

Chapter 51

Mack's Diner was near the center of town. It was a classic stainless steel-sided Worcester Diner Car that had been added onto only a little over the years. The entryway had a small addition to keep the worst of Northern New Hampshire weather out. Once in the entryway, you slid open the original diner car pocket door to enter the actual diner. It wasn't hard to tell who a first-time visitor to such an eatery was. If they tried to pull or push on the door, they got nowhere other than a bunch of stares from those already inside. There was an upside-down sign on the door indicating to slide it.

"Why do you suppose it's upside down?" Blanche pondered aloud.

Rick gigglechittered as he slid the door open. "To catch people's attention as it looks wrong, Ma Tante, just as it caught yours."

Rick let his grandmother and 'aunt' enter before him. He slid the door shut behind himself being careful to not catch his tail in it. There were twelve stools along the counter and three booths to either side of the door. The din of conversation fell silent a moment as all glanced at him. A youngish couple in the far booth to their right waved to them.

"Over here, Pistachio! We saved a booth for you." Conversations started again as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, though several of the patrons continued to glance at Pistachio as he gestured to his grandmother and 'aunt' to go ahead of him down the narrow aisle between the booths and stools.

Estelle glanced over at the two strangers. "How do you know them, Richard?"

"I have a lot of followers on social media, Mémère. I posted to social media that we were coming here for 11:30 and if anyone was around, please try and save us a booth."

They walked up the narrow aisle as one of the booth savers moved onto a counter stool next to the other saver sitting on the next stool. It was about then that the cook, who had his back to the counter, turned from the grill and saw the furry tail go by. He whipped the rest of the way around and pointed. "Hey! No pets! We only allow service animals in," he started to cry out and then trailed off with, "here..." as he stared at the giant reddish-gray squirrel with tasseled ears, wearing a maroon short sleeve shirt and sandals. It was escorting two elderly women, one with a walker, to the far booth as a man got out of the booth to make room for them. He cussed under his breath at what he saw not believing his eyes. Maybe he had been working too hard? As he continued to stare, the giant squirrel spoke, introducing the elderly women to the younger couple. The couple took selfies with the squirrel as the two elderly women slid into the side of the booth facing away from the entrance. The squirrel took the side facing into the rest of the diner. He sat at a slight angle, perched on the bench so as to not crush his tail against the seat back.

"Thank you, Mémère, for letting me take this end of the booth. It's easier for me to fight down the fear instincts if I can see everything around me," the squirrel said before turning to Fred wigwagging his tail in greeting and waving with its right forepaw. "Hello, Fred! I don't think

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we've seen each other since high school. I think you know my Mémère Estelle Michaud and Ma Tante Blanche LeClair." He pointed to each with his tail.

Fred continued to stare.

The squirrel gigglechattered similar to the Honey Almond Clusters™ Cereal squirrel in the old tv commercials. "I'm going to guess you keep too busy here to have seen the news story on me last month. And, no, you're not seeing things. You are staring at a giant, talking squirrel. Ask those around you to confirm it. Either you're seeing a giant squirrel or everyone here is having a mass hallucination. You're still not sure who I am, right?" There was amusement in his tone of voice.

Fred continued to stare as his brain slowly kicked back into gear. He briefly shook his head in the negative. He glanced back at the grill briefly to flip several burgers and then looked back at the giant squirrel.

"Here's a hint, Fred. I was voted 'most squirrely' in our senior class."

"Rick? Rick Michaud!?"

"Yes, Fred. I'm Rick."

Fred walked over to the booth and looked Rick up and down. "That's not a Halloween costume, is it?"

Rick shook his head negatively. "No, it's not a costume. And as both my Mémère and Ma Tante pointed out to me earlier, if it was, I'm a bit late for Halloween. It's the result of an unauthorized medical experiment/sabotage. But it saved my life. Of course, the side effects are a bit extreme. I'll admit the clothes are rather itchy against my fur. But your sign says, 'No Shoes, No Shirt, No Service'." He wigwagged his tail left to right as he offered his right forepaw in a handshake.

Fred took it hesitantly at first and then gave a firm shake. "My apologies for accusing you of being a pet. God, I want to hear your story, Rick, but right now I need to get back over to the grill before something burns." He called to one of the waitresses as he went back to the grill, "Sue." The waitress was quickly by her boss' side. He pointed to Rick's booth and said quietly to her, "Take good care of them. I don't know if state health officials would allow us to serve a giant talking squirrel, but I don't care."

The waitress went right over and put out placemats, glasses of water, and menus. Rick pointed with his tail to the couple on the end of the counter next to the booth.

"I also get their check in addition to our booth."

The couple only protested a little, but accepted Rick's generosity. It didn't take long for them to make-up their minds. After their orders were placed, Rick excused himself to use the rest room. When he returned, he was wearing gloves.

“Where did those come from, Richard?” his Mémère asked.

Rick gigglechittered. “Now, now, Mémère,” he replied as he pulled the gloves off and tucked them in his fanny pack. “You’re the one who taught me to always wash my hands before a meal. As I need my hands to walk, that kind of defeats the purpose of washing them if I don’t have a way to immediately cover them up, right? So, I keep a pair of gloves in my pack for that purpose.”

They and the couple made small talk until their meals were served. Like his grandmother and ‘aunt’, Rick had a bowl of the soup of the day, which turned out to be homemade corn chowder, and a grilled cheese, his with smoked Havarti cheese on homemade oatmeal bread.

“Richard, you use to eat more than that,” his grandmother said in a near scolding voice.

“Mémère, And I use to weigh a lot more too. Now, I’m all of 50 pounds and change. My doc is no longer on my case about losing weight.” He gigglechittered. “As such, I don’t need to eat like a starving teenager anymore. Besides, knowing you, you’ll not finish your own lunch and expect me to help.” His tail wigwagged a little behind him. “Oh, and before I forget, I need to warn you now. I can’t chew with my mouth closed anymore. My lips and jaw aren’t designed that way.”

Another couple made their way from the other end of the diner. One of them held-up their phone with the Mal fursuit muzzle as their background.

“You are Pistachio, who use to perform in the Mal mascot suit, right?”

Rick nodded. “In the fur.”

The couple glanced at each other. “We didn’t know you live here in Berlin.”

“I don’t anymore, but I grew-up here. I live in Groton now. I’m up visiting my Mémère and Ma Tante.” Introductions were made. More selfies and then the couple made their way to the cash register to pay for their meal.

Blanche leaned across the table a little. “Richard, how is it so many people know you?”

“Ma Tante, TV was the big thing when you were growing up, right? For my generation it is social media on the Internet. I had a lot of people who followed me in the months before my accident as I performed at events in a squirrel mascot costume. It took some time for me to get use to the popularity. Now, I don’t have much choice as my popularity seems to have skyrocketed online since my accident. I don’t know if it’s the novelty that I’m a giant talking squirrel or that I’m still trying to live a normal life despite these physical changes and that’s inspiring others.” Rick shrugged. “But the more people who follow me online, the better chance I can live a normal...well normal-ish life with this new body versus some Feds in black suits and shades showing-up and making me ‘disappear,’ if you believe such things.”

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As Rick predicted, his Mémère couldn't finish the bowl of soup, though she did finish the sandwich. Rick ate the last few spoonfuls after she insisted, though he had had enough himself. As he had promised, he covered the check for the younger couple in thanks. At the register there were more selfies with the waitstaff. It took a little coaxing to get Fred in one as he didn't like his picture taken. Rick quickly made a post:

Look where I was just at. Enjoyed the best corn chowder I've had in a long time. If you're in the area, you'd best get down to Mack's Diner in downtown Berlin City, NH before he runs out! Say hi to my high school classmate and owner, Fred Mack, when you drop by!