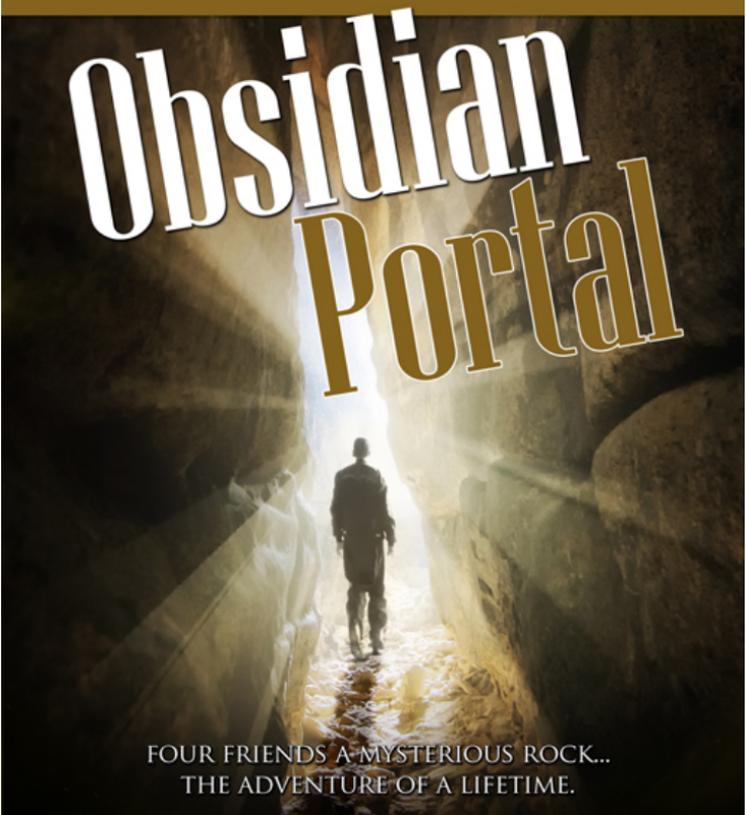


BOOK 1 IN THE MACK'S JOURNALS SERIES

Obsidian Portal



FOUR FRIENDS A MYSTERIOUS ROCK...
THE ADVENTURE OF A LIFETIME.

B. G. PRESTON

Obsidian Portal

A Novel of Adventure and Discovery

Barry Sanders, writing as:

B.G. Preston

Obsidian Portal

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SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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Prologue

Hawaii 2005

It was cool down here in the cave. After the long, uphill hike over rough, black and red terrain, finding it was a tremendous relief. Mack now had shade which was much needed after his hours of exposure in the intense tropical sun. Thankfully, he had worn sunscreen at his wife's insistence. Otherwise, he would be a fried rock hound by now.

This cave, a lava tube, was not on his topographical charts. That alone excited him. Being the first to find and explore a geological feature such as this was an unfulfilled dream of most geologists.

Soon, unfortunately, the glint of an old beer can wedged between two black slabs of lava near his feet dashed those hopes. He paused to allow his eyes to adjust to the low light until he was able to better view the cave's interior.

Mack quickly switched from exhaustion to astonishment.

What he saw down here was incredible and beyond his wildest hopes!

The opening to the cave had been almost completely hidden. Mack would not have found the entrance had it not been for the pebble which had made its way into his boot. It was when he sat down on a slab of sunbaked-lava to remove the offending stone that he saw the cave entrance hidden under a narrow ledge. Had it not been for the stone in his shoe, he probably would have walked right by the lava tube and missed the sights before him.

There were many volcanic areas on the planet with lava tubes, those subway tunnel-like features. Mack had been to several of them and these caves were generally short and unexciting. The blogs he had read indicated that several long and interesting lava tubes could be found on the big island. A few of them, near the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, had even been turned into tourist attractions.

Those tourist attractions were not where he wanted to be. He wanted to be up in the heart of the lava flows and far away from the masses of vacationers.

While he had been spending this day of his vacation up here on this rough lava flow, his wife and fifteen year-old daughter were down on the distant beach. Mack could visualize his daughter frolicking in the surf near Kona while his wife, Mary, sat back in the shade. She would be simultaneously watching their daughter and reading a novel. She would be relaxing.

"Relaxing," Mack had thought to himself. "I've got to be out of my mind coming up here," he chuckled as he compared the blackish, almost lunar terrain which he had been exploring to the image of his family enjoying their vacation down on the beach. They were enjoying this vacation the way it was always depicted

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in the brochures. Surf, lounge chairs, families frolicking on the beach, umbrella drinks and cool shade from palm trees.

“No umbrella drinks here,” Mack thought wistfully.

Once in the cave, Mack traveled about thirty feet into the tube, enjoying the cool air and being out of the sun. He carefully traversed to the point where the light was nearly gone. Any further and he would need a lantern. Nothing here of interest, he thought as he sat down to rest. Just more basic lava.

As his eyes adjusted to the darkened chamber new features began to emerge. What he was looking at was a rock formation he had never heard of. It was obsidian in look and texture, but everything else was new.

Black obsidian, the glass-like lava, lay on the floor and coated the walls before him. Large sheets of it. Obsidian was quite common in lava flows but this was different. It was interlaced with blue stripes and swirls. The coloring was one thing, but the biggest surprise was the size. These obsidian sheets were huge. Normally, obsidian was found in small, hand-size, pieces, but the rocks before him measured several feet across. Mack had never seen or heard of anything like it.

The blue swirls in the rock were a dark cobalt which made the obsidian seem vibrant and alive. As his eyes further adjusted to the light, he could see deeper into the twenty-foot round lava tube and he realized the whole cave was lined with this unusual rock formation. He went to work, taking his small handpick out from his belt. He definitely wanted to bring samples of this home.

Little did Mack know that bringing these obsidian samples home would set off a series of events which would practically change the world.

Chapter 1

Ralph, a Fish & Salt Water

10 Years Later

“Ralph! What the heck are you doing, dog?” Jim Carson scolded his year-old Beagle.

The young dog was struggling to wedge his way behind the couch in the living room of Jim’s one bedroom apartment. As Jim was dressing for work, Ralph had been pushing himself into the small space between his old couch and the living room wall. His hind end was still protruding out from the couch while his nose was honed in on something out of Jim’s sight.

Ralph’s tail was wagging a mile a minute.

Jim finally decided to check out what was getting so much of Ralph’s attention. Pulling the well-used couch out from the wall he saw it. An orange fish was laying there beside the dog-gnawed leg of his one and only couch. It was a tropical fish of some sort, but only the back half of the fish. Jim instinctively knew where the other half was, deep in Ralph’s stomach by now.

“Aurfuf,” Ralph explained.

“Yeah. Right,” Jim chuckled as he pulled his pet out from behind the couch. Beagles, Jim knew all too well, had a talent for

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finding any number of odd and often disgusting things. This time, even Ralph had outdone himself. A fish, half of a fish, behind his couch?

What was that doing there? Had he dragged it in from outside during his last walk?

"Ralph!" Jim complained. "Bad! You ate the head off that fish, didn't you!" Ralph could only wag his tail in return and look up at Jim with his "Who me?" eyes. Not knowing if he should laugh or get mad, Jim picked up the remaining half of the fish with a paper towel and tossed it into the kitchen trash.

It was when he had knelt down to pick up the fish remains that he had realized the carpet was wet. Very wet. "Okay, this is weird and how the heck did this get here?" Another thought hit, "The landlord is going to be ticked if he finds out!"

He hoped fervently that the liquid had not come from a "Ralphasode" as he called his dog's occasional, and thankfully rare, messes in unwanted places. No, Jim quickly determined as he examined the spot. There was simply no way Ralph could have worked his way into that tight space and done his doggy business.

Jim went about the task of squeezing his twenty-seven year old, six foot tall frame into the tight area to clean the mess from the carpet. It was then he realized the water on his floor was salt. Odd. Jim looked up and around to see if, perhaps, the mess had come from the apartment above him.

Nothing. The ceiling was perfectly dry. Nothing had dripped from above. He scanned the wall beside him. The only item on the wall was his beloved *St. Louis At Night*. It was a wood framed, thirty-inch square abstract painting on dark glass of the St. Louis Arch with the lights of the city in the background. Jim had put it

up a few months ago as one of his few attempts at decorating the apartment. His Aunt Mary had given it and three slightly smaller pictures to him after his uncle Mack had died from a heart attack a year before. She had hated the pictures, calling them creepy.

Jim agreed with his aunt's opinion somewhat. The pictures were a bit dark and foreboding, even so, he liked their intensity, especially this one. His fondness for these pictures was due also to the simple fact that they were from his uncle. Uncle Mack had always seemed to be the cool uncle, the fun guy you always looked forward to seeing during family gatherings. Looking at the picture caused Jim to realize how much he missed seeing his uncle.

The design on the three smaller pictures was okay, but nothing special. Jim had two of them on the wall in his bathroom and the fourth was on a wall in his bedroom, right next to a *Star Trek* poster. Each of the other three pictures were a little over two feet square. They were heavy which, Jim had learned from Mack years before, was due to the fact that they were actually rock and not paintings at all. Jim still thought of them as paintings. The designs just did not seem like something which would have come directly from nature.

Jim knew few facts about these rock paintings except his Uncle Mack had found them on one of his many geology field trips and he had heard a description of the difficulty Mack had in trying to lug them to his rented jeep.

Mack had also said the rock paintings had some unusual qualities, but he did not say what they were. Beyond that, Jim knew nothing about them.

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The St. Louis abstract on his wall and the red and green Christmas lights Jim had strung around it were the only items above his couch. That salt water and half-fish had seemingly come out of nowhere.

“Weird. Really, really weird,” Jim said as much to Ralph as to himself. “Ralph, I have to get to work but, when I get home this afternoon, we will figure this little mystery out.”

Ralph had nothing to add.

Chapter 2

Larry's Fish

"I've been working on that compound for two years! Two years!" Larry Morris exclaimed to Jim who sat there half-listening. "You would think the least that jerk could have done was to give me a little credit!" He took another gulp of his beer. "Hell no. He turned in the findings to the executive board and his name was the only one on the paper. I did most of that work!"

Larry was sitting in his apartment living room with his closest friends as he had ranted on. This was a regular event for their little group of four. At least once each week, they would congregate in one of their apartments, whine about work, kick back with a drink in hand and watch whatever was on television. Larry's place was the most common location for the group to get together due to the huge wide-screen TV which dominated one wall. The unending supply of beer, many of which were from micro-breweries, didn't hurt either.

"I warned you about him," Christine Wright reminded Larry as she took a sip from her *Pugs Brew*, a home grown beer from

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Dayton, Ohio. She had chosen it because of the appealing picture of a pug dog puppy on the label. "Your boss, George..."

"Make that George the jerk," Larry corrected her as he glared in her direction.

"I like that," Christine responded, used to Larry's rough-hewn approach. "Like I said, he takes credit for everything. He wouldn't share credit if the bloody thing was carved in your likeness. And, the heck of it is, he always gets away with it!" Christine, the only female of the group, fit right in with the others. A petite, brunette, twenty-four year old, barely over five foot three, she had a feisty temperament and took no bull from the guys.

"So what do I do?" Larry pleaded as he ran his hand through his uncombed dusty blonde hair.

"Yes, Christine, please, tell him what to do so he'll stop complaining," Jim playfully goaded his friends.

"Nothing. That jerk is too politically in. Any attempt you make to get back at him will only backfire," she said as she looked directly into Larry's beer-bleary eyes. "Dude, you just smile, be the good little corporate drone and hope for the day he steps out in front of a Mack truck!"

Christine had previously worked in the same department as Larry in the EPA's Cincinnati facility. One big difference between her and Larry was she naturally seemed to understand an organization's political structure while Larry remained clueless. She was far better than Larry at fitting into an organization.

The two of them had worked together in the same lab for a short while and Christine soon learned that, while Larry was technically brilliant, he was just plain dumb when it came to understanding people. Larry also paid little attention to his

physical appearance. He perpetually sported uncombed long hair and had an obvious paunch from his love of beer. This, combined with the ragged jeans he always wore did little to ingratiate him with his bosses. Larry just did not look like the intellectual he was. All of this hurt him when it came to dealing with many of the managers.

“Here’s to Mack Trucks!” Jim exclaimed and raised his drink.

“To Mack Trucks!” the three exclaimed and sat back in old well-worn chairs in Larry’s living room. While Larry, also in his mid-twenties, devoted much of his earnings to his in-home theater system, he spent next to nothing on furniture. Just about every stick of furniture in his place was in disrepair, a fact which didn’t bother the group in the least.

Larry lived two doors down from Jim and during the past two years they had become close friends. Christine, who also lived in the same apartment complex, but in a different building, often hung around with them and was treated as an equal by the others. The cluster of apartments, while old, offered a great view of the Ohio River and was close to both downtown Cincinnati in one direction and the EPA where she and Larry worked in another. Jim worked only a short distance from the EPA facility so the three often commuted together.

A voice from the next room called out to the three gloomy friends. “Hey Larry, you should clean out your aquarium once in a while man. You’ve got a half-eaten fish in here,” Sam Miner, the most athletic of the group, finished his sentence as he stepped into the room to join the others.

“Ticks me off, too!” Larry retorted.

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"Hey, Morris, you are mad at everything and everyone today," Jim teased him, calling Larry by his last name.

"Yeah, but I just bought that fish last week. It cost me fifty bucks! Can you believe it! The most I ever paid for a salt water fish before was about thirty bucks and now the expensive, little orange guy goes and gets himself half eaten."

"Orange?" Jim was suddenly at attention. "You have a half-eaten orange salt water fish?" He quickly got up from Larry's worn and beer stained couch and went back into Larry's bedroom to check this out.

The aquarium, like Larry's television, was top-of-the-line, but everything else in the bedroom was a mess. It looked as though nothing had ever been picked up or put away. Jim, ignoring the jumble of Larry's bedroom, focused his attention on the aquarium. There, laying on the bottom of the twenty-nine gallon salt tank, was half of an orange fish. That fish hadn't been eaten, it had been sliced in two, and Jim knew where the other half was.

"That's sad," Christine said in a low voice as she joined Jim. She stood beside him while they both stared into the tank. "Larry liked that one. I know. I was with him when he bought it. It was from the store in Kenwood."

Jim simply nodded in response. His mind was a whirl of confused thoughts.

"I wonder what ate him?" she added as she examined the rest of the tank, staring down at each of the remaining fish as though doing so would enable her to determine who the culprit was.

"He wasn't eaten," Jim added simply, his voice had an edge to it and his six foot, lanky frame went rigid. "He was cut in two."

"He looks half-eaten to me. Look, there is only the head left."

Jim just turned toward Christine and gave her an odd look but said nothing. She watched as he turned around, walked out of the room, and left the apartment without saying anything to the three others.

"You okay?" Christine called to his back as she followed him to the apartment door.

"Someone is trying to mess with me and I don't like it!" he exclaimed as he went the short distance along the outside walkway to his own apartment two doors down. "This isn't funny!" Jim added as he disappeared into his own place.

"What got into him?" Sam asked Christine as she rejoined the others.

"He just muttered something about the fish not being eaten and left," Christine paused. "He was acting kinda weird."

"Nothing new there," Sam quipped. Sam, an electronics technician who worked in his father's company, was the newest of the group but had quickly become friends with all of them. He had joined the group when he and Larry met a few months before at an electronics swap meet.

"Speaking of eating," Sam asked, "I'm starving."

"Who was speaking of eating?"

"I'm sure someone, somewhere was talking about eating," Sam jibed. "What's there to munch on in this dump? I'm starving."

"You're always starving," Christine teased.

"Yeah, and, this isn't just a dump. It is an overpriced dump with one cool home theater system!" Larry added as he awkwardly got up from the couch and ambled his way to the tiny kitchen in search of something for them to eat. If Larry had had his way, beer

would have been the main course. Thanks to Christine's intervention, they were able to add real food, even if it was often just left-over pizza.

While Larry was rummaging through his kitchen, Jim returned holding a wad of something in his hands. "Check this out!" Jim exclaimed as he approached the others. He opened the paper-towel he was holding for the others to view. Doing so, he exposed the other half of Larry's orange fish. It was the half of fish which Jim's beagle, Ralph, had uncovered that morning.

"So, which of you has been trying to mess with my head by putting parts of dead fish in my apartment! It isn't funny."

"What the hell!" Larry exclaimed as he looked at the remainder of his newest fish lying there in the rumpled paper towel. "Where'd you get that?" he looked Jim in the eyes. "What'd you do with my tropical fish!" his voice exhibiting an angry tone.

"I didn't do anything to your stupid fish! I just found it on my floor this morning," Jim barked in response, his irritation apparent. "And my floor was soaked from salt water too!"

"Yeah, right," Larry responded in disbelief. His tone indicated he felt his friend had just done some unspeakable deed to his prize fish. He loved that aquarium and spent way too much time fiddling with it. Now Jim had killed one of his best fish.

"That fish was just there. On my floor!"

"Settle down, you two," Christine said as she got between the two of them.

"Yeah, have another beer," Sam added.

"Oh great, that's just what they need," Christine scolded Sam.

"Hey, when I have a few, it works for me," Larry muttered in self-defense.

They all stood there in silence for a moment as Larry and Jim, two close friends, angrily stared each other down. Christine looked first at one and then the other. Sam, just sat back enjoying the show. Spats between various members of their little group were not uncommon. This was just the most current and entertaining chapter. It was entertaining to Sam because, this time at least, he was merely an observer.

“What’s this all about, Jim?” Christine asked, playing the role of moderator. “Why do you have half of Larry’s fish?”

“I don’t know,” Jim said slowly as he retrieved the warm beer which he had left on Larry’s multi-stained coffee table. “It was just there on my floor this morning. Ralph found it.”

“Just there? Where?”

Jim paused, taking a slow breath, followed by a gulp of beer, the last the bottle had to offer. “Ralph was nosing around behind my couch this morning while I was getting ready to go to work. He wouldn’t stop so I had to pull out my couch to see what was going on and there it was,” he nodded to the paper-towel which was laying on the coffee table. “The butt end of Larry’s fish was laying behind my couch.”

“Okay, this is weird, but solvable. Was there anything else there?” Christine asked him, looking directly into his eyes.

“Yes,” Jim responded quickly and then corrected himself. “It wasn’t just the fish. Like I said before, my carpet was soaked. It was salt water actually.”

“How could that be?” Larry said accusingly. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Hey, let’s call in the crime investigation team,” Sam laughed. “You know, like on all of the mystery shows.”

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"Yes, Sam. We know," Christine responded. "Now, be quiet for a bit. Okay?"

Jim's face suddenly wore a startled expression. "Larry. Your tank..."

"Yeah, what about my tank?" Larry said defensively. "You going to screw with my whole aquarium now?"

"The water level in your tank is low. Right?" Jim didn't wait for an answer. "Explain that!"

"Evaporation?" Sam interjected from his position on the couch.

"Oh sure. Evaporation. I saw Larry fill the tank yesterday. Today the water level is at least three inches lower!" Jim exclaimed, his exasperation clear. "You wouldn't get that much evaporation in the Sahara desert!"

"Hey. It was just a thought," Sam retorted, a mock pained look on his face. "Just trying to help. Jeesh!"

"Show us," Christine asked.

"Show you what?" Jim asked.

"Your wet carpet. We want to see your wet, salty carpet. It's what all good fish forensic experts do."

"Fish forensics!" Sam exclaimed as he got up from the couch. "That's me. Whoopee, I can't wait to get the T-shirt!"

"Okay, what say we head down to my apartment and see if we can solve this thing," Jim announced as he headed out the door of Larry's apartment.

Chapter 3

Where Did the Arch Go?

"It was right there," Jim said to the others. He nudged the curious Ralph aside while pulling the couch out from the wall another time. He pointed to the now perfectly dry carpet.

"My fish. The tail end of my fifty dollar fish was laying right there behind your couch?" Larry said in disbelief.

Christine knelt down and wiped her hand across the carpet and brought the hand to her mouth. "Tastes salty," she announced.

"Maybe you just got a good taste of dog piddle," Sam laughed.

"Ralph, stop!" she called sternly to the curious beagle as he licked at the floor.

"Okay, Jim," Larry said deliberately, "if there really was salt water and half of one of my fish on your floor, how did it get there?"

"Don't forget the crab," Christine added.

"Huh?" the three young men said nearly in unison.

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"Here," she said as she stood up to show them the remains of a small red crab which she held in the palm of her right hand. "I found it there," she added, pointing to a spot on the floor. "I guess, Jim that you and Ralph both missed it this morning."

"That's my new Arrow Crab. I special ordered him from Fish And More!" Larry cried out. "Damn it Jim, what are you doing to my aquarium?"

"I don't know," Jim mumbled. "I don't know anything about this. I just don't know," he repeated.

Sam, walking toward Jim's refrigerator, announced, "So, let's all have a beer and see if we can solve the mystery."

"Unbelievable! Is downing some of Jim's beer all you can do now?" Larry kidded him. "My best friend is messing with my prize fish and your response is to get a beer. I'll have a Lite by the way."

"Hey, a guy needs sustenance," Sam retorted.

"Me too. I need lots of sustenance!" Larry added.

"Yes you do my over-intelligent and loveable pal," Christine teased as she stood there dressed in old jeans and a faded denim blouse. Rarely had the men seen her dress up. Her brunette hair was typically in a bun or pony tail, and the clothes she chose to wear managed to hide her petite figure. Her bright eyes were, as usual, hidden by the dark heavy frame glasses she was wearing.

"Okay, enough jabs at each other. Let's make this place more festive while we try and figure out this fish mystery," Jim proposed as he strolled about the room turning on the half dozen strings of Christmas lights which he had placed here and there. There wasn't a single strand which matched any other string of lights. Jim kind of liked it that way.

“Those have got to be some of the most pathetic Christmas decorations ever,” Christine teased Jim as she sat close beside him on the couch. The other two took possession of the mismatched chairs as they sat back and sipped their beers. “Charlie Brown even did better than this,” she continued her tease as she made a point of looking around the small apartment.

“What happened to your St. Louis Arch and the skyline?” Sam asked, causing them all to turn and look up at Uncle Mack’s abstract painting. “Looks more like a bunny rabbit now.”

They all took a moment to study the thirty-inch square blue-on-black artwork. One by one, they saw that the St. Louis night sky was indeed gone. In its place was something new. A bunny perhaps, but as they watched they saw the design slowly change until the blue lines no longer represented anything in particular.

“Uncle Mack told me this thing had some unusual properties,” Jim said in amazement as he watched the blue pattern continue to change. “He just never told me the design could change like this. It’s kind of cool.”

“Kinda creepy if you ask me. It definitely makes me want another beer,” Sam announced.

“My aunt Mary thought the pictures were creepy, too. She kept just about everything of Uncle Mack’s after he died, but she had no problem giving me this and the others like it,” Jim explained.

“No,” Christine said almost in awe. “It isn’t creepy. It’s mysterious. Beautiful in a way,” she looked over to Jim, trying to comprehend what he was thinking but his face was unreadable. He was just sitting back and staring silently at the moving art.

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“What’s causing it to move?” Larry asked, his words barely distinguishable as he munched his way through the chips which he had liberated from Jim’s kitchen.

“I don’t know,” Jim responded.

“Has it done anything like this before?” Christine asked.

“No. It was always the St. Louis Arch and nighttime skyline before,” Jim responded, still puzzled. Looking at his three friends, Larry and Sam, munching and drinking, while Christine was relaxing on the couch near him. He suddenly had a thought. “The Christmas lights,” he abruptly announced. “I just put those Christmas lights on the frame around Uncle Mack’s picture recently. Maybe that’s the answer. Maybe the lights are causing the design to move!”

Christine turned so that she was on her knees on the couch and faced the wall. She bent to look closer at the painting and loudly exclaimed, “What the hell!”

They all turned to look at Christine and saw her hand had disappeared through the picture and into the wall. Her right hand was gone and her arm could only be seen from her elbow out.

Christine quickly pulled her hand and arm back out as Jim rushed to her, worried something horrible had happened. “What the hell was that!” she exclaimed as Jim checked her arm to see if she was okay. “Just what the living hell was that!” she repeated.

“Now, you need a beer,” Sam offered.

“For once, you’re right!” Christine said as she went to the kitchen on wobbly legs to fetch a drink, choosing a glass of wine instead of the suggested beer.

A short while later, a very pale and near-traumatized Christine watched Jim in silence as he pushed a broomstick into the

picture. He had pushed nearly a foot of the wooden broomstick into the picture before it hit something solid. There was no sound. The broom which Jim was holding aloft by the bristles and slowly pushing through the wall picture just stopped and would not proceed any further. The group was silent as they watched.

The only sound was from Ralph scratching.

Christine's experience of feeling as though she had been sucked through the wall and picture had taken their toll on her. She sat stiff and fearful as she watched him carefully explore this phenomenon or, "weirdness" as she thought of it. "Can you pull it back out?" she asked Jim from her position at the far side of the room. She had been sure to put distance between herself and the "weirdness".

Jim pulled back on the broomstick and the other three watched closely as the old red broom handle slowly became fully visible. "It tugs a bit, like the broom was in jelly," Jim announced.

"That's how my arm felt," Christine added. "Like it was sucked into jelly," she shuddered and added. "I really, really, really didn't like it!"

Jim ran his right hand over the end of the broomstick which had just been poked through the picture and wall. It was dry with absolutely nothing odd about its feel or how it looked. "I'm at a loss guys," Jim said as he set the broom aside and looked at his friends as if hoping one of them would have the answer. "I'm really, truly at a loss," he repeated.

"Let me try," Larry asked and stepped to the wall and started to put his arm into the picture.

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“What the hell are you doing!” Jim exclaimed. “Are you crazy! We don’t know what this thing is!” Jim’s call of alarm had caused Larry to jump back from the wall, half in fright.

“Christine did it,” he said in defense, nodding toward her.

“Not on purpose!” Christine exclaimed. “And, I’ll be damned if I’d ever do it again!” she added as she stood and paced nervously. “I just may need more wine. This thing is freaking me out!”

“Here, Larry, use the broomstick like I did,” Jim offered him, knowing far too well how Larry’s impetuous nature could lead to trouble.

Jim understood Larry’s desire to join in on the experimentation but he wanted to make sure that one of Larry’s little accidents didn’t get them in trouble. He handed Larry the broomstick and told him exactly what to do. Larry slowly pushed the end of the broomstick through the center of the picture just as Jim had done. He too hit a dead end.

“Hey Jim, turn off these Christmas lights, would you. The glare is bugging my eyes,” Larry complained

Jim took the few steps toward the light switch while Larry poked about with the broomstick some more.

SNAP!

They all jumped. The sound had been deafening. Christine had screamed in fear, her nerves already a mess. The drink she had been holding dropped to the floor and onto Jim’s carpet. One more stain to hide from the landlord. Larry had fallen back on the floor. Jim and Sam had exclaimed, “What was that!” as one voice. Ralph whined and scampered out of the room. They turned toward Larry as he lay on the floor, rubbing his side. He had fallen back against Jim’s small coffee-beer-hobby-pizza-poker table.

As Jim, Sam, and Christine looked at Larry on the floor, they all noticed the same thing.

"The broomstick!" Jim exclaimed to no one in particular. "The end is gone."

"Huh?" Larry responded, still dazed.

"Larry, what the hell did you do this time!" Jim called out to Larry, causing the others to look at the broomstick. It was neatly sheared off at the end, the last foot of its length gone. As Christine and Sam explored the remains of the severed broomstick, Jim poked around the floor beside and beneath his couch, looking for the rest of it. Nothing was to be found.

"The Christmas lights," Larry offered, finally recovering his voice and nodding to the darkened string of lights. "It happened when you turned them off!"

"He's right," Christine added. "It can't be just a coincidence."

"Hey, don't look at me," Sam attempted a joke as he took a long swig from a random beer can which was among the many on the table. "I had nothing to do with any Christmas lights."

Jim, a puzzled look on his face, took the broomstick from Larry and gingerly pushed it at the picture. Nothing. It wouldn't go through. Jim explored several other areas of the picture and they too were solid. The broomstick would no longer go through.

A horrible thought hit him and he turned to look at Christine who was recovering from the shock. "Chris," he picked up the severed broomstick, "if the power had been turned off while your arm was in the picture earlier, this," he nodded to the broomstick, "could have been your arm!"

"Holy stump, Batman!" Larry Exclaimed.

Chapter 4

The Light-Strand Variable

The Christmas lights surrounding Uncle Mack's picture didn't work when Jim turned them on again. The old, weather-worn, strand of red and green lights had been damaged beyond repair when they had been turned off and the explosion had occurred.

"Try another strand," Sam offered as he set his beer down and went over to Jim's kitchen. He unceremoniously pulled off a strand of blue, orange and green lights which had been draped over Jim's kitchen-computer table. "Try these."

"Uh, gee Sam," Jim scolded him. "Thanks for asking if you could redecorate my whole friggin apartment!"

"No problem," Sam responded, ignoring Jim's sarcasm.

A flurry of action ensued as they attempted unsuccessfully to work as a team. The three men managed to get in each other's way more than once while Christine sat back and watched the comedy unfold. What should have been a simple task quickly became a complex project. Larry's primary role seemed to be getting in the way of the others, while Sam's role was to have his hands everywhere and into everything while somehow managing to do

nothing. Finally, after much grumbling and several more beers had been downed, the task was complete. They had finished the simple job of wrapping one strand of lights around Uncle Mack's picture.

"Are you ready?" Jim asked the others, his voice jittery.

"Wait," Christine responded and quickly dashed off to Jim's kitchen where she could watch the proceedings from afar. "Okay. Now I'm ready."

Jim flicked on the switch which controlled the Christmas lights.

For a full two minutes they stood back looking at the square picture on the wall with its strand of multi-colored lights. None of them would have been surprised had another explosion occurred. No explosion. Tentatively and fearing the worst, Jim took the severed broomstick and began to push it against the picture. Nothing.

The stick would not penetrate the picture.

Christine, feeling braver now that there had not been a repeat of the earlier explosion, came into the room and repeated Jim's actions. She achieved the same negative results. Nearly half an hour later, after each of them had made several failed attempts, they gave up. Stumped. Nothing worked. They were unable to push the variety of implements they had tried into the picture.

"The design isn't changing like it was before," Christine announced to the others.

"She's right," Larry added, trying to sound jovial. "That's a clue or something. Right?"

"I'm going to walk Ralph," Jim finally said in resignation. "I need to think." He retrieved the leash which was hanging near the

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exit, affixed it to Ralph's collar, and left his apartment, leaving his three friends behind.

"Wait. I'll walk with you," Christine called out as she dashed out the door a few feet behind Jim. "I could use some fresh air too. Between the weirdness of your uncle's picture and having downed too much wine, I'm really freaked out!" She came up beside Jim and Ralph and the three of them worked their way down the one flight of stairs to the common grounds of their apartment complex.

They walked silently for a while as Ralph poked his nose here and there, sniffing his way from bush to bush. As they sullenly strolled along under the low lights the complex had along walkways, Christine took Ralph's leash from Jim and placed her arm into Jim's, instinctively knowing he needed her close just then.

After they had walked in silence for nearly ten minutes, they sat down on a frost-covered slope beside the complex's tennis courts and leaned back against the cold ground to just look up at the sky while Ralph explored everything around him.

"How can there be so many smells for Ralph to explore when everything is half frozen?" Christine said, attempting to interject some levity and bring Jim out of his funk.

"Uh," Jim responded, not finishing his sentence.

"Well said," Christine teased. "Tune in my friend. Let's look at the facts," Christine prodded him in a quiet but firm voice. "Look, I'm a chemist and you are some kind of anal person."

This finally got Jim's attention and he turned to face Christine giving her a broad smile. "That's analyst. Not anal. I'm a Marketing Analyst, you know that." This had been an ongoing joke

between the two, developing from the mutual lack of understanding of what the other did on their job.

"Ah. Finally, he speaks," Christine playfully taunted him and gave his arm a friendly squeeze. "Okay, as I was saying, we both get paid to figure out complex things. Mine with Chemistry and Physics, yours with, uh, yours with, oh, who knows, you figure out things too."

"Funny," Jim smiled, Christine's cheerfulness was bringing him out of his slump.

"So, what're the facts?" Christine said as she put out her left hand and began to count off the known facts. "One, your painting did something weird, enough so that it was able to somehow suck out stuff from Larry's aquarium."

"Yep. Just your average, aquarium sucking from two apartments away, wall picture kind of thing. Happens every day."

"Smart Alec," she playfully punched him with minimal impact. "Two, not only did it do something to the aquarium, it also allowed us to put a broomstick into it. So, let's say that it is a two-way thing we have going here. You know, two-way-weirdness. Stuff can go in and stuff can come out."

"And, let's not forget your putting your arm into it."

"Like I could ever forget that!" she exclaimed, remembering the panic she felt when her hand, and then much of her arm, had unexpectedly entered into Jim's picture. "Three, it's clear the Christmas lights, or some aspect of those lights, contributed to the effect."

"What do you mean, some aspect?" Jim's curiosity was suddenly aroused.

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“Think about it. You know, do your analyst thing. I know, for my work at least, that a chemical or physical effect is often not as simple as it appears,” she adjusted her position next to him and looked directly into Jim’s face. “Was there any difference between the Christmas lights which were on the picture when it did its thing to Larry’s aquarium and the other string of lights which didn’t cause the weirdness to happen?”

Jim thought about this for some while. At first, it just seemed like they were both just simple strands of Christmas lights. He closed his eyes and tried to visualize them and slowly small variations between the two strands became apparent.

“Okay, how about this. The first strand was from Wal-Mart and the second strand we tried was from, well, I don’t know where it was from. Not Wal-Mart though.”

“Some detective you make,” Christine laughed. “So, you have hit on one variable. Possibly different manufacturers of the Christmas light which means there could be something different in the material used.”

She stopped for a moment to reach down and pet Ralph who was begging for attention. “Anything else you can think of Jim? Any other variables?”

“I don’t think they had the same number of lights. I think the first string of lights was shorter. I’m not sure though.”

“I’m becoming more and more impressed with your powers of observation my tall, minimally cute, friend,” she teased him as she lightheartedly nudged Jim with her shoulder.

“Shush. Thanks to you, we’re on a roll. What have we got so far? One, I think they were purchased in different places and by

extension that means different manufacturers. Two, I think they had different quantities of lights on them.”

“Okay, not much yet, but this is good. Anything else?” she asked, glad to see Jim was no longer in a funk.

“Is there a third variable, you ask?” Jim pondered as he looked out over the cold winter scene before him while trying to think of anything more which may have caused the picture to act as it had.

Christine reached over to Jim and held one of his hands in encouragement. Doing so caused Jim to look over at her and, seeing the colors on her bright ski jacket, a new thought occurred to him. “Damn! It’s so obvious!”

“What’s so obvious? Fill me in.”

“There is a third variable, Christine!” Jim declared eagerly. “The colors on the two light strings were not the same. The colors! That’s it! The first light string was red and green, I remember thinking how they looked especially Christmassy.”

“No such word.”

“Whatever,” he responded, his excitement growing. “The second light string had orange, blue and I think some other colors,” he stood up quickly, pulled Christine up to her feet and tugged on Ralph’s leash for him to follow. He practically ran back to the apartment with Christine and Ralph right behind him. “It was the difference in colors!” he exclaimed aloud.

“Arrruf,” Ralph echoed Jim’s excitement as he scampered along behind.

Chapter 5

Nothing Works

When Christine, Jim and Ralph arrived back at the apartment, excited and breathless from running, they found Larry standing just outside the apartment waiting for them. He had a funny look on his face and as they got closer they saw Larry holding something in his hands. It was the end of the broomstick and it was wet.

“I found this floating in my aquarium,” Larry said simply. “After you left for your little stroll with Christine, I was curious and went to check things out. Sure enough, it was just there, floating at the top of my tank.”

“Was there any damage to your tank or anything?” Christine asked.

“No. Just this stump of a broomstick. No cracks to the glass or anything that I saw,” he gave them an odd look and spoke aloud what they were all feeling. “Guys, I’ve got to say it, this thing has me freaked out. How did this end up in my aquarium? How is it that we stuck a four foot long broom into the picture thing on the

wall and a chunk of it ended up in my apartment, in my fish tank, about fifty feet away? I really, really do not understand this!"

"None of us do," Jim said as he examined the object. "None of us do, but I think I know what triggered it. I think it has something to do with the mix of colors on the string of Christmas lights. If my assumption is correct, it wasn't enough to just put another string of lights around the picture after the first one blew."

Jim went into the apartment, recovered the old damaged string of lights and laid it on the floor full-length. He took another string of lights of the same length and laid it beside the first one. One-by-one he sat about the task of removing red and green lights from other strands around his apartment and he put them into this new strand with a mix of colors which exactly matched the older, burnt out strand.

"I don't know how," Jim went on to explain, "but, somehow, this combination of lights, when placed on the picture, triggered this effect."

"That's really stupid!" Sam joined in. "Folks put up red and green strings of Christmas lights all of the time and I've never heard of them going 'X-Files' like this."

"It's all we have to go on, Sam," Christine responded for Jim. "If you have a better idea, please say so."

Ignoring their banter, Jim set about the task of affixing this new strand of lights around the picture and wood frame. One-by-one, the others turned their attention to Jim and watched him in silence. They were equally curious about what might happen now. The picture no longer looked like anything specific. It was just a swash of random blue streaks on top of a shiny black background.

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The St. Louis Arch at night was long gone, having disappeared the moment the Christmas lights had been turned on.

The lights were finally mounted around the picture as close to how the old strand had been as Jim could remember. Looking to ensure the switch was off, he plugged it in.

This done, Jim looked expectantly at his friends, all of them holding their breaths. No one wanted to say anything for fear a misspoken word or phrase might jinx the whole experiment. Slowly, holding his breath, Jim nodded to Sam who was standing near the light switch. They stood back from the picture and watched as Sam flicked the switch and the lights came to life.

They waited a full five minutes, thinking there might be a time element to this and it might take a while for the picture to warm up before it would work. Christine had also pointed out how the lights had been on for several minutes before her hand had gone through the picture. They all agreed, it was prudent to wait.

Finally, feeling the time was right, Christine took the broomstick, their primary testing device, and gently poked at the picture. She felt certain it would plunge through and enter into Larry's aquarium two apartments away.

Nothing happened. She gave it another try and still nothing.

"I totally do not get this!" an exasperated Jim exclaimed.

Christine pointed out that the design was not changing which, they now suspected, was a critical element to making this thing work. They waited another two minutes and still the art remained static. Nothing on the picture was moving as it had before.

Larry was the next to give it a try. Unlike Jim and Christine who had been cautious in their efforts, Larry was anything but

gentle. He roughly stabbed at a variety of places on the picture. His logic was that perhaps it would work along an edge or corner. He was wrong. Nothing could be pushed through the picture.

“What about the fish tank?” Sam added as he stood back watching all of the others. “You folks have all been assuming the magic had come from the picture. Maybe you have it backwards. Maybe the fish tank caused it?”

This, to Christine sounded like a brilliant solution until Larry added that there had been no change in his tank other than the water level.

“Well, go fix the water level!” Christine nearly demanded, causing a chastised Larry to leave the room and go over to his apartment. Seeing this, she quickly turned off the power to the Christmas lights. She didn’t want for the weirdness to reoccur while Larry was putting water in the fish tank.

Ten minutes later he came back and announced that the salt water fish tank was full, just like it had been when weirdness had occurred. Knowing the three guys were watching her closely, Christine went back to the wall switch and flipped it on. She fully expected another loud bang. Nothing. This test, like the others, did nothing.

“I think I’ve had all of the fun I can stand for one night,” Christine announced and said her goodbyes to them while giving Ralph-the-beagle a hug.

Sleep didn’t come easy for any of them.

Chapter 6

Walking Ralph

The next day, Jim did his best to put the events of the previous evening out of his mind.

Little of it had made sense. He had even wondered for a moment if they had been on some sort of practical joke TV episode. Given that he had zero connections with the media and knew of no one who worked in TV or film, he soon set this thought aside. He had no choice but to come back around to the reality that something odd had happened as a result of Uncle Mack's picture and he was clueless as to why it had happened.

As he began his day's work at his company, his mind kept drifting back to the events of the evening before. The more he thought about it, the more frustrated he had become. He had gone to work in a funk, but was resolved not to let this whole thing get him down. It did, but he tried to not let it show.

A big help in getting his mind off the strange events was his work. The project he was currently working on for his employer, Reef Data was actually rather interesting. Reef Data was an electronics development firm owned by Aidan Obodin, a local

business icon and successful developer of start-up companies. Reef Data's forte was in the development of information-rich apps for cellphones and tablets.

Jim's current role was to determine commuting patterns and preferences in cities of various sizes. The information, he knew, would be used to help guide commuters to find the quickest route at any one time of day. To make the app work, Jim had had to acquire data from a variety of sources from all over the country which had resulted in a mountain of statistics and more data variations than he would have thought possible. It was his job to distill this data into a concise and easy to index set of data points. Nearly a half-billion data points at last count.

The day's work went quickly. By mid-morning and after his fourth cup of coffee, he had completely tuned out the events with Uncle Mack's weird picture from his mind. The statistical evaluations, resulting graphs, and the presentation he was pulling together, commanded all of his attention.

It wasn't until the end of the work day, as he was driving home, that he thought about the picture. Once again, Jim mulled over the situation, wondering how he could replicate it. By the time he arrived home, he was no closer to an answer.

Ralph was waiting for him with a bladder near bursting and a tail wagging a hundred miles an hour. Jim took Ralph for his evening walk, choosing to take a trail through the park across the street from the apartment complex. At times, Christine would arrive home early from her job and, on those days, she would take Ralph for his walk or join Jim. Trading off this task helped Jim immensely and it was one more way in which he and Christine were coming together.

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The crisp winter air was invigorating and soon Jim picked up his pace as he led Ralph through the city park. He enjoyed this walk. The changing seasons constantly provided something new in the sights, smells and feel of the air around him. This, also, was the closest thing which Jim had to regular exercise. He needed to be more like Christine. She worked out regularly and it showed in what little he had seen of her trim figure. As he thought of her, his mood warmed in a way he couldn't quite put his finger on. He knew she was growing in importance to him, he just had not figured out what he felt about her.

All too soon, the walk ended and he and Ralph were back at the apartment causing Jim to set his reflections on Christine aside.

With the walk done, Jim set about the tasks of feeding Ralph, and unwrapping a frozen dinner for himself. These simple duties complete, he cleaned up his apartment from the prior evening. With the exception of Christine, who routinely picked up after herself, his friends had left empty beer cans and remnants of their munchies scattered throughout his apartment. Jim would have complained but he knew he was guilty of the same sin when hanging in Larry's place.

Jim's last act of cleaning the apartment was to toss the burned out strand of Christmas lights into the trash. It had been destroyed when the loud bang from the picture had occurred and the broomstick had been cut in two. He could see it was long past needing to be pitched anyway. The old string of lights was horribly frayed and Jim wondered for a moment how it had even worked.

Later, as he was having his dinner while watching the news on TV, Christine called him from her cell as she returned from

work. She had to go out of town for the day to gather some water samples on the Little Miami River for lab analysis. Even in the dead of winter, she was known to go out to streams and rivers to collect specimens. Her work as a lab assistant with the EPA was largely a mystery to Jim and he had long since given up understanding just what she did. He knew her job had something to do with water testing but, beyond that, he knew little.

"Anything new on the weird-picture front?" she asked. "I've been wondering about it all day."

"No, nothing. Besides, all day today I did everything I could to put it out of my mind. I had to concentrate on my work. This presentation I'm working on is too important for me to screw up," Jim said. Half watching TV and half paying attention to the phone call, he invited Christine to come over later to just "hang". She accepted his offer.

Living in the same apartment complex made it easy for them to get together and do nothing in particular and Jim found he enjoyed those quiet times with her. Nothing romantic had ever passed between them, they were just two friends who enjoyed each other's company. He and Christine often compared notes on their daily work activities and the occasional dating misadventure although neither of them dated much, and when they did, the results were rarely successful. They were, Jim reflected, two office-bound geeks who were hopeless in the romance department.

"No wine or beer though," she said just before hanging up. "I rather overdid it last night."

"Ditto. No wine or beer. Just you, me, Ralph and the weird picture."

"Oh yeah. The weird picture."

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When Christine came to Jim's door an hour later, he flung it open and met her with a wild look on his face. "It wasn't the lights! It wasn't the color of them or how many lights there were or anything to do with Christmas lights at all! And, it didn't have anything to do with Larry's aquarium! It was the electricity!" he exclaimed.

"Whoa. Slow down, rewind and start over," Christine said as she edged past him, patted Ralph and turned to face Jim. "What's this about electricity?" Then it hit her. "You mean the picture, don't you?"

Jim took a breath and did his best to tone down his excitement as he described to Christine how, while eating dinner, it had suddenly dawned on him that the old string of lights had been frayed. "That worn out strand of lights was feeding a minor amount of electrical current directly to the picture. That's what did it!" he laughed as he repeated himself. "That's what did it. An old, worn, near useless cord caused it to happen. I could have been messing with various combinations of lights for years and would never have been able to make the thing work!"

"Electrical current?" Christine said slowly, stalling for time as she tried to absorb what Jim had just told her.

"Yep. It wasn't even a full charge. Just a small bit of electrical leakage in a spot where the cord was touching the picture and not the frame," Jim said, repeating his earlier explanation.

Christine asked cautiously. "Does it work?"

"Yes, and boy is Larry going to be mad!" Jim laughed and pointed to the wet carpet below the picture. "As you know, he refilled the aquarium last night." Jim chuckled at the thought of

how Larry was going to react. "Yep, his tank is probably no longer full because I turned the picture back on."

Christine looked to see that the picture had the strand of Christmas lights tightly wrapped around its border. Jim had also taped the lights and cord firmly to the picture along one side to ensure direct contact. "I shaved down the insulation on this other strand to match the old string of lights. I wanted the conditions to be as close to the original situation as possible," Jim explained this as Christine examined the picture while trying to not step square in the middle of the wettest part of the carpet.

"About a half hour ago," Jim added excitedly, "after I figured out what to do, I set this up like you see now, crossed my fingers, and turned the lights on and boy you wouldn't believe it! It happened almost immediately after I turned it back on!"

Jim explained how he had stood in amazement as water came gushing through the picture on the wall directly onto his carpet. He turned off the electricity after a couple of seconds, this time knowing for certain what had happened. Luckily, there were no fish this time. Only water.

"Try it again!" Christine exclaimed. "I want to see."

"Not yet. I think I need to get Larry to move his aquarium first, or have him drain the water or something. For all we know, this picture of ours has an attraction to water, maybe just salt water, like in Larry's tank," Jim exclaimed. "Besides, I have already drained a bunch of water from his tank and I don't want to kill any more of his fish."

"Or crabs either," Christine playfully added, reflecting on her find the evening before. "You could be right," Christine answered

simply, stepping aside to let Ralph nose his way beneath her and sniff the wet carpet.

“I can only drain just so many fish tanks before the landlord gets bent out of shape over all of the water I’m dumping onto the floor.”

“Yeah, old fossil-face wouldn’t like this one bit,” she muttered, referring to the landlord. The cantankerous owner of their building seemed to constantly be on the lookout for any misdeed and each of them had had a run-in with him.

Jim and Christine both knew Larry would be arriving home soon and they wanted to catch him before he found what had happened this time to his aquarium. Christine wrote a note and went down to Larry’s apartment and taped it on his door. The message had simply said, *“Come to Jim’s. The weirdness is working again.”*

While they waited, Christine and Jim cleaned up the aquarium water from his carpet. As they knelt on the carpet to clean it, Ralph kept nosing around them, curious about the new smells which had suddenly entered the apartment.

With Christine’s urging, Jim explained in detail his most recent experiment as they knelt near one another. “Did it make a loud noise when you turned it on or off?” she asked as she sopped up some more water from a section of carpet.

“No. I’m guessing it has something to do with the fact that we had a solid object, a broomstick, stuck in it before. It would seem the same thing doesn’t happen with liquids. Either that, or I had drained out all of the water from the top of Larry’s tank when I turned it off this time. Like so many other things about this, I just

plain don't know," Jim said as he stood up to head for his kitchen and retrieve another roll of paper towels.

"What about the first time? You know, when you cut Larry's fish in two? Was there a loud noise then?" Christine asked looking over at Jim, her blue eyes bright with interest.

Jim thought about this for a moment before responding. He explained how he was out of the room that time, so he couldn't say for sure if there was any big noise or anything like that when the fish had been killed. Reflecting further, he realized he had heard something which had sounded like a car backfiring. Jim explained about the backfiring sound while he knelt back down beside Christine.

"What's that about a car backfiring?" Larry's voice boomed as he entered the apartment and found Jim and Christine kneeling on the floor with wet paper towels in their hands. "I haven't heard a car backfire since, well, uh now that I think about it, I've never heard a car backfire. Do they still do that?"

"Welcome and good evening to you too," Jim responded. "And, before you ask, we're out of beer."

"Hey, see you later," Larry said as he started to turn and leave.

"Stay, Larry," Christine requested, looking up at Larry from where she was kneeling. "Jim has news."

This caused Larry to give Jim a questioning look. "About the friggin weirdness?"

"Yes, about the friggin weirdness. We've learned a few things," Jim explained to Larry how he had figured out how to make the painting work again and how he had drained more water from Larry's aquarium.

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Upon hearing this, Larry quickly left his two friends, went to his apartment and returned a few minutes later. "This is more than a bit irritating," Larry exclaimed. "You sure did. Hell, I had refilled it last night and my tank is down another several inches!"

"Sorry," was all Jim could say.

"Whatever. But, please stop doing that," Larry responded and paused a moment. "No fish gone. Just water, I think. I did a quick inventory. Actually one little clownfish was buzzing around so much I may have counted him twice. But, they're all there."

"That's good. Really," Jim said as he stood up from the floor, his hand holding another wet paper towel.

"Good only to a point. Keep this up and you're really going to screw up the salt and PH balance in my tank!"

"Which is exactly why I gave up trying to keep a salt tank," Christine joined in. "I had one when I was in high school and it was really frustrating because I could never keep it working right. I finally just gave up."

Their conversation evolved back to Uncle Mack's picture and they agreed to conduct another experiment.

Sam was out of town so they decided it would be just the three of them this time. Christine, sensing this could turn out to be something big cautioned the others about not saying a word of this to anyone other than Sam. They would bring Sam up to speed on anything they learned when he returned. He was, after all, their friend and he was a part of whatever this was.

Christine wanted to turn on the Christmas lights to see it work now that Jim had reconfigured the lights and electrical feed to the picture. She motioned for Jim and Larry to step back indicating she was going to turn the switch on. Larry immediately stopped

her, complaining they had already done enough damage to his aquarium.

This simple comment caused them to realize they needed to determine the relationship between the picture and Larry's aquarium. It only took a few minutes for the answer to come to them. The two objects were at a similar height and the face of the picture was parallel to the front of the aquarium. "So, does this mean if we point this picture in a different direction we will open up, uh, I guess we would call it a door of sorts, to some other place?" Christine asked.

"Damn, Chris," Larry responded. "That sounds straight out of *Harry Potter*! A magic door."

"Hey, I like that!" Jim chuckled. "Magic Fish Door. It could be our name for this thing. We need to call it something other than the Friggin Weirdness of my Uncle's picture."

"I like Fish Glass better," Larry added without explanation. It wasn't unusual for Larry to come up with ideas which were totally out of left field.

"Fish Glass, wouldn't have been my first choice. This stuff doesn't even look like glass. More like tile. How about if we don't worry about naming it and just think of it as Mack's obsidian picture," Christine said.

"Who is Mack and what is obsidian?" Larry asked and then remembered. "Oh, you mean Jim's uncle Mack. The dude who gave him the picture."

"And," Jim added, "that picture, or tile, or whatever you want to call it, is apparently made of obsidian rock. It is some sort of lava my uncle found on one of his adventures."

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Christine's frustration was mounting. "Now, as I was asking, what happens if we point this another direction? Will it need a tank of water at the other end, like an aquarium?"

"Let's find out."

They spent several minutes discussing how to proceed. Jim didn't want to point it one way because there were people in the apartments nearby. After the incident with the broomstick, they didn't want to risk hurting someone. Christine was concerned about having the picture open up right in the middle of a solid object and causing a huge explosion. Finally, they decided on setting up the picture so that it would open out toward the front of Jim's apartment. In that direction, there was little more than a parking lot and they were on the second floor so the picture should open out into the air above where any cars or people might be.

Jim chose to hang the heavy picture onto the front wall of his apartment in an empty space between the door and front window. There was no furniture to get in the way, making this area easy to work with. Jim quickly set to the task of putting two strong picture hangers on the wall. Two hangers were needed, about six inches apart, to support the picture's heavy weight.

Once the picture was hung, the lights were carefully put back onto the picture and Jim checked the Christmas lights to ensure the electrical contact against the obsidian was the same as before. This limited charge was all he wanted as he was fearful of what would happen if a full electrical charge was applied to the picture.

The three of them held their breath and, half expecting some sort of explosion, Jim flipped the light switch to on. Almost immediately, the blue pattern on the picture began to slowly

move. Had they not been tuned into watching for it, none of them would have noticed this right away as the blue swirls changed at a snail's pace.

"I'm guessing it's working," Christine said in a low, cautious voice as she stood next to Jim, clutching his arm for security.

"And no bang, or other scary stuff either," Larry added with a sigh of relief as he stated the obvious. He looked over to where Christine and Jim stood close together. "Hey, Chris, how come you are always hugging him and not me? I'm the needy one of the group!"

Christine gave him a withering smile. "Focus. Okay?"

They waited silently for several moments, half-expecting the picture to do something entirely new and bizarre. Nothing happened except for the slow movement of the blue swirls on the painting. Jim stood silently and tense beside Christine, both of their gazes fixed on the painting as if simply staring at it would cause the slowly changing pattern of the design to tell them something about its mysteries.

"Is it safe to try?" Christine's anxious voice interrupted the silence.

"One way to find out," Jim looked around his apartment for something to use to poke through the picture. He had tossed out the severed broomstick during his cleanup of the apartment. Finally, Jim came up with a bright orange plastic yardstick. It had been given to him during a recent trip to a local Home Depot.

Jim's two friends stood back and watched in anticipation as they prepared to dive for cover. Taking a deep breath, Jim gently pressed the yardstick against the picture. It went through without hesitation and, equally important, it went through without

causing a loud bang. They all breathed a sigh of relief and the tension in the room vanished.

"Holy mother-of-pearl," Larry said in an appreciative whisper. "Look at that will you!" He and Christine were watching in wonder as Jim pushed the stick deeper and deeper into the picture until his hand was nearly ready to enter as well. Jim slowly pulled the yardstick back out until it was completely free of the picture.

"Like before," Jim explained to the others, "there is a little bit of a tugging sensation, as if it was being pushed through jelly. But it's dry," he said as he brought the plastic yardstick over to Christine and she cautiously touched it confirming it was indeed dry.

"There isn't any change to it that I can see," she finally said. "Pushing it into the picture doesn't seem to harm the yardstick in any way."

As his small audience looked on, Jim gradually pushed the stick in about a foot and announced to the others, "Stand back guys. So far, we have only put things square into the middle of the picture. We don't know if it works equally well on the entire surface."

They watched closely as Jim cautiously moved the orange yardstick from the center of the picture. "The jelly like feeling increases a bit as I get further from the middle," he described to Larry and Christine. They watched in anticipation as Jim slowly moved the orange yardstick toward the edge of the nearly three-foot square picture.

"It stops just a little way from the edge," Jim told them. "But, it isn't a hard stop. Actually, it feels like the stick is mired in something like heavy syrup," he added as he moved the stick back

toward the center of the picture. "The pressure on the stick decreases as I move back toward the center."

"But you can still push the stick through any part of the picture?" Christine asked, finally starting to relax.

Jim was silent for several moments as he pulled the stick out and inserted it first near one edge of the picture and then close to the top right corner. "Anywhere but the last quarter-inch or so near the edge. Otherwise, it resists a little near the edges and the wood frame, but I'm still able to push the stick through," Jim declared.

"So there doesn't seem to be any danger of someone chopping off an arm or something if they touch an edge," Christine asked.

"I think it is okay, there certainly is no harm to this stick," Jim responded as he reexamined the yardstick. It looked fine to him, but he also admitted to himself that he really didn't know what he was checking for.

"Try turning it off and see what happens. With the stick out of it, of course," Christine suggested.

Hearing this, Jim stood back and turned off the switch which powered the Christmas lights surrounding the picture. No loud bang. The elements of the picture simply stopped moving. Jim attempted to push the yardstick through and, as expected, it met solid resistance.

The room had been absolutely silent as Jim had been conducting this test. Each of them had been holding their breath. The electrical current back on, they waited nearly a minute before doing anything more. He made another attempt to push the yardstick through the picture and it went through as easily as it had before.

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“Okay, so the stick goes through alright, but, where do you think it came out?” Larry asked impatiently as he watched Jim slowly pull the yardstick back out of the picture.

“There is one way to find out,” Christine said excitedly and instructed Jim to do it again as she dashed out of the apartment.

Following her instructions, Jim gently pushed the yardstick into the picture and held it in position, not knowing quite what to do next. His arm tiring, he moved the stick around in slow circles as it was easier to do this than it was to hold the yardstick perfectly still.

“That looks really stupid,” Larry taunted Jim.

Jim couldn’t help but agree as he thought of how it must appear for him to be standing there facing the wall while pushing a yardstick into the black square before him. And, Jim realized, simply standing there while holding a yardstick was extremely boring.

Several minutes later Christine came in, her face flushed with excitement. Jim pulled the stick back in from the picture once she returned. “I couldn’t see it at first,” she gasped, her breath not yet back to normal. “I went out to the parking lot and looked above me at about the height I thought it should come out. I looked and looked and saw nothing. The fact that it is dark out didn’t help any. Jim, you must have wiggled it some because I saw a movement out of the corner of my eye in the direction of the far side of the parking lot. It was much further out than I had expected to see anything. It was directly under one of the parking lot lights so, once I tuned into where it was, it was easy to see.”

“The far side of the parking lot? Near where the apartment manager parks his Beemer?”

"Yep. Actually it is almost directly above his car," Christine responded with a broad smile.

"Must be well over a hundred feet away," Larry announced. "That's further away than it was to my aquarium. How come?"

"I'm guessing the picture must be getting more power than before. Maybe the connection is more direct or something," Jim suggested. "The first time there was only a little bit of electricity feeding to the picture. Maybe now the contact is better," Jim shrugged his shoulders expressing his uncertainty.

"Yeah, uh sure, if you say so," Christine responded. "So, like I said, it was there, way across the parking lot and about fifteen feet above my head," she paused as they watched her, waiting for her to finish. "Guys, it was weird, from one side you can't see anything except for a stick poking up there in the sky but, from the other side, there is a black square up there in the air above your head with a yardstick poking out of it as plain as you please."

"Wow," Jim let out a gasp, not realizing until now that he had been holding his breath in anticipation. "And, you said you could only see it from one side?"

"I could only see the black square from one side. I could see the yardstick from both sides," she clarified.

"Wow," Jim repeated his earlier summary.

"You can say that again and where's the beer?" Larry exclaimed.

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END of SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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