

Decision on Primince

by Bob Mayer, ASPE



Douglas Owens pulled into the driveway of his home on 542 Capital Avenue. His lawn was slightly overgrown, and weeds had started to grow through the river rocks he had put around the shrubs, bushes, and flower beds a few years back. He stared at one particularly overgrown patch of weeds that his wife had pointed out to him the other week and that he had promised to take care of. He wished he had listened to her originally and spent the extra hundred bucks on the weed-blocker fabric before he put the stones in, but it was too late now. He sighed and stepped out of his car. The weeds will still be there tomorrow. Now, he had to prepare.

He had approximately one hour before the portal would open and then another three hours to pursue his mission. His wife and kids would be home in 30 minutes, so he knew he had to rush to gather the supplies he had hidden last year.

His wife had caught him packing some unusual items five or six years ago, which had led to some unwanted questions.

The sacred Pipe of Peahabel, to the untrained eye, can look like any other glass pipe used to smoke marijuana. It was, in fact, made of a special type of crystal found only in Peahabel, called Yalinite. Yalinite, when heated to a certain temperature and enveloped in the smoke from the Feathuasca vine, allows its holder to cross the portal of Peahabel unharmed.

Douglas's wife, Elizabeth, pulled up with their kids about a minute after he had finished packing his 2020 Toyota Highlander.

"Hey, hon! Are you sure your softball game isn't canceled tonight? We're supposed to be getting some bad storms in a little bit."

Douglas had dealt with these kinds of questions over and over again throughout the years. They had irked him more and more as the years went on, though. Why couldn't she just let him have his own thing once a week and let him be?

"It might be, but we never know; and you know how these storms are. Sometimes they hit us, and sometimes they don't."

"Well, these storms aren't missing us unless someone plays God and parts the skies. I still don't understand why they can't make that determination before you all leave home and get there."

He felt an anger start to boil up in him. Why couldn't she just let him be one night a week?

"If it's canceled, can you at least just come home? The kids are excited to tell you about how their lessons are going, and they want to play a song for you."

"THEY CAN PLAY IT TOMORROW! THIS IS MY NIGHT! I'LL DO WITH IT WHAT I WANT!" Douglas bellowed. He immediately felt bad for blowing up at her, but there was no way he was going to show it. He decided to make the point more emphatic by getting into his car and slamming the door. He didn't want to turn and look to see their faces. He knew his little girl, Alicia, was probably crying now. *She always cries, though*, he thought. At some point, she was going to have to grow up a little bit and realize that not everything is perfect in this world, not even her father.

He went to start the car and pull out when he realized that he had left his softball cleats by the front door. He decided to just go without them. Let her question him all she wants. He'll just say he forgot. There was no softball game, anyways. There never was.

Patrick and Chuck were waiting at the gates to the Arb when Douglas arrived. He stepped out

of his car, opened up the back, removed his bag, closed the back, and walked over to them without saying a word. They all gave a relatively serious nod to each other to acknowledge that they were ready to go, and then they hopped the gates.

They walked silently to a point in the trail and then veered off into the woods. After climbing a few hills and walking a short distance in a valley, they approached a jumble of fallen trees covered in thick vines. Then the rain began.

A few minutes later, they had cleared an area which led to a small opening to a cave that was too small to walk through but big enough to not have to slither through. A few meters of crawling led to a much larger opening, and a few more meters led into a chamber the size of a two-car garage.

Chuck's headlamp illuminated his bag as he unzipped it, and he pulled out what looked like ten tiki torches. Each one was made from the wood of a small Juicher tree and was coated in Yalinite. The wicks were made of Feathuasca fibers, enough to burn for approximately three hours.

Once lit, the torches were placed in a circle that took up the entire chamber, Patrick uncovered four perfectly round Yalinite stones, each about one foot in diameter. He laid them in a square three feet apart from each other.

Douglas pulled the Pipe of Peahabel out of his bag and handed it to Patrick, who filled it with a mixture of leaves and crushed seeds from the Feathuasca vine. Patrick handed it to Chuck, who lit it with each torch, tapping on each of the four stones in between each one.

The chamber started to fill with a light smoke, and a faint, bluish glow began to appear in the middle of the four stones.

"It's time." Patrick spoke the first words they had said to each other since meeting at the gates.

They all looked at each other and took a deep breath. Douglas had been going through the portal for almost two and a half decades, and he knew what difficulties he would face. He had been doing it alone for 10 years now.

It had been over 10 years since Vincent disappeared and 15 since Jerome did. Douglas, Jerome, and Vincent had spent 10 years exploring together prior to Jerome's disappearance. Douglas and Vincent had gone back through the portal on their own time frame later that year and had vowed to each other to always return through the portal together from then on. Five years later, on the trip from which Vincent never returned, Douglas made the hardest decision he ever had to make and crossed back without Vincent.

Despite the fact that Douglas had never seen or heard from his two friends who had gone missing on the other side, he knew that they must still be there. Something must have happened; something must have held them up. Year after year, though, he found no sign of them. The Peahabelites continued to indicate that they had never seen or heard from them, although Douglas didn't consider them an overly reliable source, due to their carefree, aloof, and unobservant nature. He was convinced that Jerome and Vincent could be living right in the midst of them, and they wouldn't notice.

Patrick and Chuck sat just outside of the square formed by the stones, and Douglas positioned himself inside the square. Patrick and Chuck each took their four tokes off the pipe, and then the pipe was handed to Douglas. After Douglas took his fourth toke, the bluish glow started to brighten and expand to the edges of the stones. As the glowing orb grew, Douglas went from sitting to kneeling to standing and then disappeared.

The exact location in Peahabel to which the portal would take Douglas was uncertain, although it had always been in one of the waterfalls of Primince. Arriving through the

portal was like falling off a two-story building. Years of experience had taught Douglas that submerging himself in one of the pools of Primince would shorten the length of his pain significantly.

Upon "landing," Douglas immediately did everything he could to locate one of the pools. He slithered painfully on his belly and pushed and pulled himself forward with his legs and arms as much as he could. Arriving at a cliff, he plunged himself off it, landing on a rock and then tumbling into one of the pools.

Each trip since the disappearance of Jerome and Vincent had started with the same routine. Once recovered from his arrival, Douglas immediately worked on procuring the supplies needed in order to return the following year. The Feathuasca vine was the first thing Douglas would get. It was plentiful all throughout the Falls of Primince. The seeds were next and were a little harder to find, although Douglas had learned that the vines with a thickness of a baseball bat were the most likely to be seeding. Usually, after following two or three to where they emanated, he would have a sufficient number of seeds.

Next were the Juicher trees. The Juicher trees weren't necessarily difficult to find, although it could take some time to get to where they were. The difficult part was finding 10 that were small enough to carry and transport back. Typically, they needed to be in their second or third year of growth.

By the time Douglas had collected everything, an hour and a half had gone by. He knew it would take about 25 minutes to get back to the portal. That left him about an hour to complete his mission—which had been significantly altered since Jerome's and Vincent's disappearances. The first thing Douglas did was go into town and ask the Peahabelites if they had seen or heard anything regarding Jerome or Vincent. Year after year, he received the same indifferent and slightly confused answer.

Frustrated, Douglas left town and proceeded on to his mission. Every year, he documented anything new or different that he came across, and he collected samples for Patrick to analyze—rocks, crystals, vegetation, and wood, among other things. This year, Patrick had a specific request for as much Brerrite as Douglas could pack into a bag roughly the size of a gallon. Patrick hoped that the Brerrite would help keep the portal open an extra hour or more. Last year, it helped add an additional 15 minutes to the time the portal stayed open. Without it, they knew they would not have that extra 15 minutes this year.

Douglas had collected everything he needed to, and he took a look at how much time he had left. He had hoped to have enough time to climb to the top of Mount Primince to see if there were any signs of any other towns or areas to explore. Possibly there was somewhere else that Jerome and Vincent had ended up. Like every prior year, though, he would not have the time. Douglas would have to begin his walk back to the portal.

What is the point of doing all of this? he thought to himself as he walked along the river. He had never really stopped to think about why he was doing what he was doing. Was this all for an extra 15 minutes of time to do the same thing he had always done? Coming here had already cost him two of his best friends. Plus, he spent all year lying to his wife and kids and hiding all of this from them. Year after year, it took a bigger and bigger toll on him.

Then again, he thought, who cares if his wife and kids didn't know? They wouldn't understand and would probably try to prevent him from doing it. Everything he did, even this, was for them, ultimately. They weren't grateful, though. All they wanted to do was take his time and energy. *Daddy, watch me dance! Daddy, listen to me sing! Daddy, play catch with me!* He became more and more frustrated as he approached the falls where the portal was.

He knew his window was running short now. There were five, maybe six minutes until the portal would seal over and his opportunity to return would vanish. Did it matter though? Why did he have to go back? Maybe that's why Jerome and Vincent decided to stay. Maybe they had had enough.

Douglas looked through the waterfall into the bluish glow that would take him back. Why had he waited so long to think about it? Why was he just now realizing that staying was an option?

He looked down into the river that the waterfall emptied into. The waterfall seemed to be absorbed into it—no splashing, no misting. It was more like a stream of light particles flowing down vertically and then horizontally, flowing past the vibrant colors of green and purple mosses that were like a velvet fabric to the soles of the feet. The mosses gave way to red and yellow flowers that were each so unique in their individual redness and yellowness that you could almost tell each one of them apart. Those from here could.

So, why had Douglas just realized that staying was an option? It had always been an option, whether he had considered it or not. Now, as he gazed out over the landscape, he wished he had more time to consider it.

Beyond the portal was his life: his life with all of his issues—his pains, his suffering—but also the things that he loved—his family, his friends, his home.

The smells from the flowers seemed to waft up into his nostrils as he turned back toward the portal. Pulling his gaze back, he felt nourished by their scent and the sight of them bristling in a breeze—a breeze that seemed to cleanse the skin, as if it were a warm shower... a breeze that seemed to penetrate into the body like the infrared rays of the sun on a cool day.

The people here were magical beings, and Douglas seemed like a magical being here, as well. It seemed that he could do and be whoever he wanted, however he wanted. Why would he leave this for the struggle of paying his mortgage and other bills, or for the stress of having to meet everyone's expectations of what he should be? He thought about his wife and his mother, his dog and his kids. Maybe they were all better off without him there.

Failure. That's all he could achieve if he returned, more and more failure. Here... here he could achieve; here he could succeed. The Peahabelites didn't expect anything from him. Part of his ultimate mission was completed, though. He had proven that this world existed. Patrick and Chuck could take things from here.

Maybe he should just tell his wife and kids. Maybe they would understand, and his problems would disappear. Maybe it was time to tell the world about what he and his friends had discovered and give closure to Jerome's and Vincent's families.

What if no one believed him, though? What if the samples he had collected and the things he had documented were not enough? But he had a choice. He didn't have to return. Why had he waited until now to think about it?

He could see the bluish glow start to turn from a solid mirror-like glow to more of a ripple. He

knew his time was up. He had to decide now. He put his right hand in his pocket and rummaged around, past the various smaller artifacts he had pocketed. His hand reemerged with a coin, his lucky penny.

Heads he stayed; tails he left. While holding the pipe in his left hand, he put his left arm into the waterfall, feeling the cool and wet sensation of the particles moving past his fingers and into his wrist and then forearm. As his fingers hit the portal, he could feel them tingle, almost like goosebumps; and then he felt the tingling feeling in his wrist and forearm. He did the same thing with his left leg until half of his body was inside the waterfall with half of his arm and leg already crossing through the portal.

He lifted the coin up to his lips, gave it a kiss, and then let it fly. He watched as it flipped in slow motion, reached its apex, and then began to drop. Reaching out with his right arm, he caught the penny and opened his hand just as he felt a tug on his left arm and leg. His body jerked towards the portal.

The way his body was so suddenly sucked into the portal caused his hand to be pulled out from under his lucky penny. As his head passed through the waterfall, he could see the penny floating there where his hand had last supported it. Heads it was. Ω

*“Fiction gives us the second chances
that life denies us.”*

—Paul Theroux