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The Probability of Vincent

Vincent contemplates his existence as he pushes a tattered reclining chair through a snow-covered parking lot. The forty-six-year-old halts in his tracks, places his hands on his hips, and exhales loudly, squinting his eyes at the remnant bands of amber sunlight as they sear across the Minnesota horizon, dusk cascading in streaks of purple and blue through the sea of clouds above. *I wonder* he thinks, his head craned towards the sky in exhaustion *If no one is looking for me, am I even lost at all?*

After successfully dragging the chair from a nearby junkyard over the railroad tracks, past the gas station, behind the dumpster, into the desolate street, and through the crow-infested tundra of the parking lot, Vincent feels exasperated and his muscles ache. His final destination gleams like a brilliant crystal only a few yards away.

He runs his fingers through the wild nest of matted hair standing up from his head and resumes nudging the recliner through the snow like an ant hauling a crumb five times its size. Had the sludgy, partially-melted snow not seeped through the hole in his left shoe, numbing his toes, this journey would not have been as strenuous. Had he not piled the chair with a mountain of delectable cuisine from the dumpster, and had an army of birds not repeatedly swooped down from the sky only to steal some french fries, his trek would have been more peaceful. But surpassing all these facts, had the people of Minnesota kept and valued everything they ever purchased, Vincent would not have a GoodWill donation drop-off trailer to call home.

Upon finally arriving at the glorious, 764 cubic-foot vehicle, Vincent hoists the chair up the wooden ramp and past the large swing doors, edging it closer to the center. He marvels at his achievement for a moment, moves the dumpster food from off the chair, and sinks into the recliner's cold cushion. The homeless man props his feet on a stack of dusty books and rubs his eyes, thankful to be immersed in his makeshift living arrangements once again. Piles of plastic bags, large bins, and wooden crates reach the ceiling of the trailer, breaking the impact of the biting winter chill. Rusted sports equipment lean against boxes of intricate plates and kitchen utensils. Antique lamps rest atop heaps of board games and children's toys. Flies restlessly twitch amongst the fur of a black cat, which flicks its tail atop a stack of cardboard boxes.

Vincent reaches into his pocket and removes a lumpy Hershey's Kiss. He rolls the melted chocolate over his teeth and around his mouth, forming a tiny ball from the remaining tinfoil. Vincent does not know that his life of sheer luxury is about to be completely altered at the hands of something crumpled up in this abundance of unwanted things.

Removing a flashlight from a nearby toolbox, Vincent begins his routine check around the trailer for new donations. He snags a bag from the end of the truck and pries his knobby fingers through the plastic, examining the contents. He removes a heavy camouflage jacket and turns the front pocket out, uncovering a crumpled receipt. The act of digging through strangers' belongings has become rather monotonous, and Vincent feels the slight pang of shame in his chest, but he has learned to brush it away as if it were a fly itching along his arm. Besides, he'd never really found anything more valuable than a few coins and some candy wrappers. Vincent balances the flashlight between his teeth and flattens the paper against the wall of the trailer. It's nothing at all, he thinks. Just an old, useless lottery ticket. Although...

Turning his gaze past the trailer's open doors, he stares blankly at the curtain of snow whimsically tumbling from the darkened sky and silently blanketing the cement parking lot. Reaching tall into the hazy clouds is a Powerball lottery billboard reading, "Your dream is only a ticket away", with the numbers now reaching \$120 Million.

Trembling, Vincent raises the wrinkled ticket to the billboard, comparing the numbers. His vision is blurred with rising tears and his lip wobbles. The flashlight falls from his mouth and clatters down the trailer's steps, falling into the snow. His smile stretches the blood-crusted cracks on his lips, and steady tears clean a passageway down Vincent's face. He rubs his hands across his mouth and throws his head back, laughing. Never again will he be hungry. Tomorrow will begin his saga of perfect contentment. His source of eternal food and satisfaction stood two

inches tall, wrinkled between his fingertips. Vincent was a millionaire.

He loosely tucks the ticket between his fingers and inserts his arms through the sleeves of the sacred jacket, zipping it up around his neck. Vincent notes how perfectly he fits in a stranger's clothing. Almost as if such a miracle had been predestined to him all along...

Though nothing could compare to the temporary happiness that engulfed his soul, the laborious nature of today's festivities drained Vincent's body of energy. His sheer exhaustion seemed to overcome his exhilaration, and the man drifted off to sleep, a smile still etched on his face, the ticket gently trembling under his hand.

Meanwhile, a gentle current glides into the trailer and flutters the fabric of a small American flag pin on Vincent's scarf. The tranquility of the glittering snow eases the timid and jittery condition of the homeless man's mind, further lulling him to sleep. Corners of his memory lay as cluttered as corners of the trailer, and his recollections are sometimes jolted at the abrupt slamming of a door or the hiss of a passing bus. Tonight, Vincent's mind is inundated with noise; the gentle yet persistent scrape of a loose, rolling screw in the trailer resembles deterioration, shattering explosions, and ear-splitting eruptions. He turns in his sleep as bullets hurtle past his body. He cowers as a wave of projectiles cascade over his head like a monsoon. In his recliner, Vincent shifts positions, his shoulder now wet with drool, but in his dream, the man trembles as he discovers the same shoulder wet with blood. His body shakes with heavy sobs as he grooms the fur of the black cat curled up by his knee, believing it to be the hair of a fellow comrade whose eyes are lifeless...

He lets his boiling tears well up and spill down his face. In the pulsing world outside Vincent's consciousness, it becomes difficult to tell whether the man shivers at the cold around him or the cold in his head. The soldier is grateful for the quiet snow, but he knows it will soon melt away with the coming of the sun. Vincent wonders if he will melt away with it...

Morning falls in a warm patch of sunlight over Vincent's left eye as his body lies sprawled in the recliner.

"I can't believe this," an unfamiliar voice faintly echoes in the distance. The last stages of sleep ebb, rise, and dwindle in the sea of Vincent's mind, his mouth dry and his vision blurry. "We'll be rich, won't we?"

"It's not yours to keep," a recognizable tone this time. "This is wrong. Go put it back." Vincent straightens in his chair and blinks hard, deciphering the shape of two men in blue vests pointing towards the lottery billboard.

"Aw, c'mon," pleads the one. Vincent stretches his arms above his head and cracks his knuckles, yawning. A surge of panic rushes through him. His hands are empty. He feels in his pockets and looks behind the recliner. The trailer is barren. The ticket is nowhere to be found.

"You can't just take it from him, boss," argues the other.

Now the homeless man is wide awake, moving off his recliner, and skipping down the steps out of the trailer.

"Morning, Vinny," the friendly man says.

"That's my ticket," the homeless man stammers, reaching for the paper in the other man's hand.

"Now hold on just one minute, buddy," snickers the thief. "What makes you think you can even claim this money at all? Where's your passport?"

"Let's all just calm down—" suggests the friendly one.

"Driver's license?" continues the thief. "How about your home address?" Vincent swallows hard and narrows his eyes.

"Just hand it over, alright? Please," the homeless man inquires. "I found it, and it's mine. Please."

"Is that so?" The thief laughs, raising his hand a little higher. "Because I think this ticket *actually* belongs to," he flips the paper over, squinting to read the signature scribbled on the back. Vincent feels his ears turning red, and he lowers his head in embarrassment; why hadn't *he* thought of checking the back of the ticket? "It belongs to a very wise T Crawford,"

Vincent's knees buckle at the mention of that name. As in *The Titus Crawford*? Best friend, comrade, brother in the war, a colleague of a lifetime, still alive? Highly unlikely. And now a *millionaire*? Impossible.

Vincent stands paralyzed, the rest of the thief's words completely inaudible. His eyes dart from the jacket on his own body to the ticket in the man's hand to the billboard towering above. He realized that the jacket belonged to him just as much as the 120 million dollars. Yet, for all anyone else knew, he could easily pass for a Mr. Crawford. Who would even know? No one but himself. Perhaps that was the worst part.

Another thought dawns on Vincent, more horrifying than the last. He hastily turns out the other pockets of the jacket, yet another thing he hadn't thought of in his excitement last night. His hand meets a cold piece of metal in a zippered pocket, and he removes the shiny, silver chain of a military dog tag. His mouth slightly agape, Vincent runs his fingers over the engraved letters reading, "Crawford, Titus; U.S. ARMY," followed by a social security number then "A Positive, Christian."

A fellow brother, a fellow witness, and his identity was going to be immersed in a mass of unwanted things, right next to the rusted sports equipment. Even thinking about it, his heartbeat reverberates in his eardrums and his brow furrows in anger. In an instant, he snatches the ticket from the thief's grip, shoves it into the pocket of his jeans, turns

away from the men, and breaks into a sprint, dashing madly across the parking lot and into the street.

“Way to go, Vincent,” the friendly one says quietly, watching the homeless man leap through the snow like a kangaroo.

Vincent feels the burn in his lungs as the wind tosses his hair into his face and rushes in whipping tunnels against his ears. He feels the freezing snow beneath his feet, but one cannot tell if he clenches his jaw out of pain, anger, or both. *Is this how life is? Vincent wonders, Are we all to suffer, to serve, and to live, only to be given away in the end? Only to be tossed into a bin and forgotten forever?* He refused to believe so, and he ran on. The scenery around him blurs into nothingness as he runs as fast as his body will allow. He pumps his arms and sprints until he arrives at the gas station, swings open the door, and slams the ticket at the register, his legs throbbing and tingling.

“Can you check this for me?” Vincent stumbles, panting and clutching his side. “Please?”

The man at the register wears a disinterested expression. He slowly pinches the ticket from off his desk, glances at it, enters some numbers into the computer, and raises an eyebrow.

“Yeah, man,” he exclaims, his eyes widening in amazement. “You’re the winner, alright.”

Vincent’s speech falters and reduces to a whisper as he thanks the clerk, slides the ticket off the counter, and makes his way to the door.

“Hey, wait a minute!” the clerk calls out. “This ticket is about to expire, so you’d better claim it before time runs out and everyone forgets about it.”

With this in mind, Vincent makes an important stop.

The sun begins to sink behind the clouds and towards the earth below, dragging Vincent’s heart along with it. He stumbles up the massive steps to the entrance of the library, out of breath.

The homeless man catches his reflection in the shiny mirrored windows and stops in his tracks. Days of living in a donation trailer have made Vincent forget what he looks like. He scoops some snow from off the ground and tries to brush off the dirt from his skin. He straightens his shirt, attempts to tame his wild hair, and stares at the American flag pinned to his scarf, a weary sigh escaping his lips.

Vincent recalls the days when he used to spruce himself up for his job, what his life was like before his nightmares took over causing him to forget meetings, miss important appointments, and lose coworkers’ trust. The same hands that once negotiated contracts were now used to dig through dumpsters.

The ex-soldier walks through the large revolving doors into the commodious library with a high ceiling and he heads straight to the obituaries. As Vincent suspected, Titus Crawford recently died. His address, however, was up-to-date. Noting its location in a poorer section of town, Vincent’s footsteps echo across the marble floors as he sprints out the door, the sky fading to a satiny blue.

A woman with curly hair opens the door to the Crawford household, a child balanced on her hip, another poking out from behind her leg.

“Can I help you?” she asks, her weary eyes surveying Vincent’s appearance.

In one breath, Vincent explains the story of the ticket, the jacket, and the dog tag. He returns Titus’ possessions and brandishes the piece of paper, scratching his head. As he rambles on, tears well up in the woman’s eyes. She embraces Vincent and welcomes him into her home.

The millionaires dine together at the kitchen table, reviving the livelihood of Titus Crawford; an extraordinary friend, husband, and father. As the glistening stars pierce the night sky above and snow peacefully descends in playful spirals onto the ground below, Vincent reminds the woman that lottery tickets may expire, but people never will.