

Doctor Wong and the Tunnel of Life

The low frequency rumble stirred their guts like pudding and the ground undulations severely disrupted their vestibular sense. It was a sure recipe for nausea and, as if on cue, all four hikers pitched forward and offered their breakfast sacrifice to the gods of cataclysm. Three went to their knees and retched again, while Dr. Wong lifted his eyes to look at the mountain. What he saw caused every sphincter in his body to clench in horror. The whole north side of Mount Saint Helens was in motion. As realization dawned that the mission was a failure, a stupendous explosion ripped away the top of the mountain and huge waves of molten rock, ash and steam tumbled down the slopes at breath-taking speed, directly towards his team. His shouted warning was ripped away in the cacophony of noise as he turned to run, all thoughts suspended except the immediate need for fortress-like shelter. Yet, as urgent as this need was, the good Doctor found it impossible not to stare over his shoulder at the specter of his probable demise. It was this senseless, but very human act, that saved his life, for in looking behind he was unable to see ahead and so ran headlong into the gaping maw of an ancient, but stalwart lava tube. This new sensation of weightlessness was the last straw for Dr. Sum Zing Wong's overwrought nervous system and it mercifully pulled the plug on continuing consciousness. The body that impacted the rubble ten feet below the caved in roof was completely relaxed and thus escaped injury excepting, of course, the numerous scrapes, scratches and contusions one would expect. Though rapidly slowing, Dr Wong's forward momentum was sufficient to tumble him over the edge of the rubble and down another 15 feet of loose stone where he impacted the far wall and rolled backward under a thick rock over hang. Here, at last, he slumbered.

The world above was in the process of near instant alteration. The companions of Dr. Wong never regained their feet, first being roasted by the hot breath of the pyroclastic flow and

then instantly crushed by the unbelievable volume of broken trees, ash and rock, their final resting place over three hundred feet below a new world that lifelong residents were unable to recognize. A split second later, the flow whistled across the lava tubes' fractured roof, buoyed along by the colder air below and keeping the temperature under the overhang quite livable. Splintered trees came next, throwing themselves across the opening like a pole roof, their branches and leaves forming a web that held the steaming ash and dust as it hardened like mortar. Finally came the hundreds of feet of pulverized Mount Saint Helens, sealing Dr Wong in an apparent tomb with his teammates above....

It was an old dream. One that he was tired of to be sure, but it was much more comfortable than what was on the other side of awakening. So, he stayed with it.

"Hi! My name is Sandy Toews. Like toes. What's yours?"

"Zing Wong. I'm glad to meet you."

"Hi Zing! Is that your middle name?"

"Uh huh!" How about you?"

"Yep. What's your first name?"

"Uhhh....it's the same as my Dad's, so I don't use it much."

"Same here. It's also embarrassing, so I'm guessing it's like that for you. Cool! Our first embarrassing secrets! So, my first name is Barry. What's yours?"

"Uhm, well...my first name is Sum."

Both boys engaged in a moment of thoughtful silence, then the snickers began. Sum Zing Wong and Barry Sandy Toews became instant friends. They had much in common besides their unusual names, particularly a burning interest in knowing the real story of their magnificent universe, their place in it and why it and they existed. The imponderable questions of the human

race became their passion and the quest for answers their playground. They were naturally drawn to the halls of academia, both attaining PhD's in Comparative Religion and Philosophy and both drifting rapidly into the study of metaphysics and the unexplained. Along the way they met lovely fellow seekers Willow and Arwen and the four teamed up in their shared pursuit. Grant money was hard to come by in their favorite areas of inquiry, so they set out to write a popular book detailing their adventures and findings. It was this quest that brought them to the slopes of Mount Saint Helens, for they had heard rumors of increased sightings of Sasquatch in the area thought to be in response to the mountain's rumbling to life.

As the floor of the lava tube trembled from another earthquake, a small river of sand and pebbles dislodged from the overhang and poured onto the forehead and eyes of Dr Wong. Reflex forced him towards a seated position, but the movement was interrupted by the painful collision of said forehead and overhang. Rolling to his left, Zing wiped his face and opened his eyes. The total darkness and movement of the ground caused a sudden flash of panic as memory of the disaster and certainty of instant death slowly gave way to the realization that death, for the moment, appeared to be on hold. Reaching up to shrug off his backpack, Zing's next sensation was stiffness and more pain from every bruised muscle, joint and connective tissue in his body.

"Ohhh....," escaped from a parched mouth and tears began to run as the enormity of the situation sank in. For a time, the sounds of shifting rock were joined by the agonized sobs of one with apparently no hope.

Finally, all cried out but still very much alive, Zing decided it was time to do something. Never one disposed to pity, he maneuvered his backpack around, unzipped the right side pocket and pulled out his flashlight. With eyes fully dilated and rods awash with visual purple, the beam was painfully bright, becoming less so as Zing's eyes adjusted. The lava tube was at least 20-30

feet in diameter and extended out of sight in one direction. In the other direction was the mound of rubble from the roof cave-in that had admitted his unconscious body. Since remaining in place would accomplish nothing, Zing took the easy path and walked away from the rubble and, it seemed, downhill. Hopefully, downhill meant away from the mountain. Setting his light to the lowest power, he knew that the LED would burn for many hours on each set of batteries, of which he had several. He had two bottles of water, food for three days and a body that had often hiked twenty miles in a day. Accepting that this lava tube would likely be his tomb, Zing was determined to explore it's every inch in hopes of finding a way out.

Lava tubes are not known for their beauty. Zing had been walking for two days, minus an eight hour break for food and sleeping and a few other short rests. The tube was mostly a featureless tunnel except for a few rock scrambles over mounds of rubble from roof cave-ins. At each cave-in he hoped for access to the surface, but had been consistently disappointed. Now he was worried. Low on batteries and water, what he thought was surely one of the longest lava tubes in the world was changing. The roof was getting progressively lower and now required him to walk in a crouch. Turning his light to high power, he peered ahead and felt his blood run cold and his heartbeat quicken. Bile rose in his throat and panic in his mind. A hundred feet ahead, the tunnel ended. Senselessly, he turned to run the other way, but as he did, the beam of his light reflected off something. Focusing in the direction of the flash, he saw what looked like a small side tunnel fifty feet away. On hands and knees from the low ceiling, he crawled to the opening and shone his light. Only five feet away was a small steel door with a sign that said, "Welcome."

Stunned motionless, Zing stared at the door for several seconds. The side tunnel converged to the doorway till it was only about three feet square, too tight for Zing to wear his

backpack. Shrugging it off and putting his flashlight in his mouth, he belly crawled into the tunnel.

There was no handle on the door, so he pushed. It opened a bit but closed again when Zing released pressure. "Must be spring loaded," he murmured. Crawling closer he applied steady pressure and the door opened fully to the left and stopped with a click. Now when released the door remained open. The light revealed a small latch at the top. It also revealed a square, vertical tunnel running up and down and neatly shored with wood. To the right was a sturdy metal ladder mounted securely to the shoring. Looking down, Zing saw the ladder descended to an earthen floor about twenty feet below. To the left of the bottom of the ladder was a suggestion of another tunnel. Looking up, the ladder ascended about thirty feet and stopped.

Crawling into the opening, Zing grasped the ladder and started to climb. At the top was another door made of the same wood as the shoring material. Again there was no handle, so Zing pushed. The door didn't budge, so he climbed two rungs higher and put his back into it. Suddenly, the door came free with a bang! As he looked up to see what had happened, he was hit square in the face with a dirty sneaker followed rapidly by the contents of an opened box of Leggos', two matchbox metal cars, a Frisbee, several million dollars of Monopoly money and the small bookshelf which had previously stored the items on top of the chest of drawers whose front legs had rested atop the wooden trap door. Dr Sum Zing Wong had emerged from certain death into the crowded interior of a boy's bedroom closet. A twelve year old boy, to be exact, who now sat placidly on his bed observing Dr Wong's arrival through the open closet door.

"Hi! My name is Patrick. I've been expecting you."

Zing could do nothing but blink as his overstressed mental machinery slipped several gears while trying to process this latest revelation.

"Uhhh...my name is Zing...why...how...what do you mean, you've been expecting me!?"

"My grandfather said you'd be coming, but I wasn't sure exactly when. He did say it would be on a momentous day, so when the mountain blew I figured you'd be along soon. Guess I was right, 'cause here you are!"

"Yes...here I am. Where is your grandfather?"

"Oh, he's dead. Had a heart attack about a year ago. That's when he told me...when he was dying."

"I am so sorry. I know what it is like to lose someone..."

"Oh! I didn't lose him. He's going through his cycle of life, just like all of us. I thought you would know that."

"Uhh, yes...I mean, I didn't expect you to know."

"I get it. Just trying to be nice. Don't worry, I know a lot more than most people my age. Gramps started talking to me about stuff before I was two. Said he wanted to learn what I knew before grownups made me forget it. Glad he did too, 'cause that way I never did forget it. He even helped me remember a lot I had forgotten from before."

"What do you mean, before?"

"You know! In earlier lives, before this one."

"Oh. You can remember your previous lives?"

"Sure. Can't you?"

"Well, in some ways, yes. You know, deja vu, that sort of thing."

"Wow! I thought you would know a lot more than that. What do you know about Atlantis?"

"Nothing conclusive. Only legends and myth, but I sure want to know more. What do you know?"

"Gramps taught me a lot of that stuff too, but one thing he found out was kind of sad and he wanted to do something about it. He said it was too late for him though, since it was his time to move on. He told me that when he told me you were coming. He said we would help each other do what he didn't have time for."

"What is that?"

"Well, most people think that when Atlantis was destroyed all the Atlanteans were killed. Gramps didn't believe that, but he did believe that Earth became almost uninhabitable for awhile, at least on the surface. The Atlanteans knew they had screwed up and what was coming, so they decided to go underground. They are still there but because they have evolved differently from people that survived on the surface, they are kind of stuck and can't come back. Gramps wanted to help them come back. Now, it is up to you and me."

"Are you sure they want to come back?"

"Some of them, anyway. They come to visit a lot, but they are very shy. Still, most people have heard of them. Here they are known as Sasquatch. In Asia they are Yeti. Other places they are just called Ape Men. But they are all Atlanteans. Gramps thought they could help us if we help them."

"Help us? How?"

"Before Atlantis was destroyed, they had an advanced technology, similar to ours. Today, they have a much more advanced technology, but now they also have the wisdom not to destroy

themselves or render the planet unsuitable for human life. They can help us develop a philosophy of life that is a blessing, not a curse. Our technology will follow."

Zing just smiled. Wherever his team members were in their cycle of life, he was sure they knew that the mission was again a go.

"Come on," said Patrick, as he moved into the closet and onto the ladder. "I need to get you hidden before Mom finds us. You can stay in Gramps lab. It's fully equipped and loaded with food stores."

"Food? That would be great! What have you got?"

"Oh, it's the best! There's like ten loaves of bread in the freezer and enough peanut butter and jelly to last a month....creamy and crunchy both and every kind of jam. You won't go hungry, that's for sure. And there's six cases of Coke. How about that?"

"Perfect," said Zing. "Perfect."