

Apartment 4-D

A Short-Short Story by John W. Allie

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Dr. Zachary Howard hurried up the steep flight of stairs to the fourth floor, his excitement barely contained. The report was unmistakable. He would find what he had been searching for all his life only a few steps ahead. He didn't know how it had come about, but he didn't care. The point was that it had, and that was all that mattered.

He fairly ran down the narrow hallway with its peeling wallpaper, glancing at the room numbers as they flashed by: 4-A, 4-B, 4-C...ah, here it was: 4-D. Apartment 4-D. He chuckled slightly with a mixture of amusement and excited apprehension.

He knocked eagerly at the door.

It opened slowly to reveal a short bald man wearing an old undershirt and an ill-fitting pair of jeans. This was Bill, tenant of 4-D. "Are you from the college?" he asked.

"Yes I am. Dr. Zachary Howard, Professor of Topology. May I come in?"

Grudgingly Bill allowed Zachary in and closed the door behind him. "I don't like this nonsense," he said unhappily. "Can you get it out of my house, Mr. Howard?"

"Dr. Howard, please," Zachary corrected. "I'll have to take a look at it of course, but I'm hoping to find a way to move it to the university."

"That's certainly fine with me," Bill offered. "I want it gone. It makes me nervous."

"I can assure you that no harm can come from it," Zachary said with calm assurance. "May I see it?"

Without a trace of interest, Bill led him through the cluttered apartment to where the anomaly hung in its silent, inexplicable presence. It shimmered slightly, like heat rising from the highway, and through it they could make out various distorted forms of objects in the room. Zachary gasped in delight.

Bill grunted. "It's dangerous, I tell you. Look." He picked

up an empty pizza box and tossed it carelessly through the mirage. There was a momentary wheezing sound, then the box flew back out at his feet, collapsing quietly on the floor. It looked the same at first glance, but the text was now perfectly inverted.

"It did that to an entire book once," Bill said.

"Wonderful. Glorious," Zachary was saying. He pulled a brittle wooden yardstick from his luggage and began slowly feeding it into the vortex.

"Careful," Bill warned.

The first end of the yardstick reappeared, sliding back towards them. The numbers were now facing backward. Zachary smiled.

"It's playful," Bill said noncommittally. "But I don't trust it."

Experimentally, Zachary grabbed the yardstick by both ends and pulled gently. Suddenly both ends exploded out from the mirage with the retort of a miniature explosion. Zachary fell painfully to the floor and looked with wonder at the two pieces of yardstick he now found himself holding. One was still the same, the other was inscribed with inverted symbols. The broken ends, however, were not splintered or cracked. Instead, each one tapered to an incredibly sharp edge. Zachary tested it against the surface of the mirror pizza box, which it sliced through with uncanny ease.

"Fantastic," he exclaimed triumphantly. "The middle must still be in the fourth dimension."

Bill had had enough. "What is it?"

Zachary looked at him blankly for a moment, then glanced back at the mirage. "It's a gateway," he said. "A gateway into the fourth dimension."

"How'd it get here?" Bill asked dubiously.

"I don't know," Zachary admitted. He picked up the two pieces of yardstick and cautiously pushed them into the vortex. With a loud slapping sound, the yardstick leapt from his hands and clattered to the floor, whole and now fully inverted. "Beautiful," Zachary observed.

"Can you get it out of here?" Bill asked. This was obviously the most important point from his perspective.

"I think so," Zachary said, unpacking some pieces of

equipment from his briefcase. "Once inside the field, I'll be able to use these machines to affect the gateway's position in space. Done correctly, I should be able to move it wherever I please."

Bill blinked. "Won't you just fall out again like everything else does?" he asked.

Zachary held up one of his devices. "This machine grounds me inside the field," he explained. He switched it on and it began to hum quietly.

Bill looked at it dubiously. "I wouldn't go in there if I were you," he said. "I've seen what it does to everything else. It's not safe."

"Nonsense," Zachary protested. "I've studied these things, well, in a *theoretical* sense anyway. I know exactly what will happen. I've studied these my whole life."

"You've never seen one," Bill pointed out solemnly.

"There's never been one."

Zachary turned on all his equipment and watched as little green lights came on. He started picking up the machines and preparing to leave.

"You forgot your ruler," Bill told him.

"Oh," Zachary said uneasily, his arms full and his heart pounding with excitement. "You can keep that."

Bill picked it up and examined it like an auctioneer appraising an antique. "It's not good for anything," he protested. "It's backward."

"Break it up and use it to mix paint," Zachary suggested. He began moving toward the portal. "Thank you, sir, for alerting us to this magnificent find. And now, I will be wishing you goodnight."

"Wait," Bill said uneasily. "I really don't think you should go through that thing. It's not safe."

"Please," Zachary said pityingly. "Don't be silly. I know exactly what will happen. Nothing can possibly go wrong."

So saying, he stepped assuredly backwards into the shimmering air.

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