

A

PROBABILITY EXPERIMENT

TURNED ME INTO A

CLOCKWORK GIRL

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

"Here" was a weathered old farmhouse dating to the early '40s at the latest; more likely, to when the Ottoman Empire was still a thing. Despite its age, it looked well-kept; it'd been re-painted within my lifetime, and it looked structurally sound (though the front porch had clearly been shored up recently.) The ramshackle barn, less so; the brick-walled ground floor was intact, but the roof had caved in and the haymow was exposed to the elements. The silo probably hadn't had a roof on it since the Reagan administration.

There was no sign of livestock besides some chickens pecking around in the snow outside a more recently-built coop; a machine shed off by the treeline housed a small tractor and some tilling implements; from the driveway, it looked like most of the property was dedicated to produce. A weathered and snowed-over sign, chainsaw-carved, stood opposite the mailbox, and read: **ARCADIA**. I wondered if the farm was a self-supporting venture or a hobby project that'd gotten out of hand, but it wasn't really my business.

We got out of the car, and I had to marvel at the sheer *quiet*. We were miles off even the state highway, let alone I-35; apart from the house across the road, we were probably a mile or more from *anything*. A fresh layer of snow blanketed the ground and muted all sound; the cold wind blowing across the fields made only a gentle moan. Even the chatter of my mechanisms seemed hushed...

But Tammy and her sister were making for the house, and I had to follow. It wouldn't do me any good to stand out in the cold until I ran down again, though I wasn't likely to be molested by any more horror-monkeys out here. We entered a little coatroom in back (which seemed to be the main entrance, since it had a wheelchair ramp and a widened door,) kicked off our boots, and stepped into the kitchen.

The house was a bit drafty, but warm, and the kitchen was filled with the smells of cooking and the aroma of freshly-brewed coffee. Nobody was there when we came in, but a pot was simmering on the stove, and several covered dishes were set atop it so the oven would warm them. Rhoda was about to call out when a young man - lanky, slouchy, freckled and tanned, with a disorderly thatch of fine dark hair - ambled in from the living room. "Hey, Tammy," he said. "'Bout time you got here. Mom'll be up in a minute, she's getting some things from the basem-"

He stopped, stared at his sister, glanced at me, then stared at her again, his jaw dropping. "*Tammy?*" he said, stunned. "Uh, holy *shit*."

"Language, Nicodemus!" came a voice from the pantry, as an older woman stepped into the kitchen, cradling a couple of bottles in her arms. "And just what are you cussing at your sister over, anyway...?" She glanced over to us and her eyes widened. "Tamara? Oh my *God*...!"

There followed a repeat of our conversation with Rhoda, and then a third go-round when Tammy's father came inside partway through and we had to start over. It was clearly a big emotional deal for them, but I still felt awkward, standing there watching it as an outsider. By the end of it, though, I'd been introduced to the whole family (except for a brother and his wife who were still *en route*,) and they'd been

introduced to "Susan." I still felt unsure about that, but I couldn't back out *now*...

Mrs. Greenfield could hardly have been more unlike her daughters: thin, willowy, and very pale, with soft, subtle features and thin, pale lips; even her wrinkles were thin and delicate. Her hair had once been auburn, but was mostly silver now. But Tammy and Rhoda shared her piercing green eyes - and her voice, although she spoke soft and hushed as the snowfall, while they were outspoken, even boisterous. There was something slightly otherworldly about her; if it weren't for the prosaic setting and the wire-rimmed spectacles, I might've taken her for a sorceress or fairy godmother...

If the mother were a sorceress and the daughter a mermaid, the father would've made a passable Poseidon, apart from the lumberjack flannel and snow boots. He wasn't enormous, but he was well-built and looked to be in good shape for his age; he had a rugged, handsome face, a strong brow, and a great mass of curly black hair and beard running semi-wild around his head. The girls had clearly gotten their classical facial structure from him (as well as Rhoda's slightly curly tresses,) not to mention their demeanor - though he was louder and more jovial than either, despite his stormy appearance.

Brother Nick was the other way around; he had a face more like his mother's, boyish and subtle, but his father's steely gray eyes and olive skin. (Where he got the freckles, I didn't know.) Between the youthful good looks (I was surprised to learn that he was actually the eldest at twenty-five) and the slouchy, taciturn demeanor, he came off like an escapee from a boy band going *incognito*, but it gradually became clear that he was as good-natured as the rest; he and his mother were just quieter about it.

It took a while for the conversation to turn from Tammy's change (and occasionally mine) to *anything* else, but finally the dishes that her mother had been tending the whole time were deemed ready, and just around then, Rhoda's phone pinged. "That's Jason and Angie," she said. "Running late, got stuck behind a pile-up on 694. Safe and sound, but go ahead and eat."

"Well, that answers that question," Mrs. Greenfield sighed. "At least they're okay. Kids, would you help me with these? No sense in letting it get cold on us."

The siblings took the dishes off the stove and headed into the dining room. I was surprised that Tammy joined in; shouldn't they be considerate of her limitations? But maybe not going out of their way to treat her differently was a way to support her...? She did at least take one that wasn't too hot, so she could carry it...again, not in her *lap*, which she didn't really have, but snuggled up against her tail in her seat.

I grabbed one as well, feeling awkward about not helping, and followed them; before long we were all seated around the table and ready to eat. They said grace and served up, and Mrs. Greenfield turned to me. "Susan, is there anything we can get for you...?"

"Uh, well, I don't really eat," I said uneasily; she probably felt bad about having her guest sit there at Thanksgiving dinner, unable to join in the meal. "Um, do you have any tea, maybe...?"

She smiled softly and nodded. "Of course. I'll get some water boiling."

Nick turned to me as she went off to the kitchen. "Sho, uh," he said, not quite between bites, "were you alwaysh a-um, a machine-person...? Like, uh, were you born this way?" He frowned, taking another bite. "How'sh *that* work?"

"*Nick...*!" Rhoda scolded, as if she hadn't been asking her own weird, awkward questions earlier.

"Uh, no," I said, suddenly very self-conscious, "this was from the accident..." I was surprised that it hadn't come up during the introductions; had they all just assumed I was a native demi-human? No, Rhoda knew the story; but the others? Was I just what they'd expect of a clockwork-automaton person? Was it in my demeanor? My body language? Had that changed, like with Emma? But my roommates said I still moved like a guy; why would the one aspect change, and not the other? Or did they guess that I wasn't a real woman? God - I'd gone with "Susan" to side-step any potential issues, but what if I'd only made it *more* awkward...?

My fretting was interrupted when Mrs. Greenfield returned with my tea. "It must be quite a lot to adjust to," she said, putting a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"Uh, thanks," I said, taking the mug from her. "And, um, yeah." I hadn't taken her for the touchy-feely type - she seemed too ethereal for it - but the gesture felt reassuring and maternal, and to my surprise I gave her hand a gentle squeeze before she returned to her seat. "Yeah, it is."

She smiled softly as I set the tea steeping. "Well, I'm glad you and Tammy are there for each other, at least. She's said a lot of good things about the friends she's made at college."

"Mom...!" Tammy said, looking a little sheepish. I had a desperate desire to know what she'd told them, and how much identifying information they had on me, but she didn't notice my attempts to catch her eye without drawing the others' attention. Did they *know*, or was I just "a friend from school?" Why had I ever gone with this plan? Or, at least, why hadn't I run it by her *first*?

"So, uh, Sue," Tammy's father put in, "d'you live far from school? I know she said one of her roommates was from Missouri?"

I shook my head. "Uh, no, just a few hours, down in Bear Lake. Not far, I guess." So they weren't *too* clear on the details...hopefully that boded well for my cover. Or should I have pretended that I was Emma, to throw them off the scent? No, no, one pointless lie was *already* too much for me to handle...

Tammy's mother looked confused for a moment, and seemed like she was about to ask something, but thought better of it. She seemed to be thinking it over when Nick spoke up. "So, uh, whatcha majoring in?"

"Math and physics." I took a long sip of tea, trying to calm myself. It'd be okay; they couldn't *really* suspect. If Tammy hadn't shared enough for them to tell me from Emma, she wouldn't have told them about me; surely they thought I was-

"*You want people thinking you've always been a girl?*" I felt a twinge at the memory of Emma's surprised question. Of *course* I didn't, but I wanted them realizing I was actually a guy in a sexless doll's body trying to *pass* as a woman even less. It'd be awkward and uncomfortable for me, and probably even moreso for Tammy...

Nick gave a low whistle. "Nice. Whaddya wanna be?"

"I, uh..." I thought for a minute, then shook my head. "I don't kn-uh, I'm still figuring that out." I wanted to give some canned answer, but I couldn't bring myself to make one up. I really didn't know; I was in the program because other people thought I should be, not because *I* had any specific goals. I didn't even know what came after getting my degree; what did I *want* to be? Hell if *I* knew.

"Well, it's a good time of life for that," Tammy's father grinned.

"You...you think so?" It was strange to hear that from an adult; I'd always felt like you were expected to have at *least* that much figured out by the end of high school. How else were you supposed to plan for a career...?

Mr. Greenfield laughed heartily. "Well, it's easier to do it now than later!" he said. "Beats not realizing that you don't really *want* to be an accountant 'til you're thirty-five, believe me."

"Yes, well, Mother would have killed me if I'd married a hobby farmer," his wife said, a wry smile on her thin lips.

He chuckled. "I guess it worked out, didn't it? Lucky for *me* I married a doctor. 'Sides," he added, with a twinkle in his eye, "she can't complain now; she likes my applejack too much."

"Dennis...!" she scolded, but her eyes were twinkling too. It was all so strange to think about; I knew people might reinvent themselves later in life, but to just abruptly change course in your thirties, while raising a family? How could you do that? Wasn't it *stressful* for the people who were depending on you...? But his wife and children showed no sign of resentment; Tammy even had a nostalgic smile on her face...

"Was...was it hard, doing that?" I cringed as the words left my mouth unbidden; I hadn't meant to actually *ask*...! But he didn't take offense; he only thought for a minute, smiled, and laughed quietly. "Yaknow, I was sure it would be," he said. "Had two young boys and a little girl to look after, and Rachel'd been at home since Nick

came along..."

"But...every year tax season'd roll around, and I'd be stuck at the office every night from January to April, getting ulcers and wondering if I was finally gonna have that coronary." He grimaced at the memory. "So I'd daydream about where I'd rather be and what I'd do there, and I always thought about settling down on a bit of land somewhere quiet and getting away from it all. And the more I did, the more it felt, well, *inescapable* - like it'd already been decided. Finally I talked to Rachel about it, and she wanted to get back into the practice..."

He laughed again. "Oh, you *betcha* it was scary. I couldn't even believe I was doing it while I was walking into the office to give them my notice. Felt like my body was on autopilot and I could only watch and think about what could go wrong. But, well..." He sighed in relief. "When I walked outta that meeting, it was like the weight of the *world* was off my shoulders. I got to go home to my wife and kids knowing that I wouldn't spend the rest of my life chained to a desk wishing I was *anywhere* else..."

His expression turned a little melancholy, and he glanced at Tammy, who said nothing, but gave a subtle nod. "Good thing, too," he said. "We needed the flexibility when Tammy had her accident; the boys and I could help her at home, or we could send one of 'em to keep her company in the hospital when Rachel couldn't get out of a shift. Then there was P.T. after that...if we'd had to juggle all that with my office schedule, I probably *would've* had a breakdown, or worse." He looked back over at his daughter, and the sadness vanished from his face, replaced by a warm grin.

I felt like an outsider again, and I didn't know how to respond to these people baring their souls to me when I hadn't even meant to ask. But it struck me how *not* scarred they seemed by all that. People adjusted after traumatic events, sure, but everyone in Tammy's family felt so...so *whole* that I never would've guessed at their history if I hadn't known about her disability, let alone the years of stress and absence that predated it. How could they cope with this so easily, while I could barely understand what went on in my own head, let alone come to terms with what had happened to me...?

He was about to say something more, but there was the sound of a car pulling up in the driveway, and the whole family turned to the window. "Hey, there's Jason!" said Rhoda. Mrs. Greenfield sighed in relief. "Thank goodness."

The next few minutes were a bustle of activity as the latecomers tromped up to the door and let themselves in, and the family (save for Tammy) went to greet them. I stayed at the table, still brooding, not really listening to them; there was a lot of warm greeting, and some adoring noises as if over a child - which confused me, since I hadn't seen one exit the car. Then they came back to the dining room, and I saw that the wife was very clearly pregnant.

There was yet another introduction for "Susan," but curiously, nobody mentioned the lab accident or Tammy's change; they left Jason and Angie - a short, robust, *intense* man with fiery red hair and piercing blue eyes, and a statuesque Latina as easygoing as her husband was not - to assume that I was a normal demi-human. I couldn't for

the life of me figure out why, until they all sat back down, and I realized that Tammy's lower half was hidden beneath the table. Sure enough, I caught the conspiratorial glances and suppressed smirks between them...

I still couldn't figure out why, but after a few minutes of conversation I started to piece it together. Jason was something none of the others were - a very driven, type-A personality. He was a doctor, like his mother, but more in line with the stereotype; not *rude*, but easily the most self-serious and success-minded of the bunch, and just a *tad* on the proud side. This was their idea of a practical joke, keeping a major piece of family news to themselves while he went on about his own life; and the longer it continued, the more they had trouble keeping straight faces.

Suddenly, there was a stir under the table, and he glanced over at Rhoda with mild annoyance. "Hey, cut it out, wouldja?" he said.

"Huh?" she replied not-quite-innocently. "I'm not doing anything..."

"C'mon, we both know you're kick...ing..." He trailed off as he realized that Rhoda was too far away; he glanced at me next, then Nick, but we were also out of range. Slowly, it dawned on him that the only possible culprits were his parents and Tammy; his eyes widened and, without warning, he ducked down to peer underneath the tablecloth, started, and banged his head against underside of the table. Instantly, the whole family erupted in laughter - including his wife, who'd cottoned onto the sly glances, if not the secret itself.

Jason came back up rubbing the back of his head and giving his family a sheepish grin. "You're all *terrible*, you know that?" he laughed. "Tammy, what...? When? *How?*"

"Keep going, that's three out of six," his sister chuckled; she lifted her pectoral fins above the table in a shrug, and Angie raised an eyebrow. Jason listened intently as she gave him a brief rehash of the story; meanwhile, his wife looked at me with a curious expression. Well, it was probably strange to meet someone unusual and think they've always been that way, before learning that they used to be normal...

"Well, I guess your niece'll have to learn to swim early," Angie chuckled, rubbing her belly. She picked through the dishes on the table, creating a mildly alarming "salad" of stuffing, jellied cranberry, green olives, black pepper, and gravy. I cringed and gave silent thanks that I was a guy and I'd never have to worry about being pregnant, then did a mental double-take as I had to reassess that a couple different ways, and tried to force the whole question out of my mind. I wasn't very successful.

Tammy shrugged. "Eh, it's not like I'm gonna just up and move underwater 'cause of this. Still don't know what my long-term plans are, but living on land like this isn't any more inconvenient than it was already - less, even." She grinned. "Not that I'm gonna pass up the opportunity to teach her."

"Can't miss the chance to be 'the cool aunt,' huh?" Rhoda chuckled.

Tammy laughed. "C'mon, I was *always* going to be 'the cool aunt.' *Your* role is to be 'the wacky aunt.'"

Rhoda cackled and swooned back in mock-woundedness. "Got me there. I refuse to own a bunch of cats, though. Sekhmet's a handful all by herself."

Tammy looked around curiously. "Yeah, where *is* She-Who-Mauls, anyway?"

"In time-out downstairs," Mrs. Greenfield said. "I caught her nosing around the stuffing earlier. Right on the stovetop, bold as you please."

"Lucky, too," Nick put in. "Bet she's gonna 'love' you even *more* now."

Tammy grimaced. "Gah, I hadn't even thought of *that*." She got a look that I'd come to recognize as the one where she had a question about her change that she thought I could answer, but she was visibly embarrassed to actually *ask* it. I shook my head subtly, reassuring her that no, she didn't smell fishy. She sighed in relief.

The Greenfield clan chatted for the rest of the meal, jibing and laughing and reminiscing as family members do. They were all perfectly nice, and they made an effort to involve me in the conversation, but I still felt like I didn't belong, sitting there not eating and sipping my tea, watching someone else's family from the outside. Why had I even come? Moral support, nominally; but Tammy's family had accepted this so easily it seemed alien to me. If I wasn't needed, could I go home now, back to the dorm...?

No, of course not; I couldn't badger Rhoda into driving a couple hours back up to Lakeside just for my sake, even if I was getting antsy. I was committed for the weekend, and I'd just have to put up with it. Besides, it felt...well, *nice*. Or...nice-adjacent? It was very strange; *I* felt awkward and out-of-place, but the atmosphere was just too damn warm and familial to not be infectious, and I found myself getting caught up in it, a little. But that just made me wish I could *really* be a part of it, which got me brooding all over again...

"You okay there, Sue?" Tammy asked, interrupting my funk. "You sound like you're starting to run down."

"Huh? Uh, yeah," I said, snapping back into the world outside my head. I was lagging a bit, come think; riding in the car took a lot less energy than walking around campus, but the rest was a lot to handle, even before I started getting lost in my own head. I wasn't about to be immobilized, but I did need winding. But had we really gotten to the point where Tammy could recognize it by the sound...?

Rhoda's eyes widened, and she fairly leapt out of her seat. "Oh! Oh! My turn!"

Tammy looked to see if I'd object, but I shrugged; there was no point in turning her down. I'd had to get used to it by now, and I didn't want her to feel snubbed. I got up, reeling slightly as I realized how drained I really was; it was a bit like getting up too quick after drinking. I waited obligingly while Rhoda came over, took hold of my key,

and got a feel for it. She wasn't bad at it; energetic, like Emma, but with a less brute-force approach, a more delicate touch. And it definitely felt better to not be out of energy, especially since it wasn't even six o'clock yet.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Greenfield brought out the desserts, since everyone but Jason and Angie had finished with the meal. I could only stare a bit sadly at what looked - and *smelled* - to be an incredible apple pie, with a little figure of a tree carved into the crust; I contented myself with taking a chance on mulled cider. Predictably, the alcohol did nothing, but the sharp apple tang and aromatic spices were pleasing, at least...