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## *The Ferrens of Tar Kiln*

### **Abstract**

I can't expect you to believe everything I'm going to tell you. The story at least begins truly enough with a caving adventure one October day in Eastern Kentucky.



## The Ferrens of Tar Kiln

By

Charlie W. Starr

I

I can't expect you to believe everything I'm going to tell you. The story at least *begins* truly enough with a caving adventure one October day in Eastern Kentucky. Old U.S. 60 snakes its way through the upper half of the state from Ashland on the Ohio River through the foothills and on toward Lexington, Frankfort and Louisville beyond. It used to be the only way to travel through these parts till Interstate 64 cut a gash

through the Daniel Boone Forest back in the 70s. If you like the scenic route, though, and aren't afraid of who or what you'll run into, you might follow 60 down from Ashland and through Grayson on your way to Morehead. But before Morehead you'd find yourself in the little town of Olive Hill, known primarily for its frequent floods and Smokey's Truck Stop, a restaurant which got itself on one of those cable food channel

shows for its big hamburgers and homemade pies (the apple pie really is worth the trip).

Local cavers know that, in downtown Olive Hill, you turn South off 60, cross the creek and wind your way along till you come to a certain landmark. There you make a turn, go up the hill and over the hill and over a couple more till you find the dirt drive which takes you down to the farm where you'll park at the old barn to gear up for the day's adventure. This is, of course, after you've called Mark (and we'll just leave last names for another time) for permission.

Mark is a member of the local caving grotto—E.S.S.O. “Grotto” is the word you use for a club of cavers. My wife and I joined a few years back, but Mark has been exploring Tar Kiln cave since he was a kid. His family owns the farm and part of the land the cave runs through. Mark will tell you it's the longest cave in Elliott county. If you're serious about exploring it, you could spend a day inside (and still not get everywhere). Lots of people in the region have heard of Tar Kiln. The main entrance has sadly been a popular spot for young partiers who don't clean up after themselves. You can tell those less-than-serious cave explorers by their flip flops, beer cans and the fact that they mistakenly call the cave “Tark Hill.”

A road runs past the main entrance—just a dirt track now used by four wheelers and the occasional horse rider—a road which long before 64 or 60 or even a railroad used to be the only mode of long distance travel in the area. Mark isn't sure about the name, but he believes the name “Tar Kiln” traces back to the boiling of pine wood for the production of tar and turpentine—what folks used before petroleum. I suppose there might have been an industry associated with the cave in that way. Mark's tried to look into the history of the cave's name but hasn't

found anything definite.

## II

I parked between the barn and a row of hay bales that Autumn Saturday, a crisp morning and cloudy but not too cool and a promise of sunshine later—a good day for caving, especially with the fall leaves turning all silver and gold and red in the last ditches before winter sleep. My wife, Becky, parked next to me, our twin green and gold SUV's loaded with college kids. We piled out, drawing seven students with us. There wasn't an official “caving club” at the college or anything like that. Our daughter, Alli, was a student there in her senior year and she enjoyed caving, so together we just managed to drag another half dozen students with us who we were close to in one way or the other—mostly nerdy kids interested in doing something they'd never have a chance to do any other time: explore a wild cave.

“Gearing up,” which I mentioned before, amounts to putting elbow and knee pads over some clothes you don't mind getting wet or muddy, donning a helmet and hiking boots and double checking your light sources before putting on your gloves. Serious cavers wear high luminescent lights on their helmets, usually more than one. We managed to set up a few of the kids with make-shift headlights—headband lights duct taped to cheap helmets (the rest of them would have to use hand held flashlights). Despite having decent head gear ourselves, Becky and I still carried spare flashlights in our backpacks and several ziplock baggies full of batteries. While doling out bandanas (which you wear under your helmet for stability and sweat), I started to run short and one of the young men, Zach, was left with no choice but hot pink which he seemed to embrace with more enthusiasm than his girlfriend Jessie cared for. We also

managed to outfit the girls in some old industrial jumpsuits—the kind auto mechanics wear to keep their clothes clean. The suits were too big and made the ladies look a little frumpy but that just added some humor to the day's charm. Then, with everyone dressed and the hatchbacks shut, we headed west from the barn at the start of a mile-plus downhill trek to the cave.

Becky led the group across a small field—she likes to start out strong—and to a fence, part wood and part barbed wire, which you can only get past by climbing over. None of the kids seemed overly intimidated by the obstacle, and no sooner had I warned them about the “land mines” in the field below (cow patties) than Becky, Alli, Max and Mike were taking off down the steep slope of the cow pasture and heading toward the creek. Max is Alli's fiancé, but I don't hold that against him. He's a good kid. He actually graduated from the college last year and moved back home but came down because he loves caving. He brought his friend Mike with him for the same reason. Now Mike had never been in a wild cave before, but Max knew he'd love it too. As Alli explained it to me, “Mike is that kind of crazy friend people have who's actually trying to sign up to be a Navy Seal.” Well he was charging down into the fray as fast as he could. I smiled at his enthusiasm and held him back as well.

The cave guides in this instance (Becky and me), weren't in much of a hurry. This was because neither one of us was in the best of shape (unless, in my case, you count “round” as a shape), and the mile walk down to Tar Kiln would be followed—after hours of caving—by a mile walk back, all up hill, with this cow pasture, the last and steepest hill, being the final obstacle to our return. Besides, we had to walk a bit slowly because of the cargo Becky was carrying in her backpack.

At the bottom of the pasture is a creek. You can walk a trail alongside it for a while, but at some point you have to cross over to the other side or you'll walk right off a cliff you might not see coming. The water flow is narrow enough that a well placed rock allows you to cross the stream without getting your boots and socks wet (that'll come later).

The creek's other side had more trees. Their fallen leaves obscured any trail you might be looking for to the last downhill leg of the hike.

Two years ago I came to an important conclusion: Autumn leaves are more beautiful on overcast days than on sunny ones. There they are in all their fiery glory—like the leaves on these trees near a farm in Elliott County Kentucky—shining their own light, playing at *being* the sun when the *actual* sun has gone to rest behind gray clouds. When the sun is out, the two fires compete with each other. When the sun is hiding, the trees blaze with color, and you sense the nostalgic joy and pain of the fall. This year I decided that Autumn leaves are prettiest in Eastern Kentucky as well. It's the grass, you see. In my old home in Texas, the leaves aren't as pretty as further north, but the real difference is the grass. Texas Bermuda grass dies in the winter—it sits brown and ugly in yards and on hillsides. But the strong, willful bluegrass of Kentucky stays green year round. It just stops growing in winter so the mowers can take a break. Now you look out, then, at a distant green hill dotted with the oranges, yellows and reds of the fall leaves (sprinkled with the green of an occasional pine), and that contrast of colors, that beauty of the living and the fading away...well it just makes you think of a picture you've seen somewhere before, even if you can't remember when or where. It was that kind of “pretty” out—a perfect day for hiking and

caving.

We made our way along the hill on this side of the creek, crunching through untouched leaves, trying to divine our way along.

There's another barbed wire fence, one you can step over if someone pushes it down for you—this is the landmark you look for. From here you make your way down, the ridge above to your right, an emerging ravine below to your left, and soon you're afforded a nice view of the creek bed cliff I mentioned a minute ago and its trickling waterfall coming into view on your left. A massive black wall, a good sixty feet high, curving inward at its base so that, at first glance, you think that might be the entrance to the cave. It isn't, but that creek, pouring into that ravine, directly feeds one of the entrances to Tar Kiln. By the time you reach the ravine floor you come across it.

I told Becky to hold up.

"Alright, gang, be careful, but step through this narrow. Notice on the right these sink holes—those are signs that a cave is running beneath us. And over here on the left, then, if you look carefully down this pit you'll see the Water Fall Entrance to Tar Kiln."

"Dr. Starr, are we going to climb down there?" asked Jessie.

"It's a little more dangerous than I care to try," I said, "and besides we'd have a whole lot of crawling to do if we went that way than the other way I intend us to take. So don't worry, we're not going to enter Moria from here."

Everyone chuckled at this because we carry an ample share of nerd-dom in our company, and all these students were *Middle-earth* fans, especially Jessie (you remember, she's Zach's girlfriend—Zach of the hot pink bandana). Jessie's one of my Humanities majors (as are Alli and two of the others). She's a fair skinned, golden

haired young lady with pretty blue eyes behind big glasses (a geek stereotype I know, but it's true of her I swear) without which she might be as blind as a cave dwelling flying rodent. Definitely one of my geekiest. Boyfriend Zach as well: their idea of a date is a *Star Wars* movie and a game of D&D (my kind of fun). They make a cute couple, but they're currently that "annoying" kind of in love—the giggly, cuddly kind—that makes you wish football season would start or a Kung Fu movie would play on cable somewhere. For total brain power, though, you could do little better than these two.

The ravine widened and sloped gently down to the old dirt road. Once on it, we turned left through the valley, keeping an eye out for a certain outcropping of rock, the landmark for the entrance we wanted.

"Like a fairy-tale."

"I'm sorry?"

I was leading now, Becky about twenty feet behind. She was talking to Emily.

"The hills," she was saying, "the trees, the rocks, especially these giant boulders—I just want to climb on one and stare—I've always said this place was like something out of a fairy-tale."

"We don't have anything like this in Ohio," Emily answered. "It's like someone picked them up and just set them there."

"I think they're seats for giants," Becky said.

Emily is also one of my majors. Besides that she's Alli's roommate and my student assistant. A petite girl, she chopped her hair off after her freshman year—now it looks like something out of a *Gatsby* movie. It's nice, and so is she. Alli and Emily share the perfect physical feature for caving—tiny. When Alli was young and even smaller, we'd send her into the tight spaces in caves we were exploring—maybe not the most protective of parenting choices. I figured if

we wanted to know whether or not what was on the other side of those little holes was worth seeing, we send the person least likely to get stuck. It had always worked and was going to be helpful again on this trip.

My guess was that Max would most likely want to lead the charge into tiny places on the excursion, but having Alli in the troupe always made for a good backup plan. Her name's actually "Alathia"—it means truth. But "Alli" works for family and friends, and I've taken to calling her "Al" for years now. Not sure why, but I've always thought it was cool when a girl had a guy's name. There's probably something from Plato's *Symposium* in that, but it'd be too much of a digression to get into. Anyway, Alli could've married most anyone she wanted; I wouldn't have been a jerk of a father-in-law. But I actually *like* Max. He's courageous, and I think he'll watch out for my daughter. I admire the respect he's shown her over the last few years, and he's one of those tall, athletic kids who looks like he could hold himself in a fight. Not that the macho thing is a good definition of husband, *per se*. It's just that Max comes across as both strong and gentle at the right times, and I think that strength will translate into having a good relationship with his wife. We've taken him caving a few times, and he loves to jump in head first.

"Hey Charlie!" he called as I picked a path along the dirt road around ever present standing puddles. "Is that the entrance?"

That was literally the first time Max called me "Charlie." He was used to calling me Dr. Starr and was hoping to break the habit. He took a few English classes with me. Not a great student (just so you know I'm not a blind fan of the boy); Alli will have to check his grammar for a lifetime.

"No Max. Besides the correct outcropping to watch for, you can also look at the road ahead. See the little hill—that's

the only one the road runs over between here and the main entrance. Over there, to the left of the hill—that's our outcropping."

We left the road and walked up to and then over and around several boulders—more of Becky's furniture for giants—and down sharply into a sink hole. We stood before a hole in the cliff side most people would never know was there—a gash in the rock at our feet only a few feet high and perhaps twice as wide.

"Okay gang," I said, "this is the second 'Sink Entrance.' The first one is farther back that way and a tighter squeeze and longer crawl; we go in here. Turn your lights on and follow me."

### III

Following me meant stepping in and down for what was going to be a *crawl* to adventure—frankly my least favorite part of the journey. At first the floor is rocky and you're half-standing, half-crawling, using all four limbs to climb over the uneven terrain. Then you drop to your stomach to squeeze under a low ceiling, and then, at the T, turn left and down, and at the next T, turn right. Now you're on a much smoother, dirt surface. Then it's a steady crawl, with one left turn to make your way to the main passage, and you're in the cave called Tar Kiln.

Unfortunately, I missed the first left and went right instead. I was in the lead, and there was a train of eight other people following me, many of whom had never gone into a cave let alone crawled into a small space like this, and I had already gotten them lost. I had literally forgotten about the first T's existence (and it's not really a true T—hard to explain). I crawled down the passage I thought I was supposed to be in; it started to get smaller than I remembered. There was a lot of drift wood I didn't remember as well—proof that this

entire cave could flood on a rainy day (yes, it was overcast outside, but the chances of rain were zero—at least according to my I-Phone—and the sun was due out any time). I got down to the end of the little tunnel I was in and was, by that time, crawling on my stomach, not my hands and knees. I did find an entrance into the cave, but it was too small. People could fit through it, but it just wasn't what I remembered, and I wasn't sure I could be one of those people who squeezed through. I told everyone to hold their place, and I backed up to a spot where I could sit up. I pulled out my copy of the Tar Kiln map and looked at it, seriously considering the possibility that flooding had brought silt into the cave, filling our entrance, and ending any chance we had of getting inside. Then I had a flash of genius.

"Hey Al!" I called.

"Yeah," came an unseen voice echoing in the back of the train.

"Come check this out. I don't know if I've made a wrong turn or things have changed."

Alli had been in this cave many times. I figured she was small enough to get through the hole I'd just seen, and she might be able to get her bearings in the cave and then find the real entrance or else confirm my fear that we'd found it already and couldn't get through. Long part of the story short: she crawled down the little tunnel, followed by Mike, who had no intention of being turned around at this point in our adventure. I didn't think he could squeeze through that hole. I was completely wrong. He was muscular, but also skinny, if that makes sense. A real athlete, anyway. Alli called back to me from inside the cave, having a look around. Meanwhile, she had sent Mike through a hole to see if he could find us. He did.

'Great start to leading the group, Charlie,' I thought. But at least our journey was back

on, and the goal I'd set for this excursion—an area of the cave I'd yet to explore—was still intact.

If you're five foot ten, you can't quite stand up straight when you first enter the main passage, so I stepped to the right a bit where I *could* stand upright and turned to wait for the others to join me. Paul came and stood beside me and started pulling an electric lantern out of his backpack. A bit awkward, but it gave off a lot of light.

Now Paul may be the most interesting real-life person to put into a story, but I swear I'm not making this up. He's probably a genius for starters. It fits his appearance: tall and thin with a 'fro of curly, brown hair and a generally shy, quiet disposition. He usually wears holey jeans and T-shirts and avoids shoes whenever he can. He hardly ever takes a note in class but can pull facts out of his head like out of an internet search engine. I suspected something early when I saw him spending all his time in my classes making Origami paper cranes while listening to my lectures, something I think he did his entire freshman year. Eventually several thousand cranes made their way to the ceiling of the Smith building at the college, dangling from more strings than I could count. My suspicions about Paul's intelligence were probably confirmed when he took up the challenge in comp two class of writing an analysis of Coleridge's enigmatic poem, "Kubla Khan," something even I wouldn't try to do! The paper was brilliant. I read six hundred freshman comp papers a year. I hardly ever remember them let alone praise their excellence. Paul's paper was amazing. And as I think about it, I suppose the topic from his freshman year was apropos of his joining this little caving excursion in his senior year:

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea....  
It was a miracle of rare device,  
A sunny pleasure-dome with caves  
of ice!

The Khan, Kubla could've easily built his  
Xanadu in Eastern Kentucky.

The others made their way into the main  
passage and gathered round. Becky brought  
up the rear—it's called "tail gunning"—to  
make sure no one freaked out in the smaller  
passage. Many who thought they weren't  
claustrophobic have found out otherwise on  
their way into Tar Kiln, and Becky has had  
to save a novice or two from their own  
paralyzing fear. So first we checked to make  
sure no one was crying (everyone seemed  
okay for the moment). Then I pointed to a  
little pile of rocks on the floor which Alli  
was rebuilding.

"That, children, is what we call a  
'cairn.'" It was put there to mark the exit.  
Along this main passage you'll find a  
number of holes in this side-wall which lead  
to some interesting rooms and domes, but  
only this one gets you back out. There are  
other exits from the cave but each of those  
presents its own challenges, and this one is  
the one you now know about."

The more stand-up-able part of Tar Kiln  
runs roughly west-to-east, with a good  
amount of meandering included, the main  
entrance being on the east end and the water  
flow running in that direction. We had  
entered on the south side, and I was now  
facing that direction.

"Okay, and now let me explain how this  
works." I pointed to my right. "The more  
you go that way (roughly west), the lower  
the ceiling tends to get—the more bending  
over and eventually crawling you'll have to  
do. The more you go that way," pointing to  
my left, "the higher the ceiling tends to get  
and the easier your stroll through the cave.  
We're going to try to stay together, but if

you do feel the urge to wonder off, don't do  
it by yourself. The first thing I want to do,  
though, is take us to the Picnic Room. We  
can drop off our backpacks there and move  
on.

"Charlie." Becky walked up to me at that  
point and lifted her backpack. I thought I  
knew what she was doing: opening the mesh  
pouch to let the dog out. And I mean that  
literally. She did, in fact, open up the pack to  
pull out our five pound Chihuahua/Rat  
Terrier mix, a mostly white haired little girl  
with two brown spots on her back (though  
they were starting to migrate onto her tail  
and butt in her middle age) and brown  
patches on her eyes and face. Her official  
name was Phydeaux (pronounced Fido—it's  
the Cajun spelling), but Becky refused to  
call her that because, as she explained it,  
"I'm not going to have a girl dog with a  
boy's name." So Becky insisted on Deaux-e  
(Doe-ee), and nicknames like "Dodo,"  
"Dodders," and "Dog Breath" have since  
abounded. Anyway, Deaux is a caving dog  
and enjoys being underground. Becky had  
carried her down the long trail to get here,  
but now let her loose. She started sniffing  
around as soon as she hit the floor. But that  
was not the reason Becky had approached  
me.

"Jessie's having a little claustrophobia,"  
she quietly said.

So I'd been a little bit wrong on my  
initial evaluation. Max and Mike were ready  
to charge into the underworld, with Paul  
close behind, but we needed to take it easy.

I nodded and said, "Okay, everyone, let's  
start an easy walk in that direction," and I  
pointed to the eastern or bigger end of the  
cave.

As the boys took off with Alli, Becky and  
Emily, Deaux-e's little tail wagging along  
ahead, I dropped back beside Jessie and  
Zach. She was a little wide-eyed, but was  
never one for hysterics.

“You okay?” I asked.

And she replied, “I am now that I’m in a bigger space.”

“You wanna be in here?” I continued.

“No, but as long as I can stay in a space like this, I think I can handle it.”

And so she did. For the rest of the trip, she walked the lengths of the main passage with us but didn’t take any smaller ones till we had to exit and there was no choice.

We walked, then, two hundred yards or so down to the Picnic Room. As you walk this stretch of Tar Kiln, you make a double S-curve set of turns. I had to tell the guys that the side passages they really wanted to look at would come later. We passed the entrance to the Black Rock passages—we’d come back to that—and then the key hole, which is easy to miss (especially walking in this direction), but kept pressing on till a straight-away took us into the Picnic Room.

This is the largest chamber in this part of Tar Kiln. There’s a huge slab of a rock on the floor from a “breakdown” (when part of the ceiling falls) which is big enough to sit a dozen or more people on—that’s the Picnic Table. It’s at a slight angle but is otherwise flat enough so you can climb up and sit on it. I explained all this to the kids (when you’re 51, anyone in their twenties is a kid), at least except for the part about the ceiling caving in, and then told them to drop their backpacks on the Picnic Table. We’d come back here later for lunch (which consisted of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, a Lays Variety Pack of chips, and a box of Little Debbie Oatmeal Cream Pies—all dished out among the various backpacks at the beginning of the trip).

“Now check your packs,” I said, “for your spare flashlights or anything else you might need. We want to take those with us.”

We turned, then, and went back in the direction we’d just come from. Jessie and Emily were helping Becky count bats—she

likes to keep track and report the numbers to the grotto.

“Has that white fungus attacked here?” Paul asked. I was surprised he knew about it; most non-cavers don’t. Then I wasn’t surprised he knew. It was Paul.

Becky answered: “Yes, we’re sorry to say it has. It’s called ‘White Nose Syndrome.’ It irritates the bats and wakes them up during their winter hibernation. They go looking for food and can’t find any and end up dying.”

“It came from Europe,” I added.

“Yes,” Becky went on. “It came over from Europe, and it’ll probably kill eighty or ninety percent of the bats over here. We haven’t been able to go into a lot of caves for a long time because of quarantines. But now that the disease is everywhere, they’re starting to open back up.”

“Hey, Dr. Starr.”

“Yeah, Emily.”

“What’s the cave like in winter?”

“It is exactly like this. Once you’re a few feet inside any entrance, the temperature outside the cave has no effect on the temperature inside. The cave interior remains a constant 54 degrees.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, well 52 or 54. I can never quite remember.”

“So sometimes we go caving in winter,” Becky added.

“But if you get wet, the walk back to your car can be chilly,” I said. “Ah, here we are.”

#### IV

About half way between the picnic room and the entrance cairn I stopped us. Half way up the north wall, just a little below my head level, was a hole called the Key Hole, this because...well...it looks like a key hole—one of those old-fashioned kind.

I pointed the tiny hole out to the others,

told them what it was called, and then said, “And you all are going to get a chance to crawl through that.”

Mike and Max thought that was awesome. Emily went “Whoa, through that?!” Jessie shook her head and Deaux-e sniffed Alli’s boots, wondering why they smelled like Becky (Alli was borrowing one of her mom’s pair of boots).

To assuage fears I quickly said, “Oh, you’re not going to crawl in through there, you’re going to come out from what starts as a much larger entrance. But I wanted you to see your exit, first. Now we’re going to walk about thirty feet that way to see how you can get to this point.”

We walked down to another hole, this one something of a crack at the bottom of the wall, but still taller and wider than the hole I’d just shown everyone.

“Alright, gather round. Now this will be just a quick little adventure for anyone who wants to try it. If you don’t want to” (looking at Jessie), “you don’t have to. This is the entrance to the Black Rock passage. If you stoop down and step in here and then make your way along the wall to the right, you’ll be behind this wall”—I patted the north wall of the main passage—“and making your way a short distance to the key hole. Now you will see a passage go off to your left. Do not take that. If you do you’ll be in the Black Rock passage and could get really lost back there.”

“And never be seen again,” Zach quipped.

“And the rock on that side—the walls—really are completely black,” Alli explained.

“Yeah,” I went on, “so just stay to the right, and then you’ll get a chance to squeeze through the tiny Key Hole—a cool caving experience, right?”

Actually I’d never done it myself. One of my handicaps as a caver is bad shoulders. Both have dislocated multiple times and the

left one has had four surgeries to correct the problem (it got so loose that I could sneeze or pull the sheet up in bed the wrong way and pop it out of the socket). There’s a particular way to get through the Key Hole which involves putting both arms in front of you—I’m not sure my arms wouldn’t pop out in that position.

Everyone wanted to do it but Jessie, Becky and me. The dog didn’t care. So I sent them in, and the rest of us went back to the Key Hole to wait. Zach was the first one through. Jessie was happy to see his helmet light shining through the hole. As I said, the Key Hole is half way up the wall, so I could stand there and see straight in.

“Okay Zach,” I said, “Here’s how you wanna do this: turn on your left side and reach forward with both your arms. Start worming yourself through the best you can and then look here where I’m tapping—get to this point by squirming and then you have a hand hold to grab so you can pull yourself through the rest of the way.”

He did great. Of course when you pull yourself through, you’re halfway up a slanted wall. So you need to keep holding on to let yourself down. I stood by to spot anyone who needed to avoid falling on their head. Everyone else made it well enough. As Alli was coming through last someone said, “Alli you’re being born again--,” and “Squeeze on through” or something like that. I then said, “I can see the head, Mrs. Tar Kiln. Push!” That got a chuckle. I grabbed Alli by the hand and helped her out and another small part of the adventure was complete.

“Okay, back to the Black Rock passage,” I said. “Grab your maps, and let’s take a look.”

“I don’t think I’m gonna go,” said Becky. “My fibro’s acting up a bit. This’ll be a good time to rest.”

Becky has fibromyalgia. People have

only been hearing about it for a decade or so. It hit Becky about that long ago. Her body isn't under attack or being wounded, but her nerves keep telling her brain she's in pain. It comes and goes, often with changes in the weather, but that's not always a definite predictor. She always has a little pain. But unfortunately she often has a lot. Anytime she goes caving is a choice for her to do something pretty extraordinary, and I really admire her courage for that. We pray about it all the time, but this thorn in the flesh hasn't seemed too quick to remove itself just yet. Becky holds onto II Corinthians 12 when the pain is particularly bad: "My strength is made perfect in weakness."

"Deaux-e and I will go back to the Picnic Room and get the lunch things out," Becky decided.

Jessie wanted to go with her, and Zach, though he wasn't feeling shut in, was commenting on how much he enjoyed the sun. He decided he'd stay out in the main passage too. But they didn't leave till they looked at our plan of attack on the map.

So let me try to describe the two Black Rock passages to you, and then you'll get a sense of what we were in for. Basically, north of the main cave passage runs another, narrower corridor. It never grows very wide. It breaks off from the main cave at one end—down near the Water Fall Entrance—and rejoins later, right at the spot where the water begins to deepen, as I mentioned before. The passage never narrows so much that you have to turn your body to get through it, but it does give you a feeling like you're making your way through the passages of a maze. As with the main passage, the Black Rock is a crawl down near the Water Fall Entrance and gradually raises its ceiling as it moves east so that large parts of it can be walked through, though with a fair amount of stooping over.

Sometimes this "first" Black Rock passage runs close to the main cave, sometimes it drifts further north away from it. Besides the two ends, it connects back to the main passage twice, including at the entrance near the Key Hole where we were now standing. The passage is actually several feet from the main, but it suddenly turns toward it as if purposely made to do so. If you're looking at the map which gives you the view of the cave from above, you see that the passage turns toward the main cave at an angle, connects to it, then turns away at the same but opposite angle (in a kind of V shape) but also continues on apart from this split so that the whole connecting passage looks like an upside down letter A (again, from the map's-eye point of view). This entrance, anyway, is the easiest way into the Black Rock passage. It puts you roughly in the middle of it.

But now the description gets more complicated. There is a second Black Rock tunnel. At its western end, the Black Rock is some distance from the main cave. But a hundred feet or so along it splits. The first passage, the one I just described, begins to draw near the main cave. The second passage, however, curves north and runs away from the first, further into the hill than any part of the cave. Eventually this second Black Rock channel dips down till it meets the first passage again, just before it connects to the main passage at its eastern end.

Imagine going hundreds of feet underground through a hole you have to crawl thirty feet along just to get to where you can stand up again. Then imagine crossing that big passage and finding another tiny hole to crawl through. There you find another corridor, further away from the light of day—deeper under the earth—a very long but narrower tunnel whose ceiling shrinks in the west to a belly crawl. Imagine then finding yet a third passageway, one you

can only get to a long way around. There in that even smaller tunnel, three layers back, if you will, from the light of the sun, the freedom of open air—there in that labyrinth you learn a new definition of the dark. The third tunnel back, that second Black Rock passage far under hill—that was my goal for this expedition. I had explored the first Black Rock passage before. And yes it's true I had a map for reference and others had been there before me, but that far passage was my unseen territory, and I intended to conquer as much of it as I could.

We checked our copies of the map, and I made the decision to head east through the more open half of the tunnel. There was a fair amount of stoop-walking, but the path was generally easier and a bit more upright. I kept my eye on the map. First I watched for a sharp right turn, followed by an immediate left. Then after a straight-a-way there's a fork—straight on to a dead end or right to continue. A gentle curve left and another right and back around to the left—here we were just on the other side of a wall from the Picnic Room (again, according to the map), though we couldn't see it or hear anyone on the other side. But then the corridor continued left and away from the main cave. A few more feet and we came to a triple fork: right and away, or straight to a T, or left through a narrow tunnel. Right and away would take you to the end of the Black Rock tunnel. The narrow passage on the left, or a left at the end of the T ahead were both entrances into the second Black Rock passage. Max and Mike took off, leaving the rest of us behind. I had made sure they knew how to get back to the main cave if they lost us, and Max had been in the first Black Rock passage with me a year ago. I wasn't too worried about them. The girls and Paul chose to crawl through the narrow passage because it was less wet. I chose to slosh through the wider T passage and in only a

handful of seconds met them on the other side.

And yes, that was the moment water filled my boots for the first time this trip. There's a phrase in our language called "crossing the Rubicon." It's an allusion from history about passing a point of no return. Cavers know they've crossed that point the moment they feel the icy water of a cave flood their boots. In this instance, we'd crossed another point too, into the second Black Rock tunnel.

It didn't do Alli, Emily and Paul much good to take the narrow passage. They only avoided water for a few extra seconds. I heard the "Oh" and "Ah, that's colds" ahead of me, as they hit their first calf-deep pool. I smiled and called out, "If your feet aint wet, you aint cavin' yet." Yes, English teachers use slang words. I think the wetness and cold took Paul by surprise, and he lost his earlier enthusiasm.

We eventually caught up to Max and Mike (only because they stopped to wait for us) and walking became stooping for most of the way. At what I calculated to be the approximate halfway mark into the passage, it became a crawl. We didn't know how open the rest of the tunnel would be. Max and Mike went on ahead to find out. The girls and Paul followed at a slower pace. And I made a decision:

"Hey Al!" I called.

"Yeah!"

"I think I have to call it for myself. Now that it's a crawl I think I better start heading back while I still have some energy!"

"You know, working out could help with that!"

"Yeah, yeah."

Alli is worried about me dying young. I'm out of shape, and I make up for it by not eating right either. The good news in my daughter's quip: it's obvious she loves me. So...I did something right...married

someone who could raise kids well. Anyway, I'd been doing alright this trip. My "taking it slow" strategy had worked fine. But I knew I had limits and knew I'd better turn around. The kids had maps, Alli and Max had been here before, and Alli knew the main passage pretty well.

Okay, it was probably not the best choice for a guide to make, but I didn't want my limitations to hold the young ones back. In the end they did find their way back with no problem (Max and Mike even made it all the way through the back passage), and the choice to return alone was...well, if I hadn't done it, I'd have had no reason to write any of this down. I turned back to make the exit journey. Physically it was a good call. Walking that far, bent over, was starting to labor my breathing.

The sharpest turn in the second Black Rock passage is also the furthest under the mountain (foothill, really, but mountainous enough for us). As I started to make the right turn there on my way out (keep in mind I was walking stooped over, staring mostly at the floor), I caught a glimpse of something that shouldn't have been there. In fact it couldn't have been there before. None of us had seen it on the way in (which frequently happens in a cave—something you miss going one direction is clearly visible going the other). There to my left was a good sized opening. It wasn't on the map. For a minute I even wondered if I was tired and just seeing things, that I'd misjudged what I was capable of doing. But I never hallucinate (at least not so far). I looked behind me and thought about calling the others. I also thought about just marking it on the map and going back as I'd planned—an expedition for another day.

It's really important that I convey just how unusual this was, even at this point of making a decision. If there's a "caving code," one of its rules is "Don't go caving

alone," and another is "Don't leave your group, especially if you're the guide!" But then there's also this: just as I call myself an intermediate caver, I also judge myself a man of intermediate courage when underground. Going into an unexplored cave passage, one not even on the map, was not something I would typically do without someone more experienced (like Mark) in the lead. In hindsight, I wonder if the peace and calm I was feeling at the time weren't born of...well...a bit of magic. At any rate, that I turned and headed down the passage was, for me, remarkable. Yet it was nowhere near as surprising as what I found there.

## V

The tunnel ran straight, and the ceiling rose almost immediately. I was able to stand and freely move down the corridor. I easily walked another fifty feet if not more. How could something this substantial be missing from the map? Half of me knew I should be turning back. You don't go caving on your own (though Mark once admitted to me he'd done it as a kid), and you don't leave the people you're guiding, especially without telling them. But the other half of me felt no fear. I should've been cautious, even a little nervous, but there was a calm come over me I couldn't explain. I forgot about what I should've done and lost all track of time.

The tunnel cut to a sudden right—the wall at almost a right angle; it hardly seemed natural. What came next *definitely* wasn't. The passage turned upwards at a steep angle. I wouldn't have been able to climb it but for the stairs. That's right, stairs. And they hadn't been carved by the slow working waters of Mother Nature. Their angles were even, their lines true. They had been cut with instruments and the chipped pieces removed.

"Are you serious?" I asked no one and then mounted the stairs.

I counted 33 steps. At the top, the

corridor continued straight, but the walls were smooth and square. This tunnel was artificial, and whoever had carved it had cared about its being level and having right angles. It went on perhaps another twenty feet before it came to a dead end. A big rectangle of smooth, flat wall stood before me. Or not completely smooth: there was writing on it. Five lines of carvings to be exact. The top line—a couple feet above my head—looked like old Norse runes (or something like it). The second line seemed more... I don't know... *advanced*? Like cursive carved into the rock but in letters I'd never seen before. The third line, though, seemed primitive again. It was pictographic, like Native American cave drawings. The fourth line was definitely in Latin. I don't know Latin, but I recognize it when I see it. A phrase in block letters. I'm pretty sure they (and probably all the others) meant the same thing as the fifth line which was the real shocker. It was written in English. Just two words but in some form of calligraphy. They said, "Knock Thrice."

You know how, in all the horror movies, this would be the part where the audience would be screaming, "Don't knock! Whatever you do, don't knock on that wall!"? That voice of fear was completely gone from me. My calm had become peace and was bordering on the delight of wonder. I touched the wall and ran my fingers over the letters just to make sure they were real. Then I took off my thick glove (it seemed the polite thing to do), and I knocked on the wall, one, two, three times. My bare knuckles against the solid slab hardly made a noise. Still I stood there with a sense of expectation.

A minute or two passed. Then the utter silence was broken by a pop. I jumped but quickly recovered. The pop was followed by a hissing sound and sand and dust blew out from an emerging rectangular seam. Stone

quickly grated against stone as the wall began to swing away from me. A door of solid stone opened up, inviting me in.

I was still underground, but the round chamber in which I found myself was clearly handmade, not part of a natural cave. The walls were lined with wooden shelves, and two more rows of shelves ran through the middle. Oak barrels filled the corners, some standing on end, others on their sides and stacked pyramid-like with shelves on either side to hold them in place. A few of these had wooden spigots in them. I saw copper pots and iron pans on one shelf and mugs and cups of wood or silver on another. Most of the shelves were filled with burlap sacks or pouches of a finer material—something like silk—and these seemed to be filled with food-stuffs: oats and salt and perhaps ground wheat. Other shelves had food simply sitting out on them: apples and pears, and dried fruits as well. I saw onions and potatoes, radishes and carrots, wheels of cheese and glass jars filled with honey. There was butter on a dish and some dried meats hung on hooks. Another row of hooks were draped with dried tobacco leaves. Still another held a string of garlic cloves, thyme, basil leaves and other dried plants I couldn't recognize. I suddenly felt hungry. I didn't dare touch a thing.

"Well?"

The voice came from nowhere and I was again briefly startled.

"Uh," I said, profoundly. "Hello?"

"Yes, come along then, I don't cotton to strangers nosing about in ma cellar. Come, up the stairs lad, so we won't be strangers anymore."

I finally saw a set of wooden stairs at the other end of the room. That's where the voice had come from. I should have been scared. I should've turned around and gone to fetch the others. Instead I was utterly delighted and crossed the room without a

second thought. I looked up the stairs. I saw a hand rise, fingers outspread.

“What manner of creature are you who sheds a greater light from his head than any of the fairest I’ve ever known?”

“What? Oh, the headlamps. Sorry.”

I took off my helmet and shut the lights off. My eyes took a moment to adjust, but then I was clearly able to make out a figure at the top of the stairs. He (the voice was certainly masculine) was holding a candle.

“Ah, there you are. A man after all, is it? Well come up and introduce yourself. We trade on manners here.”

Again without hesitating, I ascended the stairs. From the bottom of the staircase the figure had looked imposing, but as I climbed his stature shrank. I smiled to find the commanding voice belonging to a person who came well short of four foot six. I couldn’t yet see him clearly for the darkness of the hallway I was approaching. But he quickly remedied that.

“Come, sir, to the library. Plenty of light in the afternoon. Let’s have a good look at you!”

‘Library!’ I thought. Now I was excited (what can I say, I’m an English teacher). I stooped through the door and found myself in a cozy hallway, the ceiling a half foot above my head. The floor was of packed earth but the walls and ceiling were paneled with wood. At the far end was a wooden door in which was a tiny round window, like a porthole. Through this a small amount of light entered. My host led with his back turned to me so I still didn’t get a good look at him. His pants might have been made of wool from what I could tell. There was a roughness to their texture. They were brown, I think, and tucked into a pair of shin-high boots. His shirt was white, definitely made of cotton, with loose, almost billowy sleeves. And he wore a red vest which had a bit of a sheen to it like satin or silk, but it

was sturdier. I don’t know, I’m lousy with fabrics. He had a tousle of hair on top of his head, but the sides and back were straight and long—two thin braids fell over his shoulders in front and one down the middle in back. My first thought was ‘mullet’ but then I decided he was pulling it off without any kind of an 80s air.

Near the end of the hall he opened a door to the left. The handle and hinges were wrought iron—black. I had to stoop to enter behind him, but, again, the ceiling was high enough to let me stand straight. A large paned window invited the sun to light the space up, and I blinked to again adjust my eyes. As my host blew out the candle and crossed to a table, I took in the room. While the hallway had seemed a mix of frontier rustic and old English inn (like the man’s outfit, I quickly decided), this room had the inn’s charm but a natural otherness difficult to explain. The furniture was all of wood, but none of the pieces were fit into right angles. Three small chairs near a fireplace had curving backs, armrests and legs. Even the seats were round about the edge and concave on the surface. There were bits of lattice work filling in the back, and similar lattice—like vines weaving in and out of each other—running up in columns on the walls and carved into the wooden table from which my host was removing a large chair—obviously for me. But the lattice forms weren’t woven in straight crisscrossing angles. I recognized the ancient shapes which appear in what’s called a Celtic knot. I’m sorry I can’t explain it better than that, but if you look it up you’ll see what I mean. Oh, one other thing: the wood in the furniture and on the walls and ceilings varied in colors—it wasn’t all dark and lacquered. Shiny, yes, but also with lighter woods—beige here, even ivory there.

“Here you are, lad. Come have a sit next to the fire. You look a bit cold with those

wet boots.”

“Oh my boots,” I realized. “I must’ve tracked mud all over—”

“Now, now. Not to worry, not to worry. We may stand on manners but we’re not too much on formality. Have ’em off if you like. Won’t be a bother.”

“We?”

“Ah, yes. Well nowadays that’d be me, myself and the four-leggeds wouldn’t it.”

I sat in the chair, feeling the warmth of the fire to my left, and the little man took a smaller one in front of me. Normal people would’ve sized him up (no pun intended) immediately. I, of course, first took a look at his books. It was indeed a library with shelves lining all the free walls. The books were ancient: bound by hand in leather dyed red, gold and green (like the colors of the hillsides coming down to Tar Kiln cave), with gold filigree in twisting lines (like the Celtic knot again) on the spine. None of them were titled (or if they were, it was in symbols I didn’t know which looked more like pictographs than letters).

Then I turned my attention to the magical little man before me, as he had been focusing his attention on me. A wry smile and a penetrating look were on his face. His eyes gleamed in the firelight but without any Poe-ian malice. Of his clothing I got little more detail. The breaches were belted and buckled—a brass buckle. The vest was fastened with leather ties, not buttons. His face was clean shaven, and while his cheeks were round, the overall appearance of his face was more angular—arrow like but never sharp. His whole presence suggested two qualities at once: earthiness and otherworldliness. His very build was lithe, almost catlike—a graceful presence—save for his feet which seemed a bit large in the boots he wore—larger than his frame called for, and round and flat. I might’ve said he was dressed like a Kentucky frontiersman

from the late 1700s, but he bore himself like a nobleman from the court of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. There was indeed a magic about him.

Then he began the conversation: “You’re not him.”

“I’m sorry?”

“The little boy, all grown up. Little feller who used ta crawl about down in the cave by himself. Came this way a time or two.”

“No, sir, I’m not him,” I said.

“Good lad, him. Quiet and well mannered.”

There was an awkward moment of silence where we just stared at each other.

“Not very talkative, though, are ya?” he continued.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I’m just a little overwhelmed. You’re not on the map.”

“Map? What map?”

“The Tar Kiln map. The map of the cave.”

I pulled my slightly muddied map from a pocket and, unfolding it, handed it to him. He took it from me with an eager hand and poured over it with a delighted smile.

“Oh that’s well done,” he said. “Very well done. Not very artfully done, mind you, but accurate to a fault.” He moved to hand it back. “I don’t suppose I can keep it?”

“Oh, uh, sure, I can find my way back...I think.”

“Ah, my sincerest thanks, son, truly.” He looked at it admiringly. “You’re right. I’m not on the map. I’m right in front of you. The most interesting things often are.”

I smiled. “Sorry. I meant your home—the tunnel and the stairs leading here from the Black Rock passage—none of it’s on the map.”

“Just as well,” was his cryptic reply. “But what brings ya, then?”

“I’m in the local caving grotto...or club. People in the area who like to explore caves.”

“Ah, an adventurer, then!”

“Well, not much of one. I teach over at the college in Grayson and brought some of my students over for a *little* adventure. Most of them won’t ever visit the caves in the years they’re here and won’t have any to explore themselves when they get home.”

“So you’re a teacher.”

“Yes.”

“A fine and noble profession.”

“Oh, thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. And does the teacher have a name?”

“Starr. Charlie Starr.”

“Starr. Hmm. An ancient name. A strong name. And Charles, is it?”

“Well—”

“A kingly name that, though not so old. Can’t be more than sixteen or seventeen hundred years old a name like that—in its derivatives at least.”

“And you, sir? I’m talking with Mr...?”

“Tucks!” His smile beamed. “Tucks is my name. The Tucks are my kin. Tucks were we, an age ago, and a Tucks am I, the last o’ them.”

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Mr. Tucks, but—”

“Gabby.”

“Uh, well you are talkative.”

“No, my name. Gabriel Tucks” (though he emphasized the last syllable not the first). “A fine name too, both ancient and new—well not new to you but to all the Tucks and other little families too. ‘Gabby’ to my friends, and I can tell that you and I will be fast friends, Charlie. Fast friends indeed, if only for an hour or two.”

“Speaking of ‘hour,’ I should probably be getting back to my wife and the others I brought. They don’t know I’m here and—”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” Gabby answered. “They won’t miss you a moment, I promise.”

And for some reason I believed him

completely.

“Besides,” he went on, “I believe I can entice you.”

“Oh?”

“It doesn’t take the magic of the Fair Ones to recognize a lover of a good cup of tea when a fella sees one. You’ve got the look.”

I opened my mouth in both wonder and joy.

“All these coffee drinkers in the new world these days. It’s so a man can’t find a decent tea or the finest honey and cream to put in it. Whence the English of old America, eh? Where’d they go?”

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed (and then felt bad for using the Lord’s name a little in vain—part of it was a praise though).

“What!” Gabby cried back and looked around. “Am I on fire!”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Y’apologize too much.”

“Sorry... I mean, it’s just that I feel the exact same way about tea and coffee you do. There are so few of us left.”

“Aye, well, there are even fewer of me, and the few of us had better stick together.”

After that, we were talking like we were old friends. No sooner had he said, “tea” than there was a pot boiling on the fire, fine china cups laid out besides a jar of crystal, gold honey, and the most amazing tea cakes, loaded with fresh butter—easily a quarter inch thick I kid you not—I’d ever tasted. Gabby’s idea of a tea was more like our idea of a full meal. The cakes were accompanied by cheeses and fruits and sausages (venison, he said). I’d wondered at first if my tea cup would be more in keeping with his tiny stature but quickly found his cup (and plate and helpings) fit more a person of my size. In fact I couldn’t keep up with the speed or volume of his eating, even though he did most of the talking (between mouthfuls).

“You just mentioned ‘fair ones,’ Gabby.

Like the fair folk of old?"

"Oh, he *has* got some learnin' this teacher does, hasn't he?" he winked. "In truth I know what you're thinkin' Charlie and you're almost right. But I'm meanin' something much older than the stories you're imaginin'. It was the Fair Ones which brought the twelve families to the West in the first place. So long ago you have no dates fer't. They it was who first found the Tark Hill and brought us to it.

"I'm sorry, the Tark Hill? You mean Tar Kiln."

"Oo-hoo, so he thinks he knows something of history, does he? I'm not talking about your Civil War days from just last week, boyo, with your pitch and ovens. I'm talking about the old times. I'm talkin' 'bout Tarks. Nasty creatures. Big as a house. Well a little'uns house anyway. Used to eat the local wildcats for breakfast—and that was back when the cats was a head taller than you standin' on all fours. Slimy tongues and scaly skin—there was dragonish blood in 'em fer certain, I tell you. It was a fearful battle taking the caves below, destroying their putrid den. We lost one of the Fair Ones to it and three from the families, including the head of the Tucks clan. In the end we had to burn them out of those "Black Rock" passages as your map calls them—back when they was one giant cave till the battle collapsed most of the rock and the water since ran the walls smooth. But I'm gettin' ahead of m'self. You asked of the Fair Ones."

His eyes glazed over with memory, and he sat back to tell a tale far older than even the one he'd just told. By the hints he gave, I guessed it was thousands upon thousands of years ago that the twelve families, a clan of tiny people living in what might have been Northern Europe or even England—I couldn't be sure—were chased from their homes by "bigguns," by men. They had

heard rumors of a far off country which only the Fair Ones knew about, a place they might be safe. The Fair Ones were a different kind of men—again, it was hard to get a clear explanation from him—apparently there was something magical about them. They had heard of a wondrous land in the West, but they feared for some reason that it could no longer be reached. Still, six of them of the very few who were left in the old world, decided to attempt the journey and take the twelve families with them.

They did not find the place they'd hoped to find. They found America instead. And when they were certain they'd come somewhere they could at least make a new life for themselves, even if by a struggle, they settled in. Turns out that place was Kentucky. I couldn't believe half of what he was saying, of course. But *he* seemed to believe it. "It was the Fair Ones that taught the grass here to sleep in winter without dying," he said. "It was the Fair Ones who built the caves just to the north of here for half the families, places eventually occupied by the natives of this country," he said.

"Caves? You mean Carter Caves, the State Park?"

"Well there was a day when the State didn't exist, now wasn't there m'boy? You been up there? To that 'Park' o' yours?"

"Yeah, I love it there."

"Seen those big overhanging rocks, what is it, 'natural bridges' they call 'em?"

"I've seen three that I know about."

"Used to be a township's full of the families living under each, though the walls was completely enclosed then. But that was so long before my time even I've forgotten what happened to them. In truth, in truth. Long before my 673 years."

"Oh come on!"

"What is it! The fire's fine, yeah?"

"Sorry, Gabby, sorry but you want me to

believe you're almost 700 years old?"

"Don't look a day over 250 do I?" he smiled. And then turning his head from one side to another for my inspection: "Just a touch of gray at the temples, eh? Just a touch." And then with a bit of false anger: "And don't interrupt your elders when they're spinnin' such intrestin' tales now, child."

I suppose I could've been offended by him calling me "child," but whatever he believed about his age, I had a feeling he was older than he looked, and I remembered thinking I'd had the right at my age to consider any kid in his twenties a "child."

Still I tried to call him on the age thing: "Yeah, but—"

"I know 'tis hard to believe. I hardly believe it myself sometimes. The littluns of the families you see, we didn't live much longer than any of you bigguns." Then he became very serious: "But the Fair Ones, now. They lived forever, 'ceptin' if somethin' killed'em. They never aged, and they were beautiful. That's what it means, 'Fair Ones' or 'Fair Folk' as you call 'em. Like they bore the glory of God in their bodies. Aye, I think they did. I take it you've read stories."

"We have these tales about the Middle Ages in Europe" I said. "Tales of a fairy people who lived in a land just parallel to ours—just next to it. Usually a place you could see across a river but never get to yourself. The Fair Folk were beautiful and magical. Sometimes mischievous, even dangerous."

"Ah, dangerous, you never said anythin' truer there. But evil, no, not our Fair Ones. They were good. Utterly good. There's also some truth in what you said about the land next to the land. Come, I'll show you, then I'll finish the point I was makin'—you'll have to remind me now."

"About?"

"About explainin' my age."

That was about the only straight answer I got from the little man.

## VI

We left the library (Gabby grabbed one more tea cake for the walk) and headed to the front door. He opened it and led me out into the daylight sky. I turned for a moment to see that the house had been built partially into the side of a cliff. Then as I turned my gaze in a circle I saw that the place in which I found myself was completely surrounded by cliffs. It was a small canyon—high stone walls on every side. As far as I could tell there was no way out except the way I had come in.

"I had no idea this place was on the farm," I said.

"Neither do the farmers," Gabby replied.

I looked at him. He winked. Then he took me on a stroll through his estate.

Within the canyon walls were several buildings—barns, a stable and a chicken coop—and a few pens. I didn't see any animals but I could smell their presence. There were numerous naturally planted trees and several more in a row—fruit trees in a small orchard. There was a spring in the center of the land, and the water from it meandered through a tiny creek (small enough to step over) and out the same cliff side we'd come from. A small open field had been hoed into rows and contained a variety of ready to be picked crops. The buildings had the same quality I'd seen inside the house: a mix of some down-to-earth, homey elements—straight lines, practical doors and fittings—and more ornate, ethereal ones—curves and complex patterns and decorations where none were needed. That building was more the former, this one more the latter, and still another, a mix of both. The whole canyon floor was a testament to the influence of two cultures, or rather two distinct races (if Gabby's words could be

trusted).

“Winter’s comin’,” Gabby said. “Harvest time soon enough. Time enough to keep me busy. I get into less trouble when I stay busy.”

“Less trouble?”

“I’m a bit of a prankster, I must confess. Can’t resist the more whimsical magics the Fair Ones left behind in me—my father left behind. Makes for great, what is it, ‘folk tales’ they call ‘em?”

“You do all the harvesting, all that food processing I saw in your cellar, alone?”

“The animals are a great boon ta the work. Come, I’ll show ya.”

We came up to a wooden fence—one of the pens—and leaned over (I had to lean a lot), staring at nothing in particular.

“Mmm. Smells like life, Charlie. A good life and God given.”

“You believe in God?”

“Why shouldn’t I? He believed in me enough to make me. Now let’s see then. Oi! Calibern! Where are ye, ya pig?”

I was a bit taken aback by Gabby’s rudeness just then. Then a hog walked out of a nearby shelter, and I realized Gabby had been talking to him. The hog looked inquisitively in our direction.

“There’s a good lad, Cal. I say, would you like to have a meet with my good friend here, Charlie?”

The hog shook his head.

“He’s a bit shy. Not used to strangers. You don’t mind?”

“Oh, no; course not,” I said, as if the feelings of pigs were a regular topic of conversation.

“Well alright then, Cal. Would ya mind then heading over to the orchard and giving the apple tree a shake—fetch back a few Honey Crisps for dinner.”

The hog perked up at this and then squealed something that sounded amazingly articulate, though I was hardly an expert in

porcine speech.

“Yes, you and Freddy can have both have one—even two a piece.” Aside to me he added, “Freddy’s the horse. He’s very kind t’ the others, often helps them with their work. And so a farm favorite.”

Cal the hog didn’t have to be told twice. He jogged passed us and over to a gate in the fence. There he stood up on his back legs and pressed a lever upward with his right foreleg. What looked like a counter-weight on a pulley system gently opened the door and let the hog out to do his chores. Just outside the gate he tucked his snout under the strap of a leather bag, one that had clearly been made for his size. A flick of the head brought the bag up onto his back with two loops hanging on either side. With practiced step he put one hind leg through one of the loops and then repeated with the other. A pull of a string near his snout drew the loops tight and he was off in a moment with his piggy backpack on the way to fetch some apples.

‘Apples!’ I thought. “You mentioned Honey Crisps. Apples?! Those are my favorite. My wife and I only discovered them when we came to Kentucky.”

“Aye.”

“Yeah, the best tasting apple in the country.”

“In the world, I’d venture, Charles me boy.”

Gabby was beaming. A big smile stretched across his face and he bounced on his toes for a moment, tucking his thumbs into his vest pockets at the same time.

“What?” I asked. “What is it?”

He looked around as if to see that no one else was listening. Then he said, “Honey Crisps, young sir...I invented ‘em.”

I smiled and gave an incredulous, “Okay.”

He went on as he’d done before, ignoring the slightest skepticism on my part: “There’s

magic in ‘em, ya know. Some of the last magic of the Fair Ones left in these parts. Oh, mind you, not much so as anyone can tell something strange going on...but they do taste quite good don’t they?”

He looked off at nothing again; I joined him, and we stood in silence for a moment. Then: “You were going to tell me about your age,” I reminded him.

“Ah, yes. Hmm. How to put it. Well as plain as day I suppose: It was about a thousand years ago. Three of the Fair Ones decided they’d helped enough here, decided they’d go further west and see what help they could give to the natives across the continent. Very few of the families remained, then, mostly the Tucks and kin, but we could manage alright and had managed quite a name for ourselves among the tribesmen. Something had been happening to the Fair Ones, something slow and slight. They started to grow smaller here in the new world. Till they was barely a foot above the height of the tallest of the families.

“‘Our time passed ages ago,’ my father used to say. ‘We are just remnants, perhaps even castoffs—but if so, that of our own doing. And we are diminishing.’ The families, you see were much smaller. I have my father’s height. Or the height he came down to. In that age, just yesterday, it didn’t seem so strange for the last of the Fair Ones to join the littluns’ families in marriage. Oh, what a rare privilege. And what an act of self-humbling.”

“But no humiliation, I hope.”

“You are a perceptive one, Charlie. No, no humiliation what’s ever.”

“So you have the blood of the Fair Ones in you,” I said, putting two and two together.

“Yes and Aye. I do.”

“And they lived forever.”

“At least until they died. But not without leaving a slew of long-lived children.”

“They died?”

“Best not tell that story; it saddens the beasties.”

“Sorry.”

“Best focus on the living. True, there’s some sadness to’t. I have a brother and a sister I haven’t seen in a century. But they have no family of their own.”

“They’re still alive?”

He nodded. “I can tell, in ma heart.” But it’s ever too dangerous for us to make long journeys anymore. I’ll never see ‘em again. Don’t know, even, where they are exactly.” He stood and breathed a sigh of resolve. “Well that’s it then. I’m the last kin of the Tucks you’ll ever find in these parts. And the last of the Fair blood flows through these veins.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And no, I won’t live forever. I’m a Tucks, too. Now and then I feel my age.”

He looked at me and clearly saw an expression he didn’t like. I wasn’t paying attention to my feelings, of course. I was too busy feeling them. It may have been grief, or it might have been pity, but he responded half-jokingly: “Here now, I’ll still be around long after you’re gone! Kentucky hasn’t seen the last of the Tucks just yet. Mind your looks now or I’ll...I’ll sneak out to your grave and put pink, girly flowers on it. Now I know you, don’t think I’ll not be keepin’ an eye on ya.”

Gabby turned and drew me away; he wanted to show me the rest of the canyon farm. He talked about his parents, trying to describe what it was like to have a nearly immortal father and a down-on-the-home mom. *He* made instruments of wood and gold which made your heart melt upon the hearing. *She* dug potatoes as big as a cat and made the best chips you’d ever put to tongue. Eventually we made the round back to his house and stopped by the front door. Gabby looked up at me. I looked down at

him. Though somehow it was the other way around.

Then he said, "Charlie there's a goodness in you. One that doesn't belong to you."

"I actually understand that," I said. "But not very much of it, I think."

"There's not much in any men these days. The world has fallen from several heights. But don't underestimate what's in you. It's a crime against the Gift Giver. At the same time, I'll be honest: there's a bit of fear in you too."

I nodded my head. "I also understand that pretty well."

"True, true. But don't *overestimate* that either. If there'd been no courage in you, ye'd have never found the door to my cellar open to ya. Mark that. It's part of the magic."

I thanked him, and he led me into his home and back to the cellar door. There I donned my caving helmet, turned on the lights, put on my gloves, and headed down the stairs without another word.

## VII

I made my way back to the far Black Rock passage (or rather the near one from Gabby's point of view). It was as cave quiet as ever. I figured I'd been gone a long while, but turned right to step further into the passage just in case anyone were still back here.

I called out, "Anyone here!" and was startled to get an answer.

"Yeah! We're still here. I thought you were going back?"

It was Alli. They were still slowly pressing forward. The puzzle was momentary. I remembered my Arthurian tales. Time in Faerie just doesn't operate the same as time in our world. I smiled. Gabby had been right. Or else I'd had the most vivid hallucination of my life.

"Yeah!" I called. "I'm heading back."

"Dr. Starr!"

"Yeah, Paul."

"I think I'm going to go with you."

"Okay."

It took him twenty seconds to join me. Then we turned and headed out. I thought about showing Gabby's back door to Paul but wondered if I should. Then I found a last surprise that day: there was no door. There was no side passage leading to it. I was certain of where it should've been. It just wasn't there. And though I wasn't too upset by it, I did give second thought to the possibility that I'd just dreamt the whole thing. As time would pass, I'd continue to wonder about this more and more. Only the memories of Gabby and the tea and the farm and Cal the hog, played out in my imagination every time the doubt became too depressing—only those living memories shook me loose and convinced me of the reality of what I'd experienced.

Paul and I made our way out of the passage, around to the first Black Rock tunnel, and followed the way back to the exit near the Key Hole. Paul almost missed it.

"Are you sure?" he said. "Should we check the map?"

"We don't need the map," I answered. "I know the way home."

We made our way out and went on to the Picnic Room. Deaux-e barked to announce our arrival as she did that of the others twenty or so minutes later. Max and Mike had indeed made it all the way through the second Black Rock passage. The last of it was belly crawl. Alli and Emily had turned back. They met each other on the way out. Becky and Jessie distributed the PB & J's and everyone but me ate a good lunch. I nibbled at a protein bar but was full enough, body and soul. I didn't talk much. Fortunately no one noticed the distance to

which I'd withdrawn. Still there was a job to do and cave guide was mine for a few hours more.

When we emerged from the Sink Entrance through which we'd entered, we found that the morning clouds had burned off, and a bright sky was above us. But of course, I already knew that. The fun wasn't quite over yet. Instead of turning right and heading back up the road, we turned left and headed down to the main cave entrance. There we spent another hour exploring some of the bigger passages in the cave. I'm pleased to say Jessie walked right on with the rest of us, allowing no fear to keep her from finishing the experience.

After that came the long trek back down the road, up the ravine, across the creek, down the path, and up the pasture hill. We changed at the SUV's and bagged all the dirty cave clothes for a good washing later. Then, with the sun setting behind us, we headed home.

## VIII

I grant it, that that should be the end of the story. But who was going to believe it? I struggled for weeks with whether or not I should even tell Becky. Didn't want her worrying about my sanity. In the end, I chose not to. Not immediately, anyway.

A few months later I remembered something that had happened at a grotto meeting over a year before. On a particular Monday of each month, the Esso grotto gets together in Flatwoods, a sort of suburb of Ashland. We meet for dinner at the Giovanni's—I'm a fan of all-you-can-eat pizza...okay, I should be more honest: I'm a fan of all-you-can-eat anything. Then after dinner we walk across the side street to the public library for our meeting. One time, while we were still in the restaurant, I overheard Mark talking with Stan our

current grotto president. Besides being the world's leading expert on Tar Kiln cave, Mark is a nice guy. Soft spoken. A true Kentuckian. He's an electrician by trade, a caver by the best of fortunes. In his quiet voice he was talking to Stan (as he prefers to be called) about some of his journeys through the tighter spaces in Tar Kiln. Some of the channels up beyond the Water Fall Entrance are so tight, you have to reach up in front of you, grab the rocks in your way, and move them behind you to get through (I shivered a little bit). Stan then asked if Mark had been everywhere in the cave and Mark, in his quiet voice, said he had. He'd had a lot of years to work on it.

Then Stan asked a question: "Ever seen any Ferrens down there?" He asked it with a smile on his face—a kind of whimsical expression that said he didn't expect a serious answer.

Mark smiled too, and with a little shake of his head said, "Nah."

"Did you say *ferrets*?" I asked.

"No, Ferrens," Stan replied. "A magical creature from Kentucky folklore. Especially connected to caves."

Now there's something you need to know about Stan. He truly *is* an expert caver, and more of an expert on Kentucky caves than anyone in our region, if not in the whole state itself. Stan discovered and named half a dozen or more of the caves around the State Park, and he discovered the original entrance to one of the largest caves in the state over in central Kentucky! He was part of the team which surveyed that entire cave system. So when Stan says something about Kentucky cave lore, it's worth paying attention to. At the time, of course, it was just a fun story—interesting local trivia. But then, that one day when the memory of that conversation came back to me for no apparent reason, I put two and two together. It just wasn't that much of a stretch from

“Fair Ones” to “Ferrens”—not the way Stan was pronouncing it.

And then there was the look on Mark’s face. At the time I read it as, “Ah, funny joke.” In hindsight, though, I wondered if his expression were more along the lines of “Keep the secret”? I haven’t asked him. I don’t think I should.

I think I might have mentioned once in passing to Mark that some of the names of Tolkien’s hobbits came from our country. A Ph.D. at the University of Kentucky—a guy named Davenport—wrote about it in an essay: visiting with a history professor friend of his over in Shelbyville Kentucky—the man had been a fellow student with Tolkien back in the day. The historian used to tell Tolkien stories from Kentucky folk lore, and Tolkien had especially enjoyed hearing the names of real people from our fair state, folks like Barefoot and Boffin and Proudfoot (I can attest to having taught a Proudfoot or two myself at my own college). If I did mention that to Mark in passing, he never said anything about it, not that I remember.

At any rate, despite the external evidence and my own experiences, there was definitely a time when I started to doubt myself—whether the thing had happened or was just something I’d dreamed up. This especially occurred when the outlandish thought entered my head that the Indian name for our state was possibly a derivative of the *kin* called *Tucks*. “Well that’s just stretching it too far, Charlie,” I said aloud. But who knows how much influence *all* the Ferrens (the big and the small) had in the region in those ancient days? Coincidentally, on the very next day I walked out into my backyard to find the yard tools I’d had laying around—shovels and a pick and a few other odds and ends—were standing in a neat row against the brickwork of the house, and I hadn’t remembered doing it.

Then I noticed they’d been polished clean—not a speck of rust—and I *knew* I hadn’t done that. Beside the tools, planted neatly in the ground, there grew a cluster of flowers...with pink, girly petals. About a month later I pulled a Honey Crisp apple out of the fridge and cut it up to share with Becky. She said, “I didn’t know we had any of these left.” And I said, “The drawer’s full. Didn’t you just buy some?” She hadn’t.

I still have my doubts. But I’m sure, now that I’ve written the story—finally sort of “confessed the unbelievable”—I’m sure a lot of readers will be pretty sure themselves that I just made the whole thing up out of a mixed bag of love for Eastern Kentucky foothills and caves and love for the perilous realms where magic is as common as wishing. Yet I say it’s not about fairies and wishes. Far too many people think fantasy just an avenue for escape, but I like what C. S. Lewis said in "On Three Ways of Writing for Children" (in *Of Other Worlds*):

It would be much truer to say that fairy land arouses a longing for [the reader] knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his lifelong enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth. He does not despise real woods because he has read of enchanted woods: the reading makes all real woods a little enchanted.

Yeah, that’s it. And maybe, sometimes, it works the other way around. Maybe there’s a wood that enchants the stories of anyone who’s ever seen it. Maybe that wood’s in Eastern Kentucky.