Anyone here like stories?

I'm inevitably going to use some foul language, because that's what I do in my natural state, and I hope you'll understand it's because I'm just being me, and not trying to shock or offend anyone.

This story was 23 pages when I first did a stream-of-consciousness dump of it, so . . .there's going to be a lot of leaps over the content I had to cut. I can affirm what's left is true and accurate to the best of my memory. I committed this story from memory during a 16-hour flight from Boston to the desert of Xi'an, China, a trip dropped into my lap by way of some amazing friends I've made over the years in this scene, a situation some call "Johnny-ing it," but that I like to call "controlled serendipity."

[STORY]
Sometime last Spring, I received a not-unusual text message from my friend **[1]** Steve McGrath. Steve's message was one that comes in anywhere from 2-5 times a year (though more so lately), and it read: "JD is in town. Lost Lake around 9." The "Jack" here is Jack Daniel, whom you all know, and "Lost Lake" is one of his all-time favorite tiki lounges (which is saying something). It also happens to be a short walk from my house. Steve & the gang assemble a small, intimate group each time, and we hang out until the shop closes up, swapping stories of life, love, the Universe, and everything.

I first met Steve maybe 6 or 7 years ago at one of the famous Chicago BurbSec meetups, likely Prime, which was just called "BurbSec" at the time, as there were no others yet (man, how far we've come). Steve's a level-headed, honest, caring human being of a level I will forever be striving to come close to. Over the years he and his long-time girlfriend Diane have left their marks on my life, turning me on to cigars and bourbon, new board games, new people, home ownership, and "getting lost to the dance." I'm not dumping all this to try to make Steve some friends. These were, and are, all things that just came from being in the right place at the right time, and have opened doors in my life, many of which were career-related.

So. . .Let's talk about that; this right-place-right-time thing. "Good thing I happened to be there." "Luck." "Serendipity." . . . .. . "Serendipity." It's such a flowery, spiritual-sounding word. It lets us shrug off what's going on without having to think too hard about how weird it is. Here's another word we use all the time: "Randomness." What is "random?" What is "Randomness?" To quote Douglas Coupeland's 'Microserfs:' **[2]** "It's an easy word we use to describe patterns that are too large for us to be able to identify." What's cool about Serendipity is you can call it whatever you want. You can call it "God" if you want; God, a god, angels, spirits. . . and you might even be right. You can make up whatever rationale you want for it and it doesn't matter, because *why* it happens isn't at all relevant, only that it DOES happen, so long as you let it. Let's use, as an example, oh, I don't know. . .my entire career. Seems appropriate for the room.

[3]. There's my fist computer there; I still have it. I've spent my entire life hacking electronics. For the sake of time, I'm not going to go into it; I've got videos on my YouTube you can go check out if you want that whole backstory. Bottom line is, since I was about 4 or so (the olden days of 1983), I've been fascinated by hacking electronics. Not necessarily theft or piracy, but just making them do things they weren't supposed to; just seeing what they'll do when you . . .impose yourself on them. What happens when you make them uniquely yours.

Of course, this meant computers FASCINATED me. I grew up in the most stereotypical Blue-Collar household possible, the son of a truck mechanic and a hairdresser. Needless to say, we didn't have "computer money." A computer in the 80s would run you the modern equivalent of $1000-$2000, and I recall even in the late 90's, grabbing a useful one for $1000 was a steal. Luckily, and it took me FAR too long to realize this, I had a set of parents who loved me, and wanted to nurture that fascination as best they could with what little they had. This meant "serendipity" would bring things into my life like a new Uncle who "did computers" getting an old 486DX running for me at a time when it bordered on worthless (Seriously, it was still easier to type my school reports on the IBM Selectric typewriter). BUT, I found some old batch scripts on it, and from there, learned to write a ton of my own. Shell scripting in MS-DOS - there's an old sentence.

Eventually it meant having to build my own computer, but I still didn't actually have that level of cash. One of my first jobs out of High School was at Best Buy **[4]**, where I worked in the "Computers" department. We had a computer repair shop there too, and they had a policy of disposing of any equipment that sat for 12 months without being picked up. Over a few weeks of dumpster diving, I had amassed enough functional (though ancient) parts to build a basic Pentium machine. This was when the [Pentium IIIs] were just coming out, so, still modest, but now I could at least get on the Internet with modem that didn't use the word "baud" to describe itself, and learn how many pages a phone bill has to be before they send it in an 11x14 envelope.

While all of this was going on, I was also attending college out-of-pocket because I read the student loan paperwork and could not FATHOM how anyone would agree to THAT insanity, which meant I had like 2 classes a semester. I was taking CIS and Chemistry classes, which yes, is weird. By then "computer uncle" had begun doing IT at a pharmacy where he got my mom a job doing data entry. I always had an interest in chemistry since I got my first chemistry set when I was 7, did well in it in school along with biology, and here's the best part - nobody really thought "computers" was going to be an actual career in and of itself at the time. So, I set out to be a pharmacist. I worked in the school's IT department for extra income, along with Best Buy (as previously discussed) and a pharmacy, because any Blue-Collar parent will tell you you're not going to be able to get a job if you don't have experience.

So, Best Buy had me arrested for garbage picking, the pharmacy was boring as fuck, and computers continued to be THE BEST THING EVER. I spent every possible second in the computer labs in school with their **/CRAZY T1 connection/**, writing viruses, sniffing traffic, and optimizing infrastructure configs while off the clock. School IT offered very few hours, and it was mostly changing toner cartridges and rebooting PCs. I had to learn the admin stuff on my own, especially since in those days (maybe still now?) IT admins were assholes who didn't want to teach anyone anything, because anyone who isn't them is an idiot.

That was a pretty great time, **[5]** except for the fact that I was eventually expelled due to reasons I'm literally legally barred from discussing, but the company that sued me is long gone, so . . .fuck 'em. I'll keep it sort of safe and just mention that they were a vendor partner of the school, and I "Irresponsibly disclosed" some seriously fucked up stuff they were doing with students' PII. They sued me for slander, which obviously isn't what happened, but in the US whoever has the most money wins, and I was forced to settle out of court. I didn't finish paying that settlement off until I was 33. I will definitely not discuss how I did THAT**[6]**.

Right around that time, the pharmacy called me and asked me to resign, as I had gotten into this habit of giving all my hours away to other techs because I hated the job, and was averaging like 4 hours a week total.

I hadn't brought it up before, as I didn't think it was relevant, but now's probably a great time to mention that at this point I was also officially homeless. **[7]** I was living in an abandoned Bollywood theater called "The Adephi" in Chicago's Roger's Park neighborhood. I had been couch surfing and squatting since moving out of my parents' house, and ended up here with a friend who insisted he could turn the place into a rock venue. **[8]** In the meantime, I was sleeping on a mattress in the projection booth. **[9]** (The mattress was already there when I "moved in.")

Anyway, my mom had heard about a new computer retail store called "Micro Center," and discovered their computer repair department was hiring. She verbally sent my homeless, freeloading ass down there to apply. I passed the phone interview, and they asked me to come in. I put on my best interview outfit - some ill-fitting khaki shorts, a T-shirt with some nerdy slogan, and a Hawaiian button-up. Hashtag Yolo swag. I showed up 3 hours late, as we didn't have GPS back then, and if you took the wrong highway exit then your whole day was ruined. For some bizarre reason, they made me an offer on the spot. Hashtag Yolo swag.

[10]Micro Center was my new home. I worked as much overtime as they'd let me, and was written up several times for punching out when I hit that max and continuing to work. The

company was awesome. They paid for all the major (applicable) certification exams and vendor training, and gave you a $1/hr immediate raise for each one you obtained. They EXPECTED you to be constantly learning and growing. It was incredible. It was all I wanted in my life. I stayed there for 7 years, working my way up to Level 3 Tech, Shop Lead, Tech support, Tech Support Lead, and eventually Service Manager. I cried like a fucking baby when I got that manager title. I thought I had "made it." I was raking in a cool $36k a year. That's grown-up money!

However, one sortof-sad day my Lead Technician, Jerry, who was also a good friend I had grown with at the company, pulled me took me to lunch and handed in his resignation. My heart, and my stomach, sank. He was a beast of a tech. An absolute tank. We won so many awards from corporate due mostly to him. He had found a job doing warranty printer repairs for an IT asset recovery warehouse, and the job paid FIFTY. THOUSAND. DOLLARS. A YEAR. EVERY YEAR. This was fucking bananas to me, and my immediate response was "DO THEY NEED MORE TECHS?!"

They did not. Jerry, however, was on board. He hated to stop working with me as much as I hated him having to do it. Everything he knew he learned from me, and because of this, he was "almost as good of a tech" as I was. I know this, because he put it right in his letter of resignation. I still have it. I still read it sometimes. I miss Jerry.

With both of us desperate to keep working together, we put together a ploy to convince the Management at this new company to create a second position, at which point he would highly recommend me for the role. I would later discover this was called "social engineering." By any name, it worked flawlessly, and with much sorotf-sorrow, I resigned from the Micro Center.

The new job SUCKED[11]. It was a horrible warehouse job where the supervisor treated us the same way he treated the temp workers he had to divide up by gang colors; like worthless, sub-human shit. Also, since we had conned the company into creating this second job, there wasn't actually any work for me to do. Seems cool at first, but the Internet wasn't that big back in 2007. I started doing contract jobs the local sysadmin would kick my way, just for the excuse of taking vacation days to get out of the place. They were mainly for one-off network site surveys and modem, router & switch installs and decommissions for retail stores. Nothing teaches you networking like trying to crowbar modern equipment into a 30-year old store, even if it did mean being the only dude in a Victoria's Secret, rummaging around behind the underwear bins trying to find a cable run.

Back at the warehouse, I had taken it upon myself to learn how all this mainframe stuff that was coming in worked, because . . .new stuff to learn. I taught myself general hardware management stuff on them for auditing purposes, and eventually used one to hack out a massive bay for managing hard drive data eradication, making and saving the company a ton of money. But. . .erasing hard drives all day gets old. What now.

What now, indeed. Serendipity, as we'll call, it had provided me with a literal warehouse full of enterprise IT equipment collecting dust. I set to work completely turning our PC auditing line on

its head, devising an entire infrastructure for it out of things that were literally going to be thrown in the garbage, and then crafting the server software that would manage automating the vast majority of the process. Really, it was a LOT of hacking - making things do stuff they weren't necessarily supposed to, but had to because that's all that was available. This increased audit line efficiency by some percentage up in the thousands, which obviously saved the company a very significant amount of money, and added a ton to the bottom line. They were so happy with this that they asked me to build out and install nearly the entire infrastructure for a second warehouse they were opening.

It came to pass that, despite EPA laws being passed that pretty much guaranteed this company to make money hand-over-fist, it was managed straight into the ground. My job was eliminated, and I ended up on unemployment. This was actually really awesome. Serendipity had, through a long story revolving around me buying a motorcycle, landed me living in a huge house with a bunch of amazing friends. The cost of living in this environment was so low that I was actually still netting a couple hundred bucks every week off unemployment pay.

I'll be honest, I played a LOT of video games during that period. But, that gets REALLY boring, especially when you don't have money to really go do anything to entertain yourself. I tended a bar for a while and learned to drift from a professional racer who had a crush on me, but, believe it or not, I missed working. I missed working with computers. I developed this very real fear that I'd never get another job that paid Grown-Up Money, as I thought I had no "real" IT experience I could put on my resume. Pretty much nothing I did at the last place or even at the college were part of my job descriptions, so they didn't count, right?

I took all my savings and signed up for a CCNA boot camp & exam, praying that would at least get me a basic network admin job somewhere. In the meantime, I kept hacking. Not for experience or resume fodder (back then it wasn't really anything you'd openly discuss in a professional setting). I'd learn about a new tool or technique, and Shodan myself some easy targets in countries where the Rule of Law is a bit lower on their to-do list, and just. . .play around. Yes, this is illegal. No, I am not suggesting you try this at home. Aside from that, even with my no money, I was still picking pennies out of the couch cushions to attend and sometimes even speak at what few hacking cons we had at the time. Not because I thought they would be good resume fodder or networking opportunities (I didn't), but simply because I loved everything I was able to learn and do at them. Hacking resonated with something deep inside of me, something that was just part of who I was, and so the happiness being around other people who understood that brought was something impossible for me to find anywhere else. I would literally empty my entire bank account every time on gas money and hotel floor space.

To stave off the cabin fever, I pretty much said "yes" to any free event that got me out of the house. My roommates had some friends in the next town over who had been hosting board game nights for the past couple of years. I met a lot of people at those nights, but I made one huge, cardinal mistake, especially for an unemployed person: I never asked any of them what they did for a living. I never networked. It was a casual board game night with a bunch of vague acquaintances; why would I bring up work?

In comes, once again, serendipity. One boring Saturday, my roommate received what seemed to be a Hail Mary email from a friend, Joe[12], asking if he by some remote chance knew of anybody who'd be a good fit for a position they've been trying to fill for 18 months. It required a skillset, or at least a familiarity within the Information Security realm that was difficult to find in the ancient times of 2011. Specifically, he asked if my roommate knew anyone with IT experience who was also interested / into hacking. The response, of course, was "Yeah; so do you. That guy that you've been playing board games with for months." My roommate ran it by me, and we laughed especially hard, as the three of us were already slated for another board game night with Joe in just a few hours.

I spoke with Joe briefly about the position, and it was a bizarre dream come true. Turns out, this was a BIG retail corporation. Like Fortune 500 / Global 1000 big. Like 6th-largest online retailer on Earth big[13]. I had no idea you could actually be paid Grown-Up money learning new hacking techniques and engineering systems to defend against them. It was crazy bananas. I sent him a resume that likely looked like a 4th-grader with a severe head injury wrote it, and he somehow convinced the company to call me for an interview me.

Long-story-sortof-short, I got the job. 18 months in, they even fought to promote me to Senior despite me not meeting the HR experience requirements, as I had been doing Senior-level work since pretty much the moment I started. I found out right around then that I wasn't even the most qualified person they had interviewed for that role back when they hired me. I wasn't even the second-most qualified. So why did they hire me? Because I was passionate, and I was able to provide metrics to demonstrate that passion. They knew that you can hire in someone and teach them to perform a task, but you can't teach them to give a shit about that task. You can hire in someone with years of experience and no actual interest in the field, and someone with no experience but a huge passion for it, and in the long run, you're going to get exponentially better output from the passionate worker.

As serendipity would once again have it, or possibly just excellent hiring practices, that company ended up having what I would eventually discover was some of the best IT, and specifically infosec leadership and team members ever. There was not a single day that I woke up and had that "I do not want to go to work" feeling. That job never jumped the shark.

Unfortunately, but also as-expected if you've been following along, I soon found myself once again out of a job. Well, sortof. Our company was going through a merger that day-by-day felt more-and-more like a hostile takeover, and we were all given our final working dates. Fortunately, these were 12-24 months in the future, giving everyone time to find an alternate source of income. Joe had found a CISSP boot camp to spend our last training dollars on, and we all know many jobs out there list that as a requirement, so this was a no brainer.

Once word got out that Johnny Christmas was on the market, I couldn't go a month without somebody asking me what it would take to get me into their company. Mind you this is with most people not even knowing what I actually /did/ for a living; most people knew me from my networking and speaking at cons and meetups, and my general Internet presence. I kicked around the idea of being an SE for a long time, having some serious phone calls with the likes of Carbon Black, Bit9 and Rapid7, but none of them were technical enough for me. I wasn't ready to put down the screwdriver yet.

Then, you guessed it, serendipity. An old friend, Essobi, hit me up one day. I had seen him in person a totally of maybe 4 times by this point, as he lived dangerously below the Mason-Dixon line. I met him at a massive house party he was throwing the day before DerbyCon 2, in fact. Not really even an infosec event; just a "come eat some barbecue and fly quads and smoke cigars" party. Anyway, he was hitting me up because a Chicago MSSP called "Redlegg" had hired him on to build out a penetration testing offering, and entrusted him with hunting down the best people for the job. He knew I had been deep into the hacking scene forever, and really thought my notoriety would help to promote the company and get the team off to a running start. Also: WE'RE HIRING!

Obviously, I kept rolling elsewhere in the information security field. I'm a founding member, Director of Entertainment and Social Media Coordinator for CircleCityCon in Indianapolis, again, just because some friends in the in the industry had seen what I did in these realms on my own. I'm Core Staff for Chicago's famous "Burbsec" meetups. I've spoken at nearly 70 conferences in 6 countries, both on career advancement, and my own security research and hacktivism. I've met a lot of passionate people that I click with in a way that I had never known before when I was growing up and never leaving the house, because I thought nobody was into what I was into. Turns out I just needed to leave my house, or even Chicago, once in a while

Speaking of Chicago, Let's talk about Michael Jordan [14] for a minute. Everyone in THE WORLD knew him in the 90's because he absolutely dominated the game of basketball, right? He HOLDS WORLD RECORDS for scoring. He must have been the most skilled shooter in the history of the NBA, right?

NOPE. For a large portion of the HEIGHT of his career, he was incredibly, almost perfectly, average[15]. His ratio of shots he took vs. how many actually went in was right in the middle of the NBA. So, how did he end up with huge per-game scoring averages with such an incredibly

average shot percentage? Somebody do the math. Shout it out. The answer is: He took more shots than anybody else. He took every shot he could whenever any logical possibility presented itself.

In an infinite universe with infinite possibilities, there is an infinite number of things that can happen to you; they're only limited by the contexts in which you find yourself. If you rarely put yourself into social situations, then you're rarely going to have anyone present anything to you that is beneficial to your life. If you never say yes to those things that are presented to you, you never know where they may have led, and you'll never benefit from what the payoffs may have been 15 years down the road. You miss 100% of the shots you don't take, and you don't get into the NBA by polishing your rock collection in your basement. Nevermind that Michael Jordan's college major was Geology.

. . . .I guess I should get back to that story I started 20 minutes ago. We last left our heroes Jack, Steve and the Gang imbibing in maybe just a bit too much tiki-flavored goodness:

Somewhere around 1:30 in the morning I leaned into Jack and asked with as little slurring as all of the rum and banana cream liqueur would allow: **[DRUNK]** "Hey, if you guys ever need me at BSides LV, to MC an event or help run a game show or something, I'd love to be able to help you out and with help you with help with that."   Without even thinking, his response was "You know, why don't you come keynote this year?" In my head was a stream of shocked/excited profanity and blasphemy. **"BSides Las Vegas! The Mecca of BSides!** Luckily, what came out of my mouth was "Ha-ha; sure! . . .what do you want me to talk about?" This is my standard response when cons ask me to speak, and it's completely cheating because I'm just a dancing monkey who will riff on whatever topic you think up, and I like just telling them to make that decision for me. Again, without having to even think about it he says: "Well, you have you've had such a weird career path getting to where you are. why don't you just come hang out and tell your story?"

And, so I did.
Thank you.