

MR. STOMPY

By Brian Cramer

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“We don’t like plagiarizers, do we?”

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*Dedicated to my noisy upstairs neighbor,
watching too many Warehouse 13 episodes in a row,
and the weird smell coming from under my bathroom sink.*

Chapter 1

I don't Know Where I Am

The world is teeming with strange and inexplicable events. Many of these events are simply too complex to be understood by anything other than an omniscient being. Others simply make no sense because the universe in general makes no sense. But every so often, an event will unfold that could be completely understood but for the lack of one important fact. This is the story of just such an event. The story begins, harmlessly enough, with a nurse named Linda.

Linda was traveling home from the red-eye shift at the hospital. She frowned at the sun as it emerged from the horizon to her left. The light from the sun was strobing between the trees while she drove, making her feel even worse than she already did.

She was tired, overly caffeinated, and her body felt like it was humming slightly, which was its way of signaling that if it did not get some rest soon then it was going to shut down on its own accord – possibly for good. She was therefore fortunate to live only a few blocks from the hospital.

She pulled into her parking spot and forced her somewhat bulky body to make the journey from the car, up the stairs, and into her apartment. Being of a caring and considerate nature, Linda opened her door as quietly as she could and closed it behind her gently, as to not disturb the neighbors. Before she turned on the lights, and before she could even know why, she froze in terror. The animal part of her brain was screaming at her: SOMETHING IS WRONG!

She froze dead still while the more cognitive part of her brain, now fueled by both caffeine and adrenaline, began to rapidly assess her surroundings. She quickly came to this conclusion: she was not alone in the apartment.

She struggled to keep her breathing quiet, and dared not take any steps for fear that the squeaky hardwood floor would give her away. She closed her eyes and concentrated; she could hear mumbling coming from the other side of the house.

Two alternate futures flicked across the movie screen of

her imagination. She pictured herself bravely investigating the noise, only to have the squeaky floor give her away just before the lurking madman raped and stabbed her. Then she pictured herself quickly but quietly fleeing the apartment and calling the police from the safety of her locked Volvo, and she liked that scenario much better.

But as she turned around to make for the door, she heard what the lurking madman was saying, and it complicated her decision. If she heard him correctly, it sounded like he was saying, "I don't know where I am. I don't know where I am. I don't know where I am." He also sounded like he was sobbing, which made the nurse part of her brain want to give the idea of investigation another chance.

Against her better judgment, she stealthily made her way across the living room and then cautiously poked her head around the corner.

In the bathroom at the end of the hall, the light from the new dawn illuminated the figure of a man who was sitting on the floor and hugging his legs as he continuously muttered, "I don't know where I am..." The man was dressed in sweatpants, a t-shirt, and socks with no shoes.

He was in front of the bathroom vanity, which was open. He was also surrounded by the former contents of the vanity, which were now scattered around the bathroom as if he had been hurriedly digging them out while looking for something.

As Linda studied the man, she saw that he was bleeding badly from the back of his head. Her inner nurse beckoned her to rise to the occasion and help this man, but a more rational part of her forced her to go back outside and call the police and ambulance first. After she did this, she stiffened her resolve and entered the apartment once again. She left the door open for the police, and also to facilitate a hasty retreat if things got ugly.

As she entered her apartment, she made a little more noise in the hopes of giving this strange man some advanced notice of her arrival. She walked casually across the living room, cautiously rounded the corner, and bravely entered the hallway.

To her surprise, the man seemed oblivious to her entrance. He was still hugging his legs, rocking slightly, and muttering. Linda was about fifteen feet away from him, which was as close

as she dared to go. She cleared her throat. No reaction. She tried it again. Nothing. Finally she called out (perhaps a little too loudly), "Hello?"

The man flinched, looked at her in panic, and then tried to scabble under the sink. To her surprise, he actually fit inside the vanity. The man shook like a frightened puppy and whimpered, "Please help me. I don't know where I am."

Clearly he was not a threat, so Linda slowly made her way to the bathroom, all the while giving the man her assurance that she was a nurse and was there to help him. She pushed aside a few shampoo bottles that were in her way and sat down next to him. She gently touched his arm and told him the age-old lie: everything is going to be OK. With a little more friendly reassurance, she convinced him to come out from under the sink so that she could examine his injury.

The man would not leave the perceived safety of the bathroom, so she had him sit on the toilet as she worked. While she was disinfecting his wound, she tried to get some idea as to what the heck he was doing in her apartment. She started with a simple introduction. "I'm Linda. What is your name?"

The man squinted and touched his head. "Sssss. Ss. Sussss..." "Sam?" suggested Linda.

The man looked pained and offered her a faint shrug. "I'm sorry," he said slowly. "I seem to have forgotten. Where am I?"

"In my bathroom," she explained.

The man glanced around. "I see. Why am I here?"

Linda let out a short laugh, more out of exasperation than humor. "That's what I want to know. How did you get in here?"

The man squinted and held his head in pain again. After a moment, he looked at her with hopeless resignation. "I don't know. I'm sorry. I really don't know. If I try to remember anything, I get a stabbing pain in my head. I'm so tired. I just want to sleep."

"No, no, no!" insisted Linda, loud enough to make the man jump. "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, but you mustn't sleep. You have a head injury and signs of a concussion. An ambulance is on the way to take you to the hospital. In the mean time, just keep talking to me, OK?"

The man nodded his head. "OK, but then what's going to happen to me? I don't know where I live." He exhaled dejectedly. "I don't even know who I am." His eyes started to tear.

Linda rubbed his shoulder. "Don't worry. They are taking you to the hospital where I work. I'll be there later this evening to check on you. I'm sure you will get your memory back soon, and everything will work out just fine."

"And if I don't get my memory back?" asked the man.

Linda continued to rub his shoulder. "Well, we'll worry about that if it happens. I'll help you out as much as I can."

"Linda," said the man softly, "just... thanks. You're being so good about this. You're a really great person. I'm sorry about this. I..." he sighed, "I... I'm just lost right now."

Linda smiled and was about to give the man a hug when the police called out from the living room and scared them both. The man quickly bent over and started to rock back and forth while muttering, "We don't like the noise, do we? We don't like the noise. We don't like the noise."

Chapter 2

At the Hospital

Later that evening, Linda began her shift by immediately seeking out her strange new friend. She found him in room 325, eating pudding and watching a *telenovela*. She walked over to the foot of his bed and grabbed his chart.

"So, how are we doing today..." She studied the chart for a second "...John Doe?"

"Linda! Hi! Oh, I'm living the dream," said the man with a smile. He showed her his pudding cup in support of his assertion. "And please call me Sam."

"You remember your name?" asked Linda with a hint of excitement in her voice.

Sam shook his head and frowned at his pudding cup. "No, afraid not. But you called me Sam last night, so it's as good a name as any for now."

"Sorry to hear that," offered Linda. "For a moment there, I thought you had your memory back. Any progress with that at all? You remember anything?"

"Nothing," said Sam. "Bupkis."

Linda frowned. Then she heard a burst of angry Spanish coming from the television. She glanced at it for a moment and asked, "You know Spanish?"

Sam answered, "Not a word, I just think Spanish soap operas are hysterical. OK, maybe I do know a few words of Spanish – *Una cerveza por favor*. I'd love to know where I picked that one up from."

Linda clapped her hands mockingly. "Oh, very good. Very useful."

"Thanks," said Sam. "So, did the police find anything at your apartment. Any clues?"

Linda shook her head and started to pace back and forth beside Sam's bed. "No. Nothing conclusive. It's all very strange. There were no signs of forced entry. Your fingerprints

could not be found anywhere but the bathroom. Nothing is missing from the apartment. We don't know how you got in, or what you were doing there. The only clues we found were blood streaks on both sides of the interior of the bathroom vanity. I thought this was odd because I know that you only went under the sink once when I was home, right after I startled you with my sudden appearance."

Sam looked embarrassed and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't really remember being scared by you, but I do remember you talking nicely to me and coaxing me out from under the sink." He thought for a moment and added, "So, I guess that means that I was under the sink at least one other time before you got home. Hmm. Odd. I wonder if I was startled by something else and hid under there?"

"Maybe," agreed Linda. "Or perhaps you were going to hide under there and attack me in the shower or something. But then you hit your head on a pipe and knocked yourself silly."

Sam squinted at her. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Linda smiled. "I'd prefer not to, but it is a plausible assumption."

Sam replied, "Well, I admit that it is a possibility." He made a show of examining his arms and legs and continued, "But, I don't feel like a criminal. And I don't see any prison ink on me, or any other tattoos for that matter. Did the police find anything when they ran my prints?"

"No," replied Linda. "Otherwise I would have already told you, since they would have inevitably discovered your name. No, it seems like you were a good boy before all of this happened." She added with a smirk, "Or at least very skilled at not getting caught."

"Yes, very funny. So what do I do now? What is plan B?" asked Sam.

"I've talked it over with the doctor, and we agree that you should stay here for the remainder of the week. If there is no improvement in your condition, I have agreed to take custody of you until you are capable of supporting yourself again. And don't worry - you won't have to sleep under the sink. I have a spare bedroom that I used to keep for my son in case he wanted

to drop by and visit me."

"Oh my god, Linda, thank you so much," said Sam emotionally.

Linda continued, "To tell you the truth, you remind me a little of him, my son. He was such a good boy."

Sam noticed the past tense. He asked gently, "What happened, if you don't mind me asking?"

Linda swallowed hard. "He died of leukemia when he was only twenty five, probably not much younger than you are now. Watching him suffer like that... I suppose that's why I became a nurse. If I can help heal other people or ease their suffering... I know it won't bring him back, but it does bring me some comfort."

"Thanks for telling me," said Sam. "I'm sorry to make you remember it."

Linda put her hand on his. "You're a sweet boy. I'll check up on you later on. I have to get back to work now, or else I'll be out of a job and we'll both be living on the streets."

As she turned to walk away, Sam said, "OK, see you later. Thanks again, Linda. You're the best. I promise I won't be any trouble to you."

Chapter 3

Cohabitation

By the end of the week, Sam still had not regained his memory apart from strange flickers of recollection – odd images without context or meaning – a certain car, a field surrounded by trees, a scraggly looking cat. None of it made any sense, and none of it seemed useful in discovering his identity.

Linda was true to her word and took him into her home. And Sam was true to his word and made himself as useful and unobtrusive as possible. The two of them got along quite well together. Linda had a naturally pleasant disposition, and Sam was humble, thankful, and courteous to her in return. And so the two of them soon became very close, not as lovers, and not as friends, but perhaps as a special brand of family.

Sam had unfortunately lost much of his education along with his identity, so finding work without skills or identification proved daunting, if not impossible. To help with this, Linda adopted Sam as her own, giving him her last name of Carter. She also convinced the hospital brass to hire him as a janitor.

Sam was very thankful for Linda making him “a real person” again, and so he took the janitorial job without complaint. As it happened, he proved to be a genius with mechanisms and quickly earned a reputation around the hospital as the go-to guy for getting something fixed.

After a year or so, his prowess with machinery was officially recognized, and he was given a small workshop in the basement and a sizable raise. On the door to his workshop, someone had affixed a sign that read “Mr. Fixit.” Sam took some pride in that.

Chapter 4

We Don't Like Him, Do We?

If only this story could end here. But there are still questions that need answering. Namely: *Who really is this Sam person?, Why was he in Linda's apartment?, and What was the cause of his injury?*

If you are looking for a happy ending, then I urge you to stop reading now and forever remember these two playing cards together on a rainy Saturday night, or teasing each other playfully as they shop for clothes together at the mall. But if you wish to learn the one thing that pulls this story into focus, then I'm afraid you must read on. And I'm afraid you aren't going to like it.

As has been stated, Sam was a very kind and considerate person, and he and Linda had a peculiarly strong bond together. Linda sometimes even wondered if maybe Sam was the reincarnation of her lost son, brought back to her by some miracle from God as a reward for the care she has shown to others.

But there was a dark side to Sam as well. A well-hidden and usually dormant part of his mind that sometimes grabbed the bars of its cage and rattled the door in a rage, demanding to be let out. It fed on stress and worry and fear. When it showed up, it took control, and the usually kindhearted Sam turned into a beast without thought, without remorse, without empathy.

The first time this beast appeared was about two months after Sam moved into the apartment. He hadn't felt well that day, and retired straight to his bedroom after work, neglecting his turn to do the dishes.

When Linda came home that night, she was in an unusually bad mood because of some problems she was facing at the hospital. She was also very tired after her long shift, so when she went into the kitchen to get something to eat, only to find a sink full of smelly dishes, she was not happy at all.

While she did not confront Sam about it face-to-face, she did passive-aggressively make her complaints known as she aired them loudly while noisily doing the dishes.

Her ranting and banging startled Sam out of sleep. Once he realized that her anger was directed at him, he reflexively

folded himself up, hugged his knees, and rocked back and forth. He looked at something only he could see beside his bed and started mumbling, "We don't like the noise, do we, Einstein? No, we don't like the noise. We don't like the noise."

But the noise continued. Sam became more and more agitated until finally he could stand it no more. He sprang out of bed, and flung open his door so hard that the doorknob smashed through the wall. He came screaming into the kitchen, yelling at the top of his lungs, "Einstein doesn't like the noise! You're scaring him! Shut up! Shut up! Shuuuuuut uuuuup!"

He ended his tirade by smashing a few dishes and stomping back to his bedroom, slamming and locking the door behind him.

Linda had no idea how to respond to this. She stood frozen in terror and confusion through the whole ordeal. After Sam went back to his room, she finally felt like she could release the breath that she had been holding the whole time. Tears flowed down her cheeks, not so much from sadness, but from an unconscious reaction to the sudden stress.

She began sweeping up the shards of the broken plates while her mind replayed the last few minutes over and over, looking for answers. She eventually calmed down and was able to think rationally again. She asked herself, why was he so angry, and what was that about Einstein? It made no sense. Sam made no sense. Was he on drugs? Is this related to his head trauma? What the heck was going on?

And then she realized what it must have been. He must have been sleepwalking. He must have been dreaming. That was it. That would make sense.

The next morning, Sam greeted her with no sign that anything had happened the night before. When she finally broached the subject with him, he thought that she was joking, and suggested that maybe she was the one that had been dreaming. But the broken plates in the trash suggested otherwise.

They agreed that it must have been some weird dream state caused by him not feeling well, and perhaps by him taking too many cold relief pills.

So the two of them made up and managed to turn the whole thing into a joke. Whenever one of them wanted to get out of doing chores, he or she would say something like, "Einstein doesn't like to do the laundry!"

Life went on, and the two remained very close. But then *it*

happened again, about a year after the first incident.

This time it started when Linda brought home a small dog as a favor for a friend. When she walked it through the door of the apartment, it immediately started barking at Sam.

"Hey! What's all this about? You're sicking the dogs on me now? I swear I was just about to do the vacuuming," joked Sam.

"Sorry about this. I'm watching him for a friend while she's on vacation. It will only be for a week. I'm sure he'll calm down," explained Linda.

"No worries. He's sleeping in your room, though," said Sam with a smirk.

Sam had off from work the next day. He was trying to relax while lounging on the sofa and watching television. To his annoyance, the dog was still his bitter enemy. It kept creeping out from Linda's bedroom, getting within a few feet of Sam, and then barking its head off and running away. It was cute at first, but after an hour, it started to get on his nerves.

The dog did it once again, but this time Sam lunged at it. "We don't like it when it barks at us, do we, Einstein?"

And then suddenly Sam was in the woods. He was kneeling down and patting a mound of dirt. He jumped back from the mound and landed awkwardly on his rear end, catching himself with his hands. He scabbled away from the mound in a panic. "What did I do? Oh my god, what did I do?"

He started to shake, and his breathing became erratic. He made himself approach the mound again. By the time he was in front of it, he was nearly hyperventilating. He began to slowly dig up the mound with his hands, hoping to God to find anything other than what he suspected.

When he eventually found a patch of brown fir, his fears were confirmed and he began sobbing uncontrollably. His tears fell on the makeshift grave as he once again covered it with dirt.

Later that night, when Linda came home, Sam cried as he apologized to her about the dog. He begged her forgiveness for accidentally letting it out, and said that he would do anything she asked to make up for the mistake.

Linda knew Sam well enough to know that she wasn't getting the whole story from him. But she saw that he was obviously remorseful, and pressing him for details would only make things worse. And look at the poor dear, soaked to the bone from running around in the rain while looking for the dog. Sure, she

was upset at him, but she also felt bad for him too. She decided that she would forgive him.

Again they made up, and again everything was peaches and cream between the two of them for another year or so. That is, until the boyfriend arrived.

"Sam, I want you to meet Jack. Jack, this is my son, Sam." Linda smiled as the two men shook hands and exchanged pleasantries.

"Jack is also a nurse at the hospital. We've actually been seeing each other for a while now, just going to dinner and whatnot, but things are getting more serious between us now so I wanted you two to meet."

"Oh, Linda, that's great!" enthused Sam. "I'm sure it is hard for a nurse to have a social life, what with the odd hours and everything. I'm glad you found someone that will understand. I'm really happy for you."

"Linda?" inquired Jack. "He calls you Linda?"

Linda explained the situation to Jack, while Sam resumed eating his spaghetti lunch. He listened as Linda recounted the story of their first meeting, and all that they had been through together since that time. He really liked Linda. She really was like his mom now.

He wondered if she would still have time for him now that Jack was in the picture, and then dismissed the thought as juvenile. What am I, ten?

As if reading his thoughts, Jack looked at him and asked, "You're a little old to still be living at home with mommy, aren't you, champ?"

Sam replied, "We don't like him, do we, Einstein? We hate him, don't we? We hate him."

The next thing he remembered was Linda struggling to hold him back, while Jack stood dazed in front of him with a fork stuck deep into his upper arm, and blood oozing down from it.

Chapter 5

Alone

It wasn't long after the stabbing of her boyfriend that Linda asked Sam to move out. And really, he couldn't blame her. He'd have done the same thing. It was probably for the best, anyway. He'd hate to think that he might someday harm her in the same way. He would never forgive himself if that happened.

On the day of their parting, the two of them assured each other that they still loved each other. And Linda suggested that he take the empty apartment beneath hers, so really they weren't splitting up but just giving each other a little space. Linda was kind like that.

But then a week later, Jack was mugged in the parking lot. He wasn't stabbed this time, but rather beaten badly with a blunt object. Jack never saw his assailant, but everyone secretly suspected Sam – including himself. A week after that, Linda moved out of her apartment without so much as a goodbye.

Sam blamed himself and started drinking to cope with his shame. He quit his job at the hospital and managed to find another one working as a mechanic for a local garage. He toyed with the idea of visiting Linda at the hospital, but he felt too much love for her to put her through that. She had always been so nice to him, even to the bitter end. She had even convinced Jack not to mention him to the police after the mugging. She was such a good lady. He would leave her alone.

He looked around the apartment as if something were missing. He called out, "Einstein, where are you? Einstein? Einstein?"

Chapter 6

Something Wicked Upstairs Comes

A few more months passed, and life continued for Sam. He had been seeing a psychiatrist twice a week for the last two months, but as is usually the case, it did him little good.

He had hoped that the shrink could help him jar his forgotten memories loose, but the guy seemed to only fixate on his relationship with Linda. Sam eventually grew annoyed at this, until one day he blacked out during a session only to find himself back home with a sore fist. The shrink refused to see him after that.

He turned once again to the bottle for solace. The bottle kept him calm, and if he could stay calm, then he could stop hurting people. Or so he hoped.

And then one day someone new moved in upstairs. Strangely, Sam never saw the moving trucks. One day it was quiet upstairs, and the next day he was alarmed to hear loud stomping above his head. He thought for a moment that it might be an angry ghost come to haunt him.

As the days went by, it was hard for Sam to disprove his theory about the angry ghost because he never actually saw his new neighbor, only heard him stomping around in the night. The only evidence to the contrary had been the existence of a BMW in his neighbor's assigned spot. Sam had to assume that a vengeful spirit probably wouldn't need a car to travel between hauntings.

Sam rarely left his own apartment anymore for fear of going psycho on someone and finally ending up in jail, where he felt he probably belonged. His only outings were to work and to the grocery store. Other than that, he kept himself locked away in his apartment.

His new neighbor, which he had taken to calling Mr. Stompy, had an erratic schedule. Sam couldn't decide if he was unemployed or self-employed. The BMW he owned was certainly nice, so the guy probably had a nice job of some sort.

Sam would often stare up at the ceiling and daydream about Mr. Stompy. He pictured him as a giant ogre, stomping around relentlessly. He had a hunched back and arms so long that his knuckles drug along the floor as he walked.

Sam always knew when Mr. Stompy was home. The door would slam, and stairs would rattle and squeal as the huge bulk of Mr. Stompy pounded up them. Then it would be more stomping for a good hour, punctuated by random thumps from unknown items falling to the floor.

Sometimes he would hear Mr. Stompy spontaneously cheer, other times he would hear him let loose a stream of obscenities. However, he never heard Mr. Stompy's television, his music, or any signs of him having any company or any sort of normal life. All Sam knew was that he was the most annoying man alive. Stomp, stomp, stomp. Always with the stomping. It was driving him mad.

Days turned to weeks, weeks turned to months, and months turned to years. And still, Sam was haunted by Mr. Stompy. And still, he had yet to actually see him. Well, not his face at least. Only the back of his head. He hated the back of his head. He wanted to smash it in with a brick.

Whenever Sam heard Mr. Stompy banging his way down the stairs, he would run over to the door and peer intently out of the peephole, only to see the back of Mr. Stompy's head as he walked to his car. The peephole was foggy and distorted, so he could discern little else, other than Mr. Stompy had a buzz cut much like himself, and looked to be rather small and skinny, which made no sense at all.

Chapter 7

Meet Mr. Stompy

Mr. Stompy, or Steve as the rest of the world called him, was not an ogre. He also was not a convicted felon, the strong man from the circus, an escaped mental patient, a boxer, a wrestler, a longshoreman, or any of the other things that Sam had imagined him to be. Actually, Steve was a scientist, and quite a good one.

However, like most good scientists, he was a bit eccentric. He had this distracted way of looking at you, like he was only using a small part of his brain to listen to you, the rest of which was busy contemplating the grand unified theory of the universe, and wondering if he left the coffee maker on again.

Sam had been right about one thing, though. Steve really was self-employed. In fact, he ran his own research facility, which had some very illustrious customers. It was Steve's company that designed much of the natural language subroutines for Watson, the IBM supercomputer that once competed on *Jeopardy!* against two former champions, and beat them both.

Steve's current project was a top secret one for DARPA. The project involved the use of very high voltages, so Steve habitually wore his thick, super-insulated work boots at all times, just to be safe. He knew himself to be scatter-brained, so he worried that if he were not careful, he might one day run straight out of the apartment wearing slippers and get himself killed at work. So he always wore his boots. Always. This probably went a good way toward explaining the stomping that Sam always heard.

Steve's project was an exciting but demanding one. He had people working on it twenty-four hours a day. He only went home to have a quick bite to eat, to take a quick nap, or to feed his cat. And even then, he would sometimes work. He had his own equipment in a spare bedroom that he would twiddle with on occasion as new ideas came to him. He was really close to a breakthrough, so he cheered every advance, and cursed every setback.

Steve didn't mean to be a bad neighbor. Heck, he didn't even realize that he was a bad neighbor. No one ever complained to him, so how would he know?

Actually, he did have some clues that someone was angry with him, but he never paid any attention to them. For instance, he'd had four flat tires in the two and a half years since he had been in his new place, all of which happened overnight while parked in his spot. Also, he would frequently find that his mail had been crumpled into a ball and shoved back into his mailbox. And one time, he even found the words "GET OUT" written in red marker on his front door. He chalked it all up to mischievous youths. None of it mattered. Only his work mattered.

Chapter 8

The End is the Beginning

Steve woke up suddenly from sleep and shouted, "I've got it!" He leapt out of bed and danced around his bedroom in excitement. "Albert Einstein, you dummy! You had it all wrong this whole time."

Even though Steve was not wearing his boots, there is no doubt that Sam must have heard all of this downstairs, and was probably not happy about any of it, especially because it was nearly six in the morning. And no doubt, also, that the mention of 'Einstein' did not go unnoticed.

Steve rushed over to his makeshift workroom and started making adjustments to his setup. After about ten minutes of tinkering, he grabbed four small cubes and took them over to the bathroom.

Each of the cubes had a thin wire attached to it, which connected it to the main unit in the workroom. Steve used double-sided tape to stick them to the four corners of the cabinet surrounding his sink. He ran back to his workroom to fetch a flashlight and a hammer, the latter of which he used to pry the trim panel loose from the bottom of the cabinet.

He tossed the panel behind him and peered beneath the cabinet with the aid of the flashlight. Nothing was under there but dust and spiderwebs.

Then Steve knelt down in front of the sink and began flipping the switches on the four small cubes. He took a few breaths before he flipped the final switch, as if running through a mental checklist. Finally, with some flourish, he flipped the last switch.

The front of the cabinet went black. That is to say, it completely disappeared and was replaced by an impossibly black rectangle with four small cubes at each corner.

Steve let out a loud whoop of excitement. His cat came up beside him to see what all the fuss was about, and if any food was perhaps involved in it.

Steve held a hand in front of the cat and started talking to it, "Whoa, you don't want to go through there. If I'm right, that will send you five years back in time. And if I'm wrong, well, I doubt I'd ever get the smell out of the bathroom."

The cat rubbed up against him, wondering if food was coming yet or not. Steve took a nickle from his pajama pants and showed it to the cat. "See, a nice, new nickle."

The cat sniffed it. It wasn't food. Steve placed it on the floor and took a picture of each side of it while explaining to the cat, "Yes, I know, this is hardly scientific proof, but I just want to see if this works or not. You see, I'm going to send this back in time five years. I trust that the person who lived here before me probably never went rummaging beneath the bathroom sink, so there is every reason to expect that it will be unmolested when I recover it five years later, which is today of course."

The cat looked unconvinced. Steve, undeterred by his cat's skepticism, picked up the nickle and rolled it under the sink. "Now you see, all I have to do is shut down the emitters and collect the nickle, which should be noticeably tarnished from five years of dampness."

As Steve bent forward to turn off the cubes, his cat glanced behind him in surprise. Because right behind Steve was Sam, who was holding the trim panel in the air with a very agitated look on his face. Sam swung down sharply and cracked the trim panel over the back of Steve's head. That stupid head. He hated it. He had wanted to smash it for so long, and now he finally could.

Steve lurched forward from the impact and fell through the black hole.

The cat meowed at Sam. Sam saw it and said, "There you are, Einstein! Did that mean old Mr. Stompy steal you? We don't like Mr. Stompy, do we?"

The cat purred in response and rubbed against the corner of the cabinet, dislodging one of the emitters and thus closing the rift in time. Sam picked him up and took him back to his apartment, where the cat was finally given some food.

Steve was never heard from again. He simply disappeared without a trace. But we know the truth behind this inexplicable event. We know what happened to him, because we've read Chapter 1.

THE END
(AND THE BEGINNING)

Shameless Self-Promotion

Other Works by Brian Cramer

If you enjoyed *Mr. Stompy*, you may also like some of my full-length books:

Zero Calvin

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