

MIND THE GAP

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Please, bear with me here.

What you are about to read is true, though unverifiable by any credible scientific evidence or record of history.

My name is Jeff Cox — in some time-worlds known as The Null. I have been an anonymous nobody, an devnet terrorist, cattle, a harbinger of the end times, a dragonslayer, and a meme-d to death web celebrity on par with the Chocolate Rain guy.

I was a time traveler like you, but not like you. While you ported brazenly back and forth through a fractured timeline, I ported up and down. Well, mostly down. And it wasn't really porting. Sort of just a glitch, I guess. I don't know.

This is my story of falling through time.

—AUTHOR INTRODUCTION TO MIND THE GAP: MY INFINITE TUESDAYS BY JEFFREY “THE NULL” COX (500TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION)

PART ONE: TUESDAY

It's the end of an endless Tuesday. Jeff lies curled on his living room floor, deeply regretting the Kung Pao chicken he ordered for lunch. He drags the comforter off the couch and rolls himself into a cocoon. Kicking at the carpet with his beat-up slippers, he burps and mumbles a *'scuse me* to no one.

Jeff gropes blindly across his cluttered coffee table, knocking over a Boba Fett figurine and a stack of unread books before his fingertips find the remote control. He turns on the TV. It's an old episode of *King of Queens* (a show he truly despises, but the noise helps him sleep). He lowers the volume and closes

his eyes. Jeff Cox bids Tuesday good riddance. He dreams Kung Pao dreams.

Jeff hears a woman laugh. He is upright and alert in an instant. *Was I asleep? Am I awake? Did I just dream I heard something?* The memory is already fading.

His apartment is dark, except for the constellation of standby lights from electronics which are turned off, but not really. He listens: Television murmur, refrigerator hum, indistinct city sounds mumbling through the apartment walls. Floating in front of the TV set (which has moved on to *Two And A Half Goddamned Men*), an impossible thing emits a bit of light. Jeff's mind tiptoes past it and chooses something easier to contemplate, like the time. He cranes his neck and squints at the clock on the kitchen stove. 9 p.m., half past 2019.

The part of his consciousness that isn't studiously ignoring the floating thing gives Jeff a nudge. He turns and faces the rectangle of light floating above him. It has no edge, no depth. He tilts his head, eyeing the flatter-than-flat window. *Was that whispering?* A blue balloon drifts through the portal and

bounces off his dusty ceiling fan. He's almost positive it isn't his birthday.

The balloon floats towards his bedroom, and he's tempted to follow. Instead, Jeff rolls onto his side to get a better look through the portal-to-another-dimension thing, which is what this thing *must* be, because A) He's consumed plenty of science fiction and this is *extremely* General Zod-y, and B) He is looking into a room with three teenagers in it. They are wearing little paper birthday hats and weird, futuristic glasses.

PART TWO: TUESDAY

It's the end of an endless Tuesday. Theda's birthday party shuffles into decline. Her apartment — a source of jealousy among her less-employed coder friends — is littered with empty cups, computer hardware, and wine bottles. The cake on the kitchen island has been horribly disfigured. Candace, a girl she's been seeing for a few months, leans against the wall of glass overlooking the city, arms folded, cradling a Miller High Life bottle. Tess drunkenly babbles at her about corporate security protocols, forgetting she's an outsider, not part of the crew that cracks databases for fun. In the kitchen, Dot and Huck

flirt (well, their version of flirting). The boy attempts a Humphrey Bogart voice, whispering something filthy in his girlfriend's ear. It's a terrible impersonation but she howls in laughter anyway, her dimples stretched to their limits.

Theda sits splayed across her couch, wearing a sequined party dress she'd found at a thrift store, frowning at a column of code on her dev's heads-up display. She balances a wine glass on her knee and edits a subroutine in a window labeled **PORT V1.34**. Her dev projects a floating rectangle of video over the cluttered coffee table.

“—and so ends the eighth inning of the 2069 World Series,” the sportscaster announces in her dev's earpiece. Theda ignores the game because sports are stupid. She types a few commands and presses a button on the side of her glasses, a modified Telegony devnet interface. It's a high-end piece of hardware, a present to herself for crashing the BankHub network while their security chief gaped over her shoulder. She thinks the white-hat stuff is okay. It pays the bills and funds darker head-gear projects like PORT. She digs deeper into the firmware code.

“More cake, birthday gal?” Candace asks. She pushes aside a tangle of charging cables

and a bowl of potato chip remnants and places a piece of cake on the coffee table.

“Mmmm,” Theda replies. She scraps a block of code and spends a minute rewriting it. At the command line, she types `PORT -l` and reloads the baseball game broadcast. The same sportscaster appears on the floating screen, his hair style and suit different than in the previous clip. Candace tucks herself between Theda and the armrest. The crawl along the bottom of the screen shows the score from the 2068 World Series. Theda confirms the clip’s time stamp and grins.

“Is this your video hack?” Candace asks. “Did you get it working?”

Theda scrolls through an archive directory and loads a soap opera broadcast from 2033. A blue screen floats above her cake. **Signal Not Found.** “If half-working counts as working, then yes.”

“MediaCorp’s gonna send their friggin’ goon squad through that door,” Huck warns from the haze-filled kitchen. He exhales a cloud of smoke, his eyes watering. “*Who’s taking our fuckin’ teevee shows!*” he bellows, marching in place. Dot sits on the counter, kicking her legs and laughing.

“Fuck ‘em,” Theda texts to their group chat, biting her thumbnail. “& fuck their paywall.”

She pulls up the Telegony's schematics on her display, contemplating the mess of overlapping lines. She nods and rewrites another segment of code. She types **PORT -50** and selects an stupid-sounding sitcom from the broadcast archive.

Her dev projects a high-def image of a dark room. Theda pushes her wine glass into Candace's hand and leans forward. The layout of the room in the projection is identical to her apartment. When she shifts her view, the walls and doorways line up perfectly. There are old toys displayed on an end table and a poster that says *Firefly* on it. She tilts her head towards the kitchen, where Dot's yellow dress is redacted by a rectangle of dark shadow. Theda peers into the other living room. In the corner, a vintage TV plays a show she suspects is called *Two And A Half Men*.

Candace puts a hand on Theda's knee. "What is that?" she asks. "Some VR thing?"

Theda holds her fingers up to the projection. The air on the other side of the portal is warm against her hand. She jerks back with an exhilarated laugh.

And that's how Theda invents time travel. Happy birthday!

Theda types a string of commands and the portal enlarges to the size of a window. She pokes her head in to peruse the collection of strange old junk and notices the clump of blanket on the floor. Red slippers stick out the end. She sits back, hand over her mouth.

Tess wanders over. “What are we watching? Porn? Is it porn time?” She claps and sits cross legged on the floor. Huck wolf-howls from the kitchen.

Theda shushes everyone with an emphatic hand gesture. “Sleeping dude!” she texts the group. “SLEEPING DUDE FROM—” She consults the video feed’s time stamp. “—2019!”

“Buuuuuullshit,” Huck texts with a turd emoji. He circles around the kitchen island with the last piece of cake and steps towards the portal. Theda intercepts him.

“SLEEPING,” she reiterates, staring him down with her cut-the-shit look. Huck raises a forkful of cake in surrender.

“Okay!” he whispers. “Jesus!” Her friends gather close and peek into the projection. Dark room. Buncha old stuff. Definitely a guy sleeping on the floor. Yup.

“This is maze,” Tess texts. Dot repeats the

phrase with a big blinking arrow pointed at it.

“Hoshit,” Candace whispers. “The fuck is this?” She drops back onto the couch. “What does this *mean*?”

Theda dismisses the question as overly philosophical. More practical questions loom larger in her mind, like *How does it work?* and *Did I just become a kajillionaire?*

“What does it *mean*?” Huck hisses, leaning close to Candace. “What does it MEAN?” He switches to the group text. “IT MEANS WE ARE ABOUT TO UTTERLY DESTROY SOME SHIT.” He dances a little jig around the coffee table. Theda eye-rolls hard.

“We can go in there?” Dot asks.

“I think you mean in then,” Tess murmurs.

Theda dips her hand into the past again and shrugs. “I guess?” she texts.

“This is crazy,” Candace protests. “What did you do?”

Huck kneels in front of Theda and rests his forehead against her dress. “Theda,” he texts. “You are an all-powerful coding bitch-goddess. I bow to your superior dev skills.”

She snorts, mildly embarrassed and vaguely flattered. She slaps him on the side of his head.

“Thank you for the blessing, goddess!”

“Cut the shit.”