

The Fox and the 3,500-Word Paper

By DraVulMep

"I just don't get it..." said Lucky, walking along the fence above Fox.

"Get what?" asked the orange-furred, four-tailed, kitsune. He had been teaching the black cat some of the basics of humanoid shapeshifting. Lucky was a good student, but he seldom used his new human or anthropomorphic forms. He spent most of his time as a full cat, or a "semi-anthro", cat because he didn't really have much use for his other forms.

"How humans seem to just to want to make their lives more complicated." explained Lucky, eyes trained on a human staring into her phone. "They seem to be the ones running the whole world. You'd think they'd use this power to make their lives easier, but they still seem tied to a whole bunch of responsibilities that I just can't wrap my head around..."

"Like what?"

"Well, I've only really known about them a short while, but work, money, law, politics, that whole 'religion' thing... Even making babies seems to have a whole bunch of needless procedures!"

"Well, that's the bizarre thing," remarked Fox, "Humans like to think that their life has meaning. If they aren't satisfied with the amount of meaning in their lives, then they embark on some sort of 'quest' to find it. They're convinced that they must struggle to attain satisfaction."

"But why bother?" asked Lucky, jumping down onto the alley pavement below. "I mean, just plain ol' living is meaningful, isn't it?"

"It's supposed to be, and for most animals, it is." explained Fox, "But humans can be too brainy for their own good. They like to have something to fill those big brains *with*. Survival just isn't enough for them.

"Even things to make life simpler often have some unforeseen complication that comes sooner or later. For instance, some human, thousands of years ago, probably decided to try farming instead of hunting based on a notion that just popped into his head. Fast forward, and we need some method to figure out how to coordinate larger farms, how to adjudicate squabbles between the farms, that sort of thing.

"Now, even leisurely activities like games, vacations, entertainment, etc., often require massive amounts of effort, both by the makers of these products, who have to employ massive amounts of people and resources, and by the people 'enjoying' these products, who often have to figure out how to set time aside to properly enjoy them. A trip to the park often has to be accommodated for in their schedule, and they often feel like they have to time it just right based on weather, crowds, and so forth."

"So, humans are just slaves to their own system. Is that it?" asked Lucky.

"Well, that's one way of looking at it. I just see humanity as slowly creating and nursing a mental organism; a state of being that is both influencer and influence. Humans call this organism 'Civilization'."

"What d'you mean, a 'mental organism'?"

"It's not really 'living' in the sense the you or I or the Prime Minister of Canada or an amoeba are 'living' beings. It's more of a non-physical entity sustained by cultural practices; by work, money, politics, religion, and all those other things you were mentioning."

"Well then, what's stopping the humans from just leaving this 'organism' be and just... going wild?" Lucky was beginning to tire of Fox's intellectualism.

"Because 'going wild' – as you put it – would entail giving up the conveniences of Civilization, and many humans can't imagine live without them. Some of them would go bananas without their internet connection. It's ironic when you think about it. Humans like to think that they are incapable of functioning without having Civilization in their lives, but this only becomes *more* true the more they *think* it's true.

"Civilization can be addictive; even to animals! You were remarking earlier about how pampered some pets are, and even the two of us live in a house, paying human money for much of our food."

"Alright then, wise guy!" said Lucky, shifting to his semi-anthro mode so he could cross his arms, "Since you seem to wanna transform every fifth person we meet, let's see what happens when a particularly overworked human loses their connection to this 'Big-C Civilization'!"

"You actually *want* me to change someone?" said Fox, shifting to his own semi-anthro mode so he could return the favor, crossing his arms with a vulpine smirk, "Who are you and what have you done with Lucky?"

"Temporary of course." said Lucky, "No more than 24 hours. Fully animal. No perception alternations on the recipient."

"Hmmm..." remarked Fox, scratching his muzzle, "How about reality warping?"

"Minimal at most. Just enough that the world doesn't fall apart when the guy can't do his work, but make it quiet enough that their routine will *definitely* be shaken by what's happened. And to make things interesting, we'll make it a bet."

"A bet?"

"Yeah, a bet. If the guy turns and freaks out over not being able to work, you win. If he decides to enjoy the wild life, I win. Loser spends three days as the winner's species."

"Sounds good to me! Did you have anyone particular in mind?"

"Not really... Let's see who we can find!"

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"I don't know *what* my problem is!" Barry groaned into his phone as he sauntered through the park, "I just can't seem to get motivated to finish that paper! I just keep on staring at the same sources over and over and over! It's like staring at a brick wall!"

"Well maybe you could take a break and come back to it later." Barry's older brother Allen remarked.

Allen was close to getting his PhD miles away at the University of Tulsa. Barry was still going through his undergraduate degree.

"Eh, I would if I had the time."

"You don't seem to have the time for *anything* these days, bro!" said Allen, "My workload's easily bigger than yours, and I still find the time to hang out with my friends here."

Barry didn't know what to say to that. He was a born introvert, with few friends.

"Well, I don't really have anyone to hang out with..."

"You don't even need to hang out with anyone in particular, just stop and smell the roses! Get out of the house! Put away the computer! Get some exercise! Just do *something* that gets you out and about!"

"I'll keep that in mind..."

"Alright..." From the tone of his voice, Allen must've been catching on that 'I'll keep that in mind' really meant 'I'll pretend I remember but I won't'.

The conversation drifted to more mundane topics. Barry had just made it home to his dorm when it ended. His roommate, Evan, was off doing some special course abroad, so Barry had the room all to himself.

He had just under a month to finish this paper, but he had come face to face with a mental block. This lack of inspiration or motivation made it easy for Barry to slack off, checking social media and playing online games. However, even these didn't seem to pull him from his creative doldrums. It was the same old sites, with the same old features. Nothing new seemed to pop up in either of them.

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"Mmmm-hmmm! I must compliment you on your choice of target, my fine feline friend! He's devoting time to a paper he doesn't enjoy that serves an end he doesn't fully understand! He feels utterly attached to Civilization, yet feels it hasn't given him his due! Now what?"

"Now you change him!"

"With what means?"

"Can't you just zap him?"

“Not through a window, I can’t!”

“Hmmm... Hey, he’s checking his phone, and working on his computer too... Didn’t you say you can work your magic through technology?”

“Oooh! I haven’t done *that* in a while! Might as well knock the rust off the gears! Now to magically seal our bet!”

“Seal it? What do you mean?”

“Make it so that neither of us can weasel out of it. *Aschente!*”

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Barry now found himself mindlessly tapping the ‘P’ key on his keyboard as he waited for some flash of inspiration to hit him. Nothing.

Suddenly, the endless row of ‘P’s deleted itself and was replaced with the word ‘*SCIURUS CAROLINENSIS*’.

Where did *that* come from?! Barry’s ear twitched in annoyance. Was this some kind of hack?!

He deleted the weird words (what were they anyway? Latin?), but found that as soon as he did so, an alert popped up on his phone. It was a Tweet from someone called DaBigF. All it said was “*Eastern Gray Squirrel – though that name may be a misnomer given your fur color.*”

This was even *more* puzzling! Barry soon felt a bit warmer. He looked down and found that there was thick, black fur all over his body. He hadn’t even noticed earlier, but his ears had grown larger and pointed, and had moved to the top of his head.

Another line appeared on his essay document; “*Tail Length: 21-24 cm (8¼-9½ in)*”. To accompany this missive, an enormous, fluffy, black-furred tail erupted out of Barry’s backside, obliterating his pants and underwear. It had to be as long as his torso and head put together!

Barry was about to take to his phone to challenge whoever was behind this when a new Tweet popped up from DaBigF; “*Total length: 43-50 cm (17-20 in)*”. This new information was enough to cause Barry to shrink, falling out of his now-oversized clothes.

No sooner had Barry untangled himself than a new piece of information popped onto his essay document: “*These squirrels prefer mature deciduous forests.*” This was enough to cause his hands and feet to reform into paws, and his limbs grew shorter. Barry groaned as he noticed his hands now looked more suited to holding acorns than using a phone.

The last bit of information came on both the computer and the phone. “*These true nut-lovers feed mainly on the seeds of maple, ash, and elm.*” With a start, Barry recoiled as his face pulled out into a muzzle, with his front teeth growing into nut-crunching proportions.

The newly-minted squirrel climbed up his sheets onto his bed, where he had laid down his laptop. Now the computer didn't even show anything except for a new message.

"We apologize for the interruption. You needn't worry. This isn't permanent. What really matters is; what will you do now?"

Barry's elongated ears perked at the sound of his window creaking open. The screen somehow fell out of it as well. Barry thought to himself for a moment. The *last* thing he'd expected was for him to be turned into a squirrel! What was he supposed to do now?!

Then he remembered. His paper was on the role of parks in Victorian society! This could be a good research opportunity! Seeing local parks from a squirrel's perspective could give him new directions to look into!

Excitedly, Barry dashed out the window, jumping onto the next tree, ready to begin his research, and maybe have a little fun while he was at it!

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"Uh, Fox? *What the fuzz happened?!*" yapped Lucky, who was now rendered a black-furred fox with a white-tipped tail.

"I must admit, I didn't see *this* coming!" mused the orange-furred cat that had once been Fox, "The betting spirits must have seen this outcome as a draw!"

"Betting spirits?!"

"The ones I pledged to when I magically sealed the bet." said 'Fox,' "Barry seems to feel that 'going wild' would actually *help* him function in human society, so the spirits decided that meant nobody won and nobody lost... or maybe that we *both* lost? I don't know, really."

"Three days like *this*..." groaned Lucky, burying his now-vulpine face in his hand-paws.

"Well, *I'm* enjoying it!" said 'Fox,' "I haven't been able add felines to my shapeshifting repertoire yet! This could be a preview of coming attractions for when I *do* get out of the canid family!"

"Yes, well, I'd very much like it if you left me *out* of the canid family reunion next time!" growled Lucky.

"Just remember, this bet was *your* idea!" purred the cat. "Let's go home! I'm eager to see what it *really* means to take a catnap!"