

THE EVERLASTING MAN

A STORY BY

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Origins

He came to me after an endless week in the office when I thought that a life of only three score and ten is enough for anyone. Imagine if there was no end to it.

The Everlasting Man

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He leant back on the bar, watching the others, reached out for his glass and nearly knocked it over. He swore. The other customers looked at him carefully, trying not to attract his attention. Only one person had the courage to speak.

“You need a holiday, Davy,” said the doctor.

“Not me, I’m what you’d call disgustingly healthy.”

“That’s not what I meant, I’ve never seen you in the surgery since the day I came here. I meant you’ve been looking very tense and taut lately, probably too much time on your own up there at the farm.”

“Farmer’s work is never done,” said Davy. “Besides, who’d look after the animals?”

“You’d find someone. There’s plenty who’d take over for a week or two in return for the same favour later.”

Davy sniffed. “If I left I’d never come back.”

“Nonsense, you’re as much a part of this place as the walls.”

Everyone in the bar tensed. The doctor didn’t know it but he was edging Davy toward the rages they had seen of late.

“I’m more of this place than you’ll ever know. I’ve known this place before.”

Davy tried to stop talking, because he knew the strange things he’d been saying would come tumbling out. Things that were best left unsaid. He sighed. It was always a sign to move on, though these days strange talk was tolerated

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more than it once was. He felt the urge to talk overcome him.

“This place was once under a mile of ice.”

“It was too,” said one of the locals. “Bad winter that year as I remember it.”

The bar laughed.

“Ha very funny ha,” said Davy staggering toward the joker. “But I saw it, no matter how much you laugh, I saw it. I stood way to the south and could see the edge of the ice in the distance. A mile high it was. God, how the wind would come down from there. Cold, dry, cut right through the thickest skin you’d got on. Saw the ice retreat from these very hills.”

“Tell us about the Queen of Sheba, Davy” another local called out.

“What for? It was Solomon I worked for,” he replied.

He was past the violent stage of drunkenness now, and was heading for oblivion. Someone laughed and he crashed down onto a table, passing out before the pleasure of a fight could

grab him. He felt himself being dragged out to a car and surfaced now and again to find himself being driven over the hills to his farm. The cold night air revived him enough to see it was the doctor.

“Did it again, did I Doc?” he slurred.

“Yes, I’m afraid so,” said the doctor. “I’ll get someone to drive your car up tomorrow.”

“Thanks. Maybe you’re right, I need to get away. It’s quiet now, I sold most of my stock last month. There’s only a few breeding ewes left. I’ve been in mind for a change for a time now.”

“You need it too. You’ve been saying some very strange things lately.”

“Just reading too much, is all. Then I have too much to drink, and it all comes out like I saw it, or I did it myself.”

“How old are you? Fifty, fifty-five?”

“More like thirty five thousand.”

“No,” laughed the doctor, “it just seems like that. What I’m getting at is that maybe you should sell up this place while it’s still a good farm, then buy

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a smallholding closer to the village. It's not so much work, and you'd be in your stride by the time you retire."

"I've thought about retirement a lot. I've been around here too long, it's time to move on, settle somewhere else. I've brothers and sisters, they'd have me for a while, and I've enough money. You're right, but I think retirement is the answer, not just a holiday. Thanks for bringing me back."

"Can you manage?"

"Aye, I can stagger to bed from here, no problem."

"Okay, I'll drop by tomorrow, just to give you an informal check, if that's all right with you?"

"No probs, doc, no probs, but make it Friday, I've things to do this week."

The doctor said goodbye, and Davy staggered to bed, not bothering to undress. He lay down and pondered the last few months. It was always the same. He knew when moving time was upon him. The frustrations, the boredom, the memories flooding back, the careless talk. He thought of his five brothers and sisters, a close knit

family, almost perfect in its unity, but incomplete since the death of their parents. The perfect family. Such thoughts were the final sign. Time to find the family again and renew the spirit that was flagging to a halt.

He lay on his bed and let the memories flood back. He remembered the times in Africa, the hunts across the Sahara savannah, the trips down raging rivers, the awesome deeps of Mediterranean deserts, the cold winds that swept down from the northern ice fields. He remembered the pain of rejection from the tribe, the fear that drove them out, the hatred toward his parents, the prejudice against the perfect children who didn't die of childhood diseases, the wounds that healed and didn't fester, the suspicion of their survival when other children died and they were left alive and thriving.

The family were the hybrid offspring of the mating of his father with a woman of an older branch of human kind, a mixing of ancient genes with the newer vigorous stock, a chance mating that produced the perfect family. But perfection isn't tolerated when a tribe keeps losing its own

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offspring while the perfect ones survive.

Memories of the night of rejection flooded back. The incessant drums, the chanting, the shaman with his powders and bones, the stones that came down upon their hut, the fear and hatred that drove his parents and their terrified children into the darkness. He wept for the separation, and the difference that still separated him from his mortal cousins.

They found a valley deep in the northern savannah where they could live their lives in peace, with plentiful game, sweet water, an abundance of vegetation to supply everything they could ever need.

The tribe had never hunted the savannah, preferring the forests far to the south, except for that one magical journey. They met strangers from the north moving south away from the incessant cold of the ice fields. The two tribes hunted game together for two seasons. The southerners learnt the grunting tongue of the northerners, learnt to use animal skins against cold winter winds, taught the northerners the use of better weapons for hunting. They swapped

stories of the humid forests to the south and the freezing moorlands and tundras of the north.

A yearning for their homelands came between them, and the northern tribe moved back to its tundra, the southern tribe moved back to its forests. A northern woman chose a southerner as her mate, and moved back with him to the forest home of his fathers. Their mating produced the perfect family that couldn't die. In bad years when the game moved on, the forest wouldn't fruit, or other tribes stripped the land of food, the perfect children would go into hibernation while others died of starvation, waking when some intuition told their bodies that sustenance was available again. Fear and jealousy drove the family into the night, drove them out of the forests and into the great savannas of the Sahara far to the north.

The valley they found was surrounded by steep hills and was big enough for a tribe. The children grew to maturity, and chose, bartered or bought mates from tribes that passed their way, but no offspring came from the matings. Brother mated with sister, but still no offspring; they had perfect

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genes, ones that needed no more reproducing, a hybrid that could last forever. Their parents died eventually, lacking the perfect genes they had given their children.

The orphan family survived, and their valley became a place shunned by savannah tribes, as familiar suspicions grew to rumour, and rumour grew to fear. Legends of the people who couldn't die became commonplace, and became transformed into tales of immortals. As human kind spread out across the planet, they took the stories with them. The stories became the mythology of our species, transformed and embellished whenever a tribe gathered around its fires at night.

Loneliness sometimes forced the family out into the world, mingling with the outsiders, returning to the valley when driven out or shunned. Millennia passed, the ice receded, the savannah dried and burned, land bridges turned to marsh and finally surrendered to the rising oceans. The tribes that rejected the family settled and multiplied, formed towns then cities, and it became easier for the family to settle amongst

them.

Over the centuries the family parted, each of them finding his or her own place to live, until the suspicion and rumours started again, and it was time to move on. They'd return to the dry valley, unblock the hidden wells, and farm meagre crops until another sibling returned. Sometimes they would find a brother or sister already there, deep in hibernation, and revive them with food won from the valley.

Davy reminisced through the night, the memories feeding his love for his immortal siblings and his yearning to be with them again. As dawn broke, he packed his most precious belongings, a small bag of mementoes that would stun most historians - the coin Hadrian gave him when they built the wall across the land he now farmed, a stone from the foundations of Solomon's temple, the token given to him by the Norseman he dragged from the sea and who later became known as Quetzacoatl to the local people of Central America.

He spent the week writing letters to friends, gave his lawyer power of attorney over his affairs,

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telephoned his neighbour across the hills to come and claim the ewes for his own flock. He was out for a final walk around his fields when the doctor arrived on Friday morning.

“You’re looking much better,” the doctor said.

Davy nodded and offered him coffee. He told the doctor of his decision to retire.

“So suddenly?”

“Not really. I’ve been running the place down for months. It’s been on my mind a while.”

“Where will you go?”

Davy paused and smiled. “I’ve got family south of here. I’m always welcome. It’s a good place around here, maybe we’ll come and visit. They grow good people on this land, it’s good soil. In a century’s time, when the world’s a warmer place, it’ll be good farming up here.”

The doctor frowned. “You have a unique way of putting things, as if decades were weeks, and centuries were years.”

“It comes from being a farmer. You get to know the soil, how it’s made, what makes it good. It’s a

long slow process, you get to contemplating long stretches of time. Is all. It takes centuries to make a good soil, you know, and just hours to ruin it with chemicals. A true farmer knows he is only a custodian of his soil.”

“Do you want me to give you a checkup before you go.”

“Aye, might as well, though you’ll find nothing wrong.”

The doctor hummed and hahhed, poked, prodded, tapped, and listened. “If all my patients were as healthy as you I’d be out of a job. Make sure you stay that way.”

“No problem, doc,” Davy said smiling.

He gave the doctor a bundle of letters to distribute to friends and neighbours, then went outside for a last look at his land.

“It’s good soil,” he mused again. “Just needs warmer climes. Maybe I’ll be back one day.”

He went back inside, collected his bag of keepsakes, a backpack of clothes and odd and ends, and a pouch of gold coins. Gold was good

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anywhere, no matter what the local currency. Besides, most money would be useless by the time he came back, if he came back.

“Just walking out of everything?” the doctor asked.

“Aye, it’s the best way. Jed over yonder will come down for the ewes this afternoon, I already phoned him, and the auctioneer will be in Monday to sell what’s not been given away.”

“After thirty years, just like that,” said the doctor as he drove them through the gate and out onto the road.

“Thirty years?” said Davy. “It’s nothing, just a blink in the eye of eternity.”

The doctor laughed. “You really do say the strangest things for a hill farmer.”

“Never rush to judgement, Doc, you never know what’s beating under the chest. You can drop me off by the bus stop at the pump, I’ll take the bus to Mollington and get the train from there.”

They arrived at the stop with a few minutes to spare, stood reminiscing then said their good-

byes as the bus came into view.

“Send us a card,” said the doctor as he drove off.

‘It’d be a shock if I did,’ Davy thought, smiling to himself.

The bus coughed to a halt. Davy stepped on board and smiled at the driver.

“Single please.”

“Where to?”

“The Sahara Desert.”

The driver laughed. “You’ve got the wrong bus, you’ll want the 23 for that.”

“Well, make it Mollington railway station. I’ll get a train from there.”

The driver laughed again, and the bus drew away. Davy looked out across the hedges, the farms, the hills. He would see two or three partings like this each century, had lost count of the farms he’d left, the communities he’d given up, the friends he’d known, the places he’d loved. What he wanted was to be able to stay, to be part of the people, to have a family of his own, to belong. But this could never happen. He was

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the everlasting man, and people would hate him for it if they knew. What he wanted most, was to die.