

Albert's Doorway

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When I walked over to Albert's that fateful day, I noticed something was different. The house looked much bigger than I remembered, especially the part where Albert's room was. It appeared ballooned out, just that one room. Odd that I'd never noticed it before.

There was a new sports car in the driveway too, a model that both Albert and I had been drooling over in magazines. A red Viper. Man, it was hot. It was also very expensive. I wondered who owned it, because it certainly wasn't anyone in Albert's family.

When I rang the bell, it was Albert who answered. It appeared he was the only one home. Like myself, Albert is a kind of scrawny geek-looking teenager, with thick glasses, pimpled face, the works. Albert wasn't wearing his glasses that day, though, and it looked like his face had cleared up. As a matter of fact, it looked like he'd had a nose job. And his build, the way he stood, he seemed a bit wider, more muscular, like he'd been working out. Odd, I thought again. I should have noticed the difference when I saw him the day before.

"Hey, Brad! Boy do I have something to show you," he said.

"Where is everybody?" I asked.

"They're all on a cruise boat heading toward Hawaii. Come on inside."

"But---"

He grabbed me by the arm and dragged me through the door. As he pulled me past the dining room toward the stairs, I saw that there was a huge pile of green twenty-dollar bills stacked on the table. "Take some, if you want," he said, pausing just for a moment. "But hurry, I've got to show you what I've been doing."

Not wanting to be greedy, I only took a few. Then a few more. Then, well, there was so much a handful wouldn't be missed. My pocket was bulging as I finally followed Albert up the stairs to his room.

His room, I noticed, had been remodeled. There was no denying it, it was much bigger than it was a few days before. And instead of just one computer sitting on his desk, he had several computers, nice new powerful ones.

"Remember I was showing you how I'd converted my Dad's satellite dish so that I could use it as a radio telescope?" Albert asked.

"Yeah. Did your Dad get mad?"

"No." Albert had an unbelievably huge grin stretched across his face. "It was the best thing I've ever done in my life."

"Okay."

"I was listening to the background radiation of the universe night before last, and it struck me. It sounded an awful lot like a modem carrier wave. Silly me, I went and piped the antenna into my modem. Well, nothing happened of course. The hertz cycle was way off. So then I got out this old 4800 baud piece of junk my dad got from the phone company and I tinkered with it, adjusting here and there, and guess what happened."

"What?"

"I connected."

"With what?"

"The background radiation of the universe. Or at least what everybody thought was the background radiation of the universe."

It's not, it is a carrier wave. I connected with it. I went on-line."

"On-line with what?"

"The universe. Reality itself." He tapped a few times on the keyboard on his old computer. "I can move things around, change their properties, you name it." He tapped some more. The money I had stuffed in my pocket was suddenly on the desk. He tapped some more. It doubled in amount. He tapped more, and now there was money bulging in every pocket I had. "You see," he said, "reality is apparently nothing more complicated than a gigantic computer simulation. What we think of as the cosmos is a simulation running on some sort of cosmic mainframe computer. That's why when these guys in Scientific American look at the building blocks of reality they find nothing at all. Matter is made up of particles that are made of nothing. Why? Because it's all just information. They're looking at the building blocks of a program."

"You're telling me that we're nothing but simulations running on a cosmic computer somewhere?"

"Basically, yes. That's what I believe."

"So, who's running the computer?"

"God, I guess."

"God is the Cosmic Sysop?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Don't you think the Cosmic Sysop is going to be upset to find you've been playing around with His programming?"

"He hasn't minded so far."

"Maybe because He hasn't noticed yet. If I were you, I'd keep it small and simple." I looked outside. "That's your car outside?"

"Yeah, want one?"

It was tempting. "No thanks. You can put a pile of cash under my bed at home, but other than that, I don't think I want to be part of this."

Albert had an evil grin. "I can change your mind, you know."

I frowned. "That would be a bad idea. How would you ever get my genuine opinion if you go and change my mind?"

Albert's grin faded. "I didn't think of that." After a moment his smile brightened again. "Hey, let's get a bunch of naked high school cheerleaders in here and have a party!"

"Sounds like you've done this before."

"It was one of the first things I did." He showed me a whole wastepaper basket full of used condoms. While I was gaping at that, the girls arrived.

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My resolve to remain uninvolved didn't last long at all. The next day found me sitting right beside him in the Viper cruising down the Interstate at a steady 170 MPH, beer bottles in hand, large cigars in mouth. I was grinning from ear to ear. Life was good, and I was no longer a virgin. Not only was I no longer a virgin, I was no longer a virgin a dozen times over. The beer, which was not really a taste I was used to, seemed to taste better with every progressive bottle I drained.

Albert didn't seem to be as content as I was. He was searching for a highway patrol car, but in vain. "If we had tried this last week, we would have been pulled over within minutes," he said, brooding. "Now look at us. Are they all on vacation or what?"

"Maybe the variable you used was too broad. Maybe no trouble will come our way at all."

He shook his head. "No, this is just dumb luck."

Finally we spotted a black and white on the opposite side of the freeway. It had pulled over a big old Lincoln Continental, and the officer was writing out a ticket. Albert skidded to a stop, rumbled the Viper across the dirt meridian, and zoomed right up to the officer. He threw a beer bottle at the man, yelling, "You big dumb fuck! Come and do your job!" He tromped down on the Viper's throttle and sent it squealing down the lane. The acceleration was unreal, throwing my head back and pressing me deep into the plush leather seat. The cop dashed over to his car, leaped in, and took off in pursuit.

Albert was laughing hysterically. "I can't believe I did that! Can you believe I did that? I'm so afraid of authority figures!"

I, too, was afraid of authority figures. I wasn't finding it so hysterically funny.

"You big dumb fuck!" Albert yelled again, laughing. "You big dumb fuck!"

We were chased into town, where Albert slowed. The highway patrol car was right on our tail, separated by mere inches. He looked really mad. "Pull over!" he shouted over his PA speaker. "Now!"

Albert sent the Viper rumbling down an off ramp and came to a stop right in the middle of an intersection, stopping all the traffic. He was still laughing hysterically.

"Move your car out of the intersection!" the officer's amplified voice said. "Pull over to the side."

Albert flipped him off.

The officer opened his car door and came after us with his gun drawn. "Get out of the car, now! You're under arrest!"

Albert nudged me, and we both pulled out our new cards. The cards had our names and pictures, and had the large, bold letters that read: ABSOLUTE IMMUNITY.

The officer immediately holstered his gun, but he still looked angry as hell. "I'll have to run these through!" he said, collecting the cards. "Could you please move out of the intersection?"

"No," Albert said, puffed up and being as arrogant as he could manage.

Shaking his head, the officer returned to his car. The cars around us honked, backed up, honked more, and made their way around us. After a while the officer came back, still angry, and handed us our cards back. "I don't care if you have total immunity or not, you shouldn't abuse it like this."

"Or what?" Albert shouted. "Go back to your car, public servant. You can't do a damn thing to us!"

"You know, somebody just might snap, shoot you, then claim temporary insanity," the officer told us. He looked like he was seriously contemplating it.

"Bite me!" Albert laughed, throwing the car into gear. The officer watched us leave with a horrible, glowering expression.

We rode for a while in silence, and then I said, "I don't think we had to be so ... extreme."

"Yes, we did," Albert said. "There's a big difference between creating a few cards and an authorization in a database somewhere, and changing all of society so that it accepts the card." He grinned, very pleased with himself. "It worked perfectly."

I had to admit that it did.

"This has vast implications," Albert said. He was very, very pleased with himself.

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During the next couple of weeks we indulged in an insane excess of total wish fulfillment. A lot of it was pretty nasty, and much of the nasty stuff had a lot to do with famous actresses and models. It didn't make me feel good afterwards -- I felt like I was using people, manipulating them without any regard for them. I also came to the conclusion that if I could get anything I wanted with no effort, then everything felt worthless. Disposable. Albert seemed to like it this way, he enjoyed the disposable aspect of everything.

"Look," I told him one Monday. "Let's do something real with your terminal. Let's make some changes that are worth making."

"Like what?"

"Stop those wars in Eurasia and Africa. Give some plentiful food source to India. Make life better for everyone, not just us."

"I always figured you for a Democrat," Albert said. "You're right, though. Let's do something about the common lowlife scum."

We watched CNN for a while, getting a good idea of where all the trouble spots were, and then Albert isolated the areas and adjusted parameters so that everyone there just lost their will to fight. That night all the news programs were buzzing with special reports on how truce talks were going on everywhere. Some people who were interviewed thanked God that people were finally coming to their senses; others called for investigations and alerts, insisting something evil was going on. The next day, however, while Albert was working on getting more food to the starving, we learned wars had broken out in different areas. Albert stopped those, and did some poking around. "Arms dealers are really vile and ruthless people," he said at one point. "Did you know they cause most of the small wars?"

"Obviously."

"No, they really arrange them, set them up. I'm going to delete them from the program."

"Delete them!" I was very alarmed.

"Yep." He tapped on the keys, peering at the screen. "Done. Arms dealers are gone. All guns everywhere are disappearing into rusty balls of harmless junk."

The next day there were new arms dealers, and plastic guns were being produced in mass quantities. Albert was only slightly miffed. "Figures. This stuff happens naturally. There's no point in trying to curb it, it's part of the program." He did change parameters so that plastic guns had a tendency to explode, however, which forced the arms industries to divert their energies back to research instead of production.

"Look at this," he said late one afternoon. "Look what happens when you give the starving a limitless food supply."

"What?" His computer screen didn't make any sense to me. Then again, it never did.

"There's a soaring increase in reproduction. That's all we need, another eight billion people." He thought about it a moment, then started tapping on the keyboard. "Time for an attitude change. Everyone everywhere will think sex is repulsive without birth control."

"Hey!"

"What."

"Hey, dammit. You did it to me too." I had felt the sudden attitude change myself. "Don't go changing me."

"I already have. Several times."

"What!?"

"Way back when I first showed you what I was doing, you didn't want to be in a room full of naked cheerleaders. Then you

didn't want to go joy-riding in the Viper. You've had fun since, haven't you?"

I stared at him in disbelief.

"Well?"

"Whatever." I was angry, but I was also afraid. He could delete me or change me around any time he wanted. I had to watch my step. "I guess it hasn't hurt me any."

"I wouldn't hurt you! You're my best friend, my only friend." He turned back to the computer. "I'll always make sure you're well taken care of."

"Thanks."

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"You know what our problem is?" he asked one day while we were out on our favorite yacht. "I can transport anything anywhere except myself. In order to do it, I've got to be at the terminal. I've thought about creating a portable terminal, but that could be dangerous, because what happens if it drops carrier and we're out of control? So I thought to myself, why don't I play around with the laws of physics and create some inter-dimensional doorways? That way we can always have a quick way back to the terminal when we need it, and we could go anywhere we want."

Play around with the laws of physics? I struggled to sit up, but I was too drunk. "I have serious doubts about that," I said to Albert. "I think that would be extraordinarily dangerous." It took me several tries to get the word "extraordinarily" out.

"Why?"

"You're messing with the programming of reality!"

"We've been doing it for a month now. So what?"

"We've been doing just little things, Albert. What you're talking about is a major change."

"So?"

"So Somebody might notice."

"Who cares?"

"I mean Somebody Big."

"I've come to the conclusion that there is no Cosmic Sysop. There was one at one time, but there's no sign of Him now. He's either dead, or gone off somewhere else. This system is in self-run mode and has been for eons." He stood up and pulled his Bermuda shorts up over his belly button. "If anyone is the Cosmic Sysop right now, it's me."

"You're calling yourself God?"

"Well, I'm not the Creator, but we could easily argue I'm now the Caretaker." He was silent for a moment. I think he was waiting to see if I would argue with him. I didn't. That is, I didn't dare.

That night after we returned from the coast, Albert went right up stairs and began reworking the laws of physics. Putting loopholes in them, actually, to allow him to open the dimensional doorways. Apparently this was a lot more complicated than any of the other tinkering he'd been doing, because he was at it for over two days.

"Brad, it's ready," he said. It was just after noon on Tuesday. He hadn't showered at all, and his hair was sticking out every which way. "I opened the first doorway -- it's between my room and yours."

"Cool." I followed him up the stairs and into his room. There was a new door in his room, and through it I could see my room over at my house. "Whoa," I said. I had to admit I was very impressed.

"Go ahead," Albert said. "Step on through."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Have you tested it yet?"

"No. You're testing it."

"What?!"

"Don't worry. If anything happens to you, I can undo it. Go on, step through."

Shrugging, I walked through the doorway into my room. Something happened when I did -- the light changed suddenly. It was like it went from a sunny day outside to sudden gloomy overcast. There was also a long, low thudding sound, like that of an enormous base drum, that seemed to echo through the whole house. I knew immediately something bad had happened. Turning around, I found Albert's doorway had disappeared.

I ran through the house and out the front door, then nearly fell over in shock. The sky had gone insane. There were dozens of moons, a ring of fire, and patches of night and day like a crazy quilt. The horizon was uneven and bizarre. In one direction it seemed to stretch away into infinity, and in the other direction it was much too close, as if the Earth were only a fraction of it's usual size.

Cars on the road were all stopped, the drivers missing.

I jogged all the way to Albert's house, and found it was only half there. It looked as if a huge chunk had been cut out of the house, and that missing chunk included Albert's room. I yelled out his name several times, but I really didn't expect to hear a reply. There was no one in sight anywhere.

I wandered for a while, feeling lost. The Earth as well as the sky had become a crazy patch quilt, as I found whole sections of town had been replaced by fields, by rivers that ran from nowhere to nowhere, and blocks of buildings that looked like they belonged in Europe. It was all empty of people. It was empty of all living things, period, except for a cat which stood on a board fence and stared at me. I walked over and petted it for a moment, and it purred, meowed, then abruptly jumped down and ran away.

It took a while, but I managed to find my way back home. The cat followed me. It ran right in the house and searched around, looking for food. Finding none it stood at my feet and meowed. I couldn't find any food, either, as the food pantry was replaced by part of a tree and the refrigerator door seemed welded shut. Unlike the cat, I wasn't very hungry. I let it outside and then went into my room, lied down on my bed and tried to take a nap.

I yawned twice and fell dead asleep.

When I awoke it was sunny outside, and birds were singing. The cat was outside my window, meowing. I stared outside, seeing a normal world, seeing people in their cars driving and kids playing on the sidewalk. Alright, I thought. Albert fixed things.

I took a leisurely walk in the warm afternoon sunlight over to where Albert's house once stood. In the house's place was a vacant lot. The street still held the skid marks from Albert sliding the Viper up into his driveway, but the Viper and the driveway were gone. Walking up to where the garage had been, I found the Viper's keys in the dirt.

A suspicious neighbor looked on as I poked around the lot. "Where'd Albert's house go?" I asked her.

"Who's Albert?" she asked.

"The guy who lived in the house that was here."

"There's never been a house there."

I nodded. Apparently Albert had not fixed things. Apparently Albert had crashed reality, and the Cosmic Sysop had reset the program and terminated Albert's account.

Altogether.

Back home, I found my parents had left a message on the answering machine saying they were coming home from the vacation Albert had sent them on. I looked in my wallet and found I still had the license to do anything, but doubted if it was good anymore. There was still a pile of cash under my bed, so I grabbed some of it to go buy some cat food and a litter box.

It appeared the cat was there to stay.

[Oh man, that was awful! Get me out of here!]