheel channeling water into fields for irrigation. They watched carpenters, masons, weavers, bakers, butchers, shoemakers, basket-weavers, potters, and wooden cart-makers at work. They saw horses being harnessed to pull plows, and hay being cut for barn storage. Jake and Kip saw that everything moved with orderly purpose and well-planned efficiency.

 The event-filled day went by quickly, and before they knew it, the sun was setting orange and purple in the west. The birds sang their final day songs before nesting. The Explainer asked at another random cottage if three guests could spend the night. Jake and Kip thanked the Explainer and their hosts for comfortable straw-filled beds and quilted blankets before fading into a deep, deep sleep. A cream-colored moon rose and stars moved across the night sky as the pair dreamed about caves and crystals and little men…

 When roosters crowed at sunrise, Jake was greeted with a steaming mug of hot herbal tea, and Kip was given a large glass of fresh milk still warm from the cow. A friendly dog also delighted Kip with plenty of licks about the face as the boy lovingly petted and hugged it. A wooden basin of water and a towel helped the pair wash up.

 Jake and Kip volunteered to help with simple chores around the village until sun’s zenith – a time which we would call noon. That was when the Explainer asked the five men who brought the Palmers underground to meet and transport the pair back to the surface.

 “This is not really good-bye, but rather more of a farewell. We will meet again when your times come. I or another Explainer will meet you and set you up with a location and family group that you choose. Even though there are billions here living below, it’s still pretty much a small world, and we of course have all eternity to see each other sometime again, so don’t worry,” he laughed. The Explainer embraced Kip, then Jake. “Mankind’s fear and dread of death is over. God, in His infinite love and compassion, has seen to that. It is a gift so pure and incredible that it is totally beyond our comprehension. We can but simply and humbly thank Him.”

 The one of the five men took two pink crystal Shifters out of his pocket and gave one to Kip and the other to Jake. The familiar sensation of motion and colorful spectrum- sparkles returned, and along with that the minty air odor. Before they knew it, Jake and Kip were back near the musty portal entrance. An Illuminator crystal was produced by another of the men and the seven walked forward following the light.

 When the passageway finally narrowed and dim natural light was visible in the distance, the five men collected the pink crystals from the pair and also put the Illuminator away. “We won’t need to use our Shaper crystals to miniaturize again because we are not going any further than this spot. But we have one final task to perform.” One of the five men pulled out a red crystal. “This is called a Forgetter. I will place it on your forehead for a moment, in the area between your eyes and slightly above called your Third Eye. All that you have experienced since we first encountered each other will be erased from your memory. You will remember nothing of the world below.” First Jake, then Kip had the red crystal applied. Afterwards, when the father and son opened their eyes a moment later, the five men were gone, as were all associated memories of their remarkable experience.

 When the two Palmers exited the passageway, they saw Trudy waiting in the distance near the underground gift shop. They waved while they walked towards her.

 “Find anything interesting, guys?” Trudy asked. “We only have about ten more minutes before our tour group heads back to the surface.”

 “Yeah, Mom, we found a cool hidden tunnel, but it got too narrow and low for Dad to go ahead with me, so we had to turn around,“ Kip replied.

 “Well, I’m glad you did, because we just have a few minutes left to grab a snack. So…who’s up for some ice cream?” Trudy grinned.

 The End by Jack Karolewski

 5/28/15