

A

PROBABILITY EXPERIMENT

TURNED ME INTO A

CLOCKWORK GIRL

AND I REALLY DON'T KNOW
WHAT TO MAKE OF IT ALL

Eventually, the coffee and cakes got to Emma, and she had to excuse herself to go take care of business. By this point I really was running down, and I followed her to the public bathrooms in the lifeguard shack, to have her wind me once she'd finished. I was staring out across the lake, waiting for her, when I felt it: the sensation of my body slowing to a halt. I hadn't experienced this since that first morning, but it was instantly familiar. *Great*, I thought. *Next comes the time-lapse, right?* I wasn't looking forward to this, but it wasn't as scary now that I understood it.

Or, at least, it wasn't until I heard something snuffling around over by the trash cans. Shit, that could be anything, out here - a raccoon? A bear? Then it padded toward me... I stood there, frozen. Why wasn't the time-lapse kicking in? Reality should've been accelerating around me, but instead each moment seemed to crawl by at an agonizing pace. Was this a survival mechanism...? What was the use of it if I couldn't *move!*?

I felt something grab hold of my leg, and then it was scampering up my side to my shoulder. *Oh please, please, please don't be-*

A hideous little face peered around the edges of my vision, grinning demoniacally. *Holy mother of God-!* I *hated* these things: Darling's macaque, if I remembered the name correctly, the inexplicable pet-craze homunculus of a decade ago. Hordes of them had been bought and abandoned just as swiftly once the fad was over, and most of them ended up as strays, scavenging dumpsters and trash cans. The DNR was trying to eradicate them as an invasive species, but they were tenacious and clever enough to make it a challenge.

I ***hated*** them! If Winston Smith's Room 101 had rats, mine had *these* little ghouls. The face was too round, the smile too broad - like those creepy hand-puppets they use in Sunday school or chintzy children's theater, where the head is just a foam sphere split in half at the equator, covered in some unnaturally-colored fabric "skin" - and the humanlike head of hair just emphasized how *inhuman* the rest was. This was the face of the Uncanny Valley - and they smelled like armpit fumes to boot. Reeking, tricky, sociopathic, freakish little bastards - how had they *ever* been popular!?

She - it was a she, the longer hair was a sign with these things - leered at me with that hideous little grin, sniffing at my face and hair. Probably the creature was looking for food and didn't know what to make of me, but between my gut-level horror and loathing of the things, the temperamental nature of many primates, and the fact that I was immobilized and unable to *do* anything about the situation, I was on high alert, the closest thing to real, consuming *panic* I'd experienced since my change. *Get it off get it off get it **off-!***

It began pawing through my hair, but there were no lice to be had. It sniffed my lips so closely that it was nearly a kiss; I cringed on the inside, but that was all I could do. God, I smelled like pancake batter and maple syrup, didn't I...? This stupid fabric absorbed scents far too easily. And here I was, motionless but hyper-aware, utterly helpless, *alone* with this terrifying inhuman *thing*...

"Stu? Hey, you okay?"

Oh thank **God**. That was Emma's voice. She could get this *thing* off of me...

"Oh, *gross*," she said, rounding the corner and catching sight of the creature. "Go on, shoo! Get outta here!" She tried to wave it off, but it wasn't skittish enough to take off just like that. She batted at it more directly, but it dodged, hid behind my head, and then paused atop my back, sniffing curiously at the air.

Oh *shit*. I might smell a bit like food, but Emma was the one who'd actually been eating. I felt the creature clamber up the back of my head and prepare to spring. If it got hold of her head...! But what could I do? I was motionless, wasn't I? Or...was that just a mode I was operating in? I could will myself to sleep, and, obviously, I could continue operating at normal speed when I was running down, if needed; I only had so much energy, but maybe it was possible to decide how I used it?

I tried to focus as totally as possible on the sensations of its movement, which was exquisitely awful. I felt its thin little fingers dig into my "scalp," its leg muscles tense up...and, at the exact moment they released, I threw everything I had - literally shifting gears - into lurching forward and bending at the waist, giving it an assist it hadn't anticipated and sending it soaring over Emma's shoulders to land in the snow on the other side of her.

Unfortunately, that wasn't the end of it. Hungry *and* enraged, the disgusting little beast screeched, whirled around, and bounded back towards Emma. "Hey, what the-!?" she sputtered, trying to kick the thing off her leg. "Gah! *Stop!*" It scrambled up to her waist and for a moment they wrestled for possession of her head. Emma was as worked-up as I'd *felt*, but she wasn't used to whatever weird kind of close-quarters combat this counted as, and in a moment the creature was scampering off on two legs with her in its arms.

"**STOOOP!!!**" she shrieked, tearing off blindly after it; to my amazement, she did actually seem to have a sense of where she was in relation to herself, despite being unable to see. "Get *back* here, you little *bitch!*"

This was *not* good. Even worse, it'd taken off across the lake, towards the hole - to lose her in the crowd? I didn't know. But if it dropped her, if she went in the water... I tried to move again, but it was no use; I'd been burning the candle at both ends, and now the time-lapse was hitting me *hard*. Emma seemed to accelerate at warp speed as time slowed around me, and I was tilted too far forward and couldn't correct. I slowly tipped over, clanging to the ground as the last bits of energy unwound from my mainspring.

Finally, my perception slowed to the point where even persistence of vision failed, and I watched in slide-show format as Emma chased it all the way to the hole - just in time for Tammy to surface, lunge out of the water, plant her hands on the ice, and turn in a mighty sweep, meeting the creature dead-on with a powerful and precise tail-smack - *just* missing Emma, and sending it flying into the dist-

-ance?

The next thing I knew, everything was different. I had a brief flash of a dark, enclosed space and orange light filtering in from above before my perception lurched in the now-familiar way that it did when the person winding me started the next turn. The next flash filled me in - it was an icehouse, with small windows at the top of the walls letting in just enough light to see by.

I wasn't fully wound until nearly a minute later, but I recognized Tammy's touch; and when I turned around, there she was, seated on the bench next to me. My energy was back, but I was in the same mental and emotional state as when I stopped; I didn't say anything, just started trembling, shaking, wishing I could cry. She took me in her arms and hugged me tightly until I calmed down, my tempo slowing, my inner workings settling back into order... "*God* I'm glad you're okay," she said, her voice a little shaky. "When we got back to shore and found you..."

"Heck," said Emma, from the other end of the bench, "it's good just to hear all that *racket* you make. Seeing you lying there dead silent just about gave us a heart attack. And we didn't know if your insides were too brittle to take being wound up out in the cold, so we had to borrow *this* shack just for the heater..."

I stared into the glowing kerosene heater for a long while, trying to process this. I'd stopped, completely. The undiscovered country, the big unknown since I'd become this thing...now I knew. I wasn't dead, at least, but it was still unsettling to realize that yes, my entire existence really was contained in the state of the intricate clockwork mechanisms inside me. I was a machine...

"Stu?" Tammy said. "You okay? Please, say something. We've been freaking out this whole time."

I frowned. "Wha...what time is it?"

"Nearly four," Emma said. "We wanted to make really sure you warmed up, just in case."

That explained the light; the sun must already be setting. "What...what *happened*, there?" I asked Tammy. "Did you *hear* us? Underwater?"

She shook her head. "No - I just happened to be surfacing when I heard Emma yelling her head off-" She frowned. "Uh, sorry."

Emma waved her free hand dismissively. "Meh. Anyway, that little cretin was just dashing through the crowd when Tammy pulled that kickass tail-sweep. Girl, you didn't even break stride!" she laughed, then frowned. "Uh, sorry...?"

Tammy waved it off as well. "It was just damn lucky that all played out the way it did," she said. "If that thing had actually run off with you..."

"It's lucky you got it first," Emma said, gritting her teeth. "Swear to God, I was going to wring its scrawny little neck when I caught it."

"I...I'm sorry," I murmured. "I'm so sorry..."

"Huh?" Emma said. "For *what*? It's that little simian bitch that started all this."

"But...I couldn't *do* anything," I said. "You only got dragged in 'cause you were trying to help *me*..."

"Oh, come, now," she said. "It's not like this is *your* fault. Hell, you were even trying to help me when you could barely *move*. Don't think I didn't see that."

"And I'm the one that dragged you both here," Tammy said, putting an arm around my shoulder. "C'mon - what'd we say? We're all in this together - we're all here to support each other, because we're all dealing with this craziness. There's absolutely no reason for you to get all guilt-complex on us."

I nodded, but I wasn't buying it. I'd just felt so *helpless*...

"Anyway," Emma said to Tammy, "you really gotta try those things they're making at the pavilion. They're delicious."

"I, uh...I already ate," she muttered.

We stared at her. "Huh?" I said. "Was there a *restaurant* down there?" I didn't *think* a lake this small would have any other merfolk living in it...

Tammy looked more than a little sheepish. "No...I, uh...I caught a fish." She looked me in the eye. "Is...is that weird...? I just got so hungry, and there was this, what, a perch, I think...? It just felt natural..."

Emma stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing. "Man, fresh sushi to go? You *would*."

"*Sashimi*," she corrected. "I, uh...I *did* make sure it was dead before I started eating it..." She was starting to turn a little red.

"I, uh, think that's normal-ish," I said, trying to wrap my head around it. "Or at least not that weird. Though I think most merfolk carry a knife for that kind of thing."

Tammy nodded. "I'm definitely gonna have to get one. I only ate half before this humongous fish with a mouthful of needles came over to get a bite. Had to be damn near 6' long. I figured it was better if he had the perch than *me*."

"It's just such a picture, *you* getting all nature-red-in-tooth-and-claw," Emma chuckled. "I guess the blood washed out by the time you got back...?"

She nodded. "That was at the other end of the lake, so yeah, plenty of water to clean it up."

"Seriously?" I said. "That's, what, two and a half miles from here...?"

Tammy got a sheepish grin on her face. "Probably, yep."

"Aaand *how* long did it take you to cover it?" Emma prompted, a teasing tone in her voice and a twinkle in her eye.

"...Ten minutes?"

Emma slapped her knee. "*Damn*, girl!" she laughed. "You're faster in the water than you are on wheels!"

"No *wonder* you worked up an appetite!" I said. Tammy and Emma were both laughing, and I found myself laughing with them. The experience back on shore still nagged at the back of my mind, but for now, with the immediate trauma over, it felt good to share a laugh with my classmates...my roommates...my *friends*.

Once we were sure I was in good working order, we left the icehouse to its owner, who'd politely gone out for a smoke while we talked. Emma held her head tightly as she sidled around the hole in the ice, and I stepped carefully myself, though it wasn't nearly wide enough for me to go through. Tammy wasn't worried, but she was still the last out; she was still figuring out locomotion on land, and she ended up sort of sidewinding, drawing her tail up next to her, planting it against the ice, and lunging forward as she straightened out. It was a sight.

Once she was back in her chair (and bundled up,) we returned to shore. Emma slipped into the bathroom to check whether she'd gotten scratched or bit while tussling with the monkey, which left Tammy and I standing outside. I felt a little nervous being back at the scene, but it was reassuring to have her there instead of being alone.

"Um, Stu," she said, while we were waiting, "do you have any plans for Thanksgiving?"

"Uh, no," I said, a little surprised. "I hadn't even thought about it since before this happened, and...I wasn't *planning* on going anywhere."

Tammy looked a little surprised as well. "You...were just gonna hang out in the dorm?" She frowned. "I guess you didn't need to worry about running down, then."

I hadn't thought of *that*, either. If both my roommates had plans, I'd have nobody to wind me for an entire four-day weekend. "W-well, uh...I guess it's not so much of a concern now," I said. "We didn't know what'd happen before, but...no harm done." It still felt a little disturbing to contemplate, though...

She shook her head. "N-no, that's, uh...look, what I'm getting at is, if you don't have plans, do you want to come to my house? It's only a few hours from here, down Highway 23."

"I, uh...I can't eat," I said. This seemed...odd...to me. Was this normal in her family, inviting not-quite-strangers to their gatherings...?

"Well, yeah," she replied. "Not for the dinner, just...you know, for the company. Beats sitting around all weekend, right? Plus...well, I still haven't told my family. I'm not seriously *worried*, but it'd be nice to have the moral support."

Okay, that made more sense; and if I could be useful, I might as well... "You're, uh, you're sure your folks won't mind?" I asked.

She nodded. "I've invited friends over before. We're a pretty relaxed bunch."

"Uh, o-okay, I guess." It still seemed a little strange to me, but if they didn't mind, it should be fine, right...?

"What," Emma said, coming out of the bathroom, "you're not gonna invite me, too?"

Tammy shot her a Look. "Do *you* wanna be there when I tell my dad and brothers who got me involved in a high-energy metamorphics experiment gone awry?"

"Point." Emma set herself on her knee as she adjusted her stocking cap, then tucked herself back under her arm. "Shall we go?"

We did - straight back to the dorm, where we spent the evening unwinding and chilling out. I kept Lucky close at hand, petting her, feeling thankful that *our* homunculus was a sweet-tempered little mushroom-thing and not a hideous little monster. Thankfully, I didn't have any dreams that night.