

**THE  
TREMENDOUS  
WOBBLE OF THE  
WIBBLE-BLOB**

*A Comedy Adventure*

By  
**M.C. WOBBLE**

**WOBBLE BOOKS**

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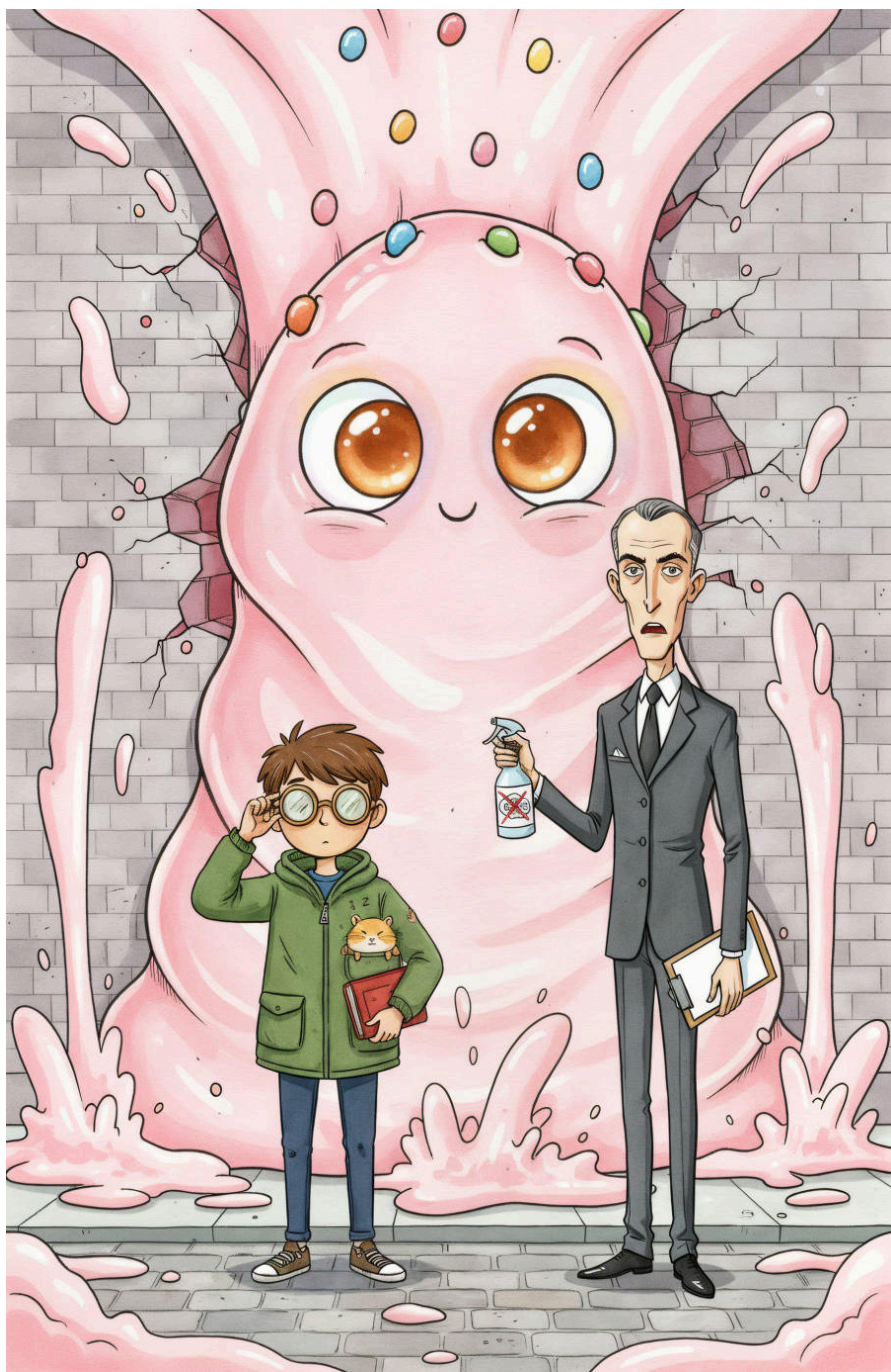
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## CHAPTER 1

# THE DAY THE CLOCKS WENT WOBBLY

In the town of Clockwork Crumble, nothing happened without permission. The 6:00am siren woke every citizen simultaneously. By 6:04am all toothbrushes were in motion. By 6:13am every briefcase had been clicked shut with the same crisp, identical snap. The town ran like a machine, because Comptroller Grimshaw Starch insisted it must, and Comptroller Grimshaw Starch had not been wrong about

anything since the spring of 1987—when he had briefly confused a sandwich with a filing cabinet, but nobody mentioned that anymore.

At the centre of Clockwork Crumble stood the Great Custard Calendar: a twelve-metre bronze monument inscribed with the Official Timetable of Permitted Emotions. Monday: mild satisfaction. Tuesday: productive concern. Wednesday: controlled contentment. Thursday: regulated gratitude. Friday: carefully supervised relief. Weekends were for "independent emotional maintenance," which mostly meant sitting quietly and not feeling anything too loudly.

Eleven-year-old Ned Noodlewick had forty-seven volumes of opinions about all of this, recorded in his series of Chaos Diaries. Volume 47, currently tucked under his arm, was three-quarters full. "The grown-ups of Clockwork Crumble," he had written in yesterday's entry, "have become so rigid that if you tapped Comptroller Starch on the shoulder, he would ring like a dinner bell. I have not tested this theory. I am saving it."

Ned's one companion in the matter of chaos was Admiral Crouton, a golden hamster of enormous character and irregular consciousness. The Admiral was narcoleptic—he fell asleep at

precisely the wrong moments—mid-biscuit, mid-sentence, mid-emergency—and delivered, while unconscious, observations of startling brilliance. Ned kept a separate notebook just for the Admiral's sleep-wisdom.

It was a Tuesday morning, and Ned was walking past the Clockwork Crumble Custard Factory—a vast grey building that hummed constantly, like a fridge with something to hide—when it happened.

The factory shuddered. The ground trembled. A crack split the main wall, and through it, in a rush of extraordinary pinkness, oozed the most tremendous

quantity of custard Ned had ever witnessed. It bubbled through the vents, fountained from the chimney, and pooled in the factory yard with a sound like a thousand disgruntled blancmanges.

Comptroller Grimshaw Starch arrived within forty-three seconds (the Official Response Time for Grade 2 Violations). He was a narrow man with a face that looked as if it had been ironed. His eyebrows met in a permanent V of disapproval. His suit had once cut a ribbon at a mayoral ceremony simply by standing near it.

"UNAUTHORIZED WOBBLING!" he bellowed, brandishing a clipboard and a spray bottle labelled

**ANTI-MESS PROTOCOL.** "This is a Grade 8 Infraction! Custard does **NOT** leak on Tuesdays! Tuesdays are for productive concern, not—"—he gestured at the surging pink mass—"not **THAT!**"

Because the custard—the pink, bubbling, tremendous custard—was doing something custard was absolutely not supposed to do. It was growing. As Starch's outrage increased, as the citizens' collective frowning deepened, the mass swelled and rose. By his fifth disapproving sentence, it was the size of a small bungalow.

Two enormous caramel-sauce eyes blinked open in the pink

wall of goo. They swivelled, taking in the crowd. The crowd stared back. For a very long moment nothing happened, which was the most un-Clockwork-Crumble thing that had ever occurred.

Admiral Crouton, asleep in Ned's breast pocket, trembled. Then, in a voice like a distant foghorn wrapped in cotton wool, murmured:

"The wobble remembers what the walls forgot."

Then he snored.

"Well," said Ned, adjusting his goggles—a gift from Granny Tick, who claimed they could see

through bureaucracy, though so far they had only managed fog and one very thin fence. "This is going to be a very interesting Tuesday."



## CHAPTER 2

# THE CUSTARD CHRONICLES

By the following morning, the Wibble-Blob (Ned's name for it; Starch called it "the unauthorised custard situation," which lacked poetry) had grown to occupy the entire factory yard. Citizens took forty-minute detours to avoid it. Starch had cordoned it off with yellow tape reading **UNAUTHORISED WOBBLING—DO NOT APPROACH—THIS MEANS YOU** and posted Officer Trundle-Grime

to stand guard. Officer Trundle-Grime was doing this very badly, because the Blob had wobbled at him three times and each time he had wobbled slightly back without meaning to.

Ned had spent the night thinking. For the first time in forty-seven volumes of observation he had no theory—only questions. Why was the custard sentient? Why did it grow when the adults got grumpier? And why—most pressingly—did it smell faintly of birthday cake?

He decided to investigate. Specifically, to break into the factory archive room through a window that hadn't closed properly since 1994, which he

knew because he had been using it as a shortcut for two years. Admiral Crouton, wedged into his breast pocket, was technically unconscious but had communicated "yes" via one emphatic snore.

The factory archive room smelled of old paper and older secrets. Filing cabinets lined the walls: Annual Custard Output (Vol. III), Approved Stirring Techniques (Classified), Employee Emotional Compliance Reports 1974–1980. That last one made Ned pause. He pulled it open. Inside, hundreds of forms stamped **LOGGED AND SUPPRESSED** in red ink. Incident: Employee hummed a tune. Nature of tune: cheerful. Action taken: emotion

extracted and stored. Vat reference: 7B.

At the back of the deepest cabinet, behind a box labelled "Do Not Open Unless Feelings Arise—If Feelings Arise, Repress Them Immediately," he found what he was looking for. A thick, dusty file stamped: PROJECT EMOTION SUPPRESSOR—CLASSIFIED—Authorised by Comptroller Flint Starch I, 1974. Ned sat on the floor and read it from first page to last, and by the end his expression had cycled through several emotions that were definitely not on Tuesday's approved list.

"Crouton," Ned whispered. "Wake up. This is important."

Admiral Crouton opened one eye, took in the archive room, and immediately fell asleep again. But in the split second before unconsciousness reclaimed him, he murmured:

"You cannot archive a laugh, Ned. You can only delay it."

"That," Ned said, staring at Vault 9's floor plan, "is either the most profound thing I've ever heard, or you're dreaming about cheese again."

Ned took this as confirmation of the former. Back outside, he noticed something new: Starch, dictating emergency ordinances at his podium, had developed a very slight wobble in his left knee.

Each time a citizen  
laughed—accidentally, quickly  
suppressed—the Blob's caramel  
eyes brightened and Starch's  
knee wobbled a fraction more.  
"The Blob grows on rigidity," Ned  
murmured. "And it's contagious."  
He began to write very quickly.



# **CHAPTER 3**

## **COMPTROLLER STARCH'S RIGIDITY RAY**

By Wednesday, Starch had a plan. He always had a plan by Wednesday. He called it the Rigidity Ray. It sat on a wheeled trolley the size of a wardrobe and resembled a cannon that had been to university. Its barrel was mirror-polished. Its targeting knobs were labelled **STERN**, **STERNER**, and **GOOD GRIEF**. Starch had invented it himself, which he mentioned four times before the demonstration began.

"BEHOLD!" Starch announced, eyebrows at maximum V. "One blast will make any wobbly substance firm, orderly, and compliant! This **THING**"—he pointed at the Wibble-Blob, which had overnight expanded to include most of the factory car park—"will be **RIGID** before luncheon!"

The crowd applauded dutifully. Ned, perched in the clock tower with his **Chaos Diary** open, wrote: "This is going to go badly." He was right, but wrong about the nature of the badness.

The beam struck the Blob squarely in its left caramel eye. The Blob shuddered—and then, with a sound like a very large

person deciding to be even larger, it grew. Tremendously. It surged outwards, swallowing the factory gate, two parked bicycles, and the hat of a particularly unfortunate bystander.

"A minor calibration error!" Starch announced, sweating visibly for the first time in recorded history. He fired again. The Blob grew again. A third shot overheated the nozzle, which spun violently and fired a stray beam at Starch's own podium, which became instantly rigid, snapped off at the base, and fell on Starch's left foot.

"This," said Starch very quietly, "is a custard-trophe."

Silence. Then three citizens at the front started giggling—quickly suppressed, hands over mouths—but the Blob's eyes lit up like caramel lanterns and it wobbled with what could only be called delight. It rained small gumdrops from its upper reaches. Nobody knew why. The gumdrops tasted excellent.

That afternoon, Mrs. Fitch-Crumble the pharmacist stopped Ned on his way home and said, in a very confused voice: "I need to tell you something peculiar, because I walked past that thing on the corner, and now I find I can only speak in rhyme, and nothing I do will fix it, I've tried, I've tried,

and it's quite a crime."

Ned stared at her. She stared back, clearly horrified by herself. "The Blob is spreading," Ned said slowly. He wrote: Day 3. The rhyming is what suppressed poetic feeling sounds like when it finally gets out. This is a feedback loop: adults panic about rhyming, which makes them more rigid, which feeds the Blob, which makes more people rhyme. It is what I call a Tuesday.

Admiral Crouton, jolted awake by a nearby sneeze, opened his eyes and said with unusual clarity: "Only the children are immune." Then fell back asleep.

"Of course," Ned said. Every

adult on the street was rhyming and looking appalled at themselves. Every child was watching them, trying not to laugh. Trying not to laugh. "Time to visit Granny Tick," he said, and walked very quickly.



## **CHAPTER 4**

# **GRANNY TICK'S GADGET GARAGE**

Granny Tick lived in a house the local building surveyor had described as "a structural curiosity" and refused to visit again. The walls leaned in three different directions simultaneously. The garden had been converted entirely into a testing ground for experimental confections, and something in the shed had been making a suspicious ticking noise since 2003. Granny Tick called it Reginald

and fed it biscuits.

"Ned!" she said, flinging the door open before he'd knocked. She was small with white hair that went in seven directions at once and goggles pushed up on her forehead, identical to the ones she'd made for Ned. "Come in. I've been expecting you since the wobbling started. Tea? I've also got experimental biscuits, but I'd recommend the tea first, in case the biscuits are still feeling assertive."

Ned told her everything. She listened without interrupting, which was unusual. When he finished she was quiet, then said: "Grimshaw Starch's grandfather. Yes. I was there, a young

engineer at the factory when they installed the **Suppressor**. They called it the **Efficiency Module**. Said it would make the custard smoother." She paused. "The custard has never been less smooth, Ned."

"You quit?" Ned said. "In 1976, when I saw what it was actually logging. Fifty years of emotions, Ned, compressed into **Vault 9**." She stood up abruptly. "Right. Follow me to the garage."

The garage was a wonder and a hazard. **Shelves** ran floor to ceiling, each holding inventions in varying states of completion:

The **Spontaneous Dance Shoes**—polished red, size seven, a

tiny motor in each heel. "One step and they start a cha-cha you can't stop," Granny Tick said. "I wore them to a planning committee meeting once. The minutes were never the same."

The Unexpected Chuckle Cannon—a brass tube with a rubber bulb at one end. "Fires concentrated silliness at a range of twelve metres. Results are involuntary and comprehensive."

The Grand Prankophone—a gleaming brass instrument that resembled a tuba that had been to art school. "Plays any sound at any volume. I tuned it to 'uncontrollable giggling at forty decibels.' I've been waiting twelve years for a situation worthy of

it."

"This," said Ned, writing at speed in the Chaos Diary, "is the situation."

"I rather thought so," said Granny Tick, and began loading gadgets into a shopping trolley.

Admiral Crouton woke briefly and said:

"The cure for too much order is a calculated amount of chaos."

The Admiral, satisfied, went back to sleep, his whiskers twitching with what Ned could only describe as glee.



Pian

## CHAPTER 5

# THE RHYMING EPIDEMIC

By Thursday, the rhyming had spread to roughly a third of Clockwork Crumble's adult population. Citizens were deeply distressed. The weekly Efficiency Report, normally four pages of pristine prose, had been submitted in verse. Starch had read it three times in mounting horror before noticing that even his own annotations were rhyming.

**"THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE,"** he announced at the emergency town meeting. "I hereby declare a **State of Verbal Compliance Emergency!** All unauthorised rhyming will be fined one **Crumble per couplet!"**

"But sir," said Deputy Crumpler unhappily, "if we rhyme, is there a way to stop? Will not the fines become a mountain quite on top?"

"You're doing it right now!" **Starch** roared.

"I'm afraid I know, and I can't cease, I've tried and tried, oh please—"

**"DISMISSED!"**

Outside, Ned sat on the steps with his Chaos Diary. Beside him, Priya Puffcheeks was asking questions, as she always did—approximately one every forty-five seconds. Priya communicated almost exclusively through interrogation.

"Why are only the adults rhyming? Is it the Blob? Why doesn't it affect the children? Is it because we laugh more? Is laughing the key? Do we weaponise the laughing?"

"Extremely close," Ned said.  
"You've basically solved it."

"Have I? Which bit? The laughing bit? What do we do with the laughing? Can it be both a

weapon and a cure? Is there a minimum giggle threshold?"

"That's exactly it." Ned showed her Observation #7. "The Blob produces gumdrops when people laugh. It shrinks when people laugh. But it grows when they're tense and rigid. The adults can't stop being tense because they're panicking about rhyming, which feeds the Blob, which makes the rhyming worse." He drew a circle with arrows. "A grumpiness spiral."

"We need to make Clockwork Crumble laugh," Ned said. "Really laugh. Like it hasn't in fifty years."

"That seems difficult," Priya said.

"Have you met the people here? Is laughter within their current emotional skill set? Should we check the calendar?"

"We're going to give them no choice," Ned said, and began writing a list of names.



## CHAPTER 6

# THE WOBBLE RESISTANCE

Ned called the meeting for midnight at Granny Tick's garage, because midnight was the one gap in Starch's patrol schedule—he had never considered that anyone might want to do anything at midnight, because in Clockwork Crumble, midnight was for mandatory unconsciousness, timed to the minute.

Five kids arrived.

Priya Puffcheeks, who had arrived twelve minutes early and spent the time asking the garage door why it was closed.

The Boggle Twins, Bert and Berta, who finished each other's sentences incorrectly with tremendous confidence. "We're here because—" "Adventure!" "No, I was going to say—" "Ned asked!" "Yes, that's right." They beamed. Ned had given up.

Fig Fumbleton, a boy with the unique ability to fall asleep on purpose. Unlike Admiral Crouton, whose narcolepsy was involuntary, Fig could sleep at will, which Ned considered possibly the most useful skill he'd ever encountered. He arrived

apparently already asleep and opened his eyes once seated, as if he'd teleported from bed.

Zola Zestwick, who had strong opinions about sensible shoes (against), institutional furniture (also against), and 6am alarms (violently against). She had arrived in shoes with bells on the toes and a hat reading "I CONTAIN MULTITUDES."

"Right," said Ned. "The Wibble-Blob is made of fifty years of emotions the town wasn't allowed to have. It's lonely, confused, and extremely large. We need to make Clockwork Crumble laugh—genuinely, out loud, without permission—before Starch finds a

bigger Rigidity Ray."

"Is laughter sufficient?" Priya asked. "How much? Decibels or duration? What happens if we don't reach the minimum viable giggle threshold?"

"The Blob probably eats the town," Zola said cheerfully.

"Let's aim for laughter," Ned said firmly, and unrolled his plan.

Phase One: Granny Tick's Spontaneous Dance Shoes, deployed at the Bureau of Clockwork Compliance. "Five officials dancing involuntarily. Dancing adults in Clockwork Crumble will be unprecedented. The sight alone should trigger

laughter."

Phase Two: The Unexpected Chuckle Cannon, aimed at the main square during Starch's daily 10am Address. "One blast of concentrated silliness at the most rigid person in town. If Starch laughs, everyone laughs."

Phase Three: The Grand Prankophone, from the Clock Tower. "Forty decibels of uncontrollable giggling, town-wide, sustained long enough to dissolve the Blob completely."

"What's phase four?" the Twins asked simultaneously.

"There isn't a phase four," Ned said.

"Phase four: run," Zola suggested.

"...I'll add that," Ned conceded.

Admiral Crouton shifted in his sleep, smiled—a clear hamster smile—and murmured: "Do not aim for manageable. Aim for magnificent."

"Magnificent it is," Ned said.

## CHAPTER 7

# THE GREAT CUSTARD CAPER

Before Operation: Maximum Wobble could begin, Ned needed proof. Not for himself—he had seven pages of it. For the town. For the adults who would, when the laughter hit them, need to understand why. In Clockwork Crumble, unexplained things were filed under B for "Bizarre, Prosecute Accordingly."

So: the factory. One more visit. To retrieve the Emotion

Suppressor's original blueprints. He told Priya. She asked nine pertinent questions about structural integrity. He told the Boggle Twins, who said they were good at "either sneaking or the other thing"—which turned out to also be sneaking. He told Fig, who said he could be asleep and useful simultaneously. He told Zola, who showed up with significantly more bells.

The team entered through the archive window at 11pm. Fig fell asleep on a filing cabinet and provided, while unconscious, a list of archive keywords Ned found extremely helpful. The Twins located the relevant cabinet by reading every label aloud and arguing about each one, which

was disruptive but thorough.

Priya found the blueprints. "Is this the one? The one with 'Suppressor' on the front? Are we allowed to take originals? Is this theft or justice? Can it be both?"

"Take it," Ned said.

Zola found Vault 9B, still intact: a room behind the archive, sealed with three locks and a sign: **APPROVED SURPLUS—DO NOT FEEL EMOTIONS NEAR THIS VAULT.** She picked all three locks with a hairpin, because Zola had skills.

Inside was a small round viewing window. Through it, in amber

factory light, was something none of them had expected.

It was tiny. Barely the size of a jam jar. A perfect small flan, trembling on its own in an empty vault. It had two tiny eyes like currants, and it wobbled—constantly, gently—in a way that was not mechanical but clearly, unmistakably, sad.

"That's the heart," Ned said. He didn't know how he knew this. But the Chaos Diary had been building to it for forty-seven volumes, and he recognised it when he saw it.

"We're getting you out," Ned told the viewing window, which was perhaps unusual but felt

necessary.

Quiver wobbled once, twice—and then glowed. A warm, golden, entirely uncatalogued glow.

Admiral Crouton woke up, looked at the vault window, and said, in a voice not at all sleepy:

"It has been waiting a very long time to be found."

Then he fell asleep immediately, with great dignity.

## **CHAPTER 8**

# **OPERATION: MAXIMUM WOBBLE**

Friday morning. The Wibble-Blob now occupied every street within four blocks of the factory. It had swallowed eleven post boxes, three bus shelters, and a speed camera (which it subsequently burped back toward the Bureau, where it landed on Starch's car with a deeply satisfying sound). Eighty per cent of the adult population were rhyming. The Rigidity Ray had been confiscated after accidentally rigidifying

Starch's own desk while he was sitting behind it.

"Today," Ned told the assembled Wobble Resistance, crouched behind Granny Tick's hedge at 9:55am, "we make this town laugh so hard the Blob shrinks to something we can fit in a biscuit tin. Ready?"

"Ready—" said Bert. "Willing!" said Berta.

"Is 'ready' a feeling or an objective state?" Priya asked.

"I dreamed the whole plan and it worked," Fig said, from a light doze.

"Close enough," Ned said. "Go."

Getting five pairs of Dance Shoes onto Bureau officials required a delivery ruse, three forged requisition forms (the Twins' speciality), and one astonishing performance from Zola, who told the receptionist the shoes were "mandatory ergonomic footwear approved by the Comptroller for all Grade 4 officials, effective immediately." Starch would never have fallen for this. Starch was not in the building.

Five officials slipped on the Dance Shoes and immediately began cha-cha-ing around the Bureau of Clockwork Compliance, which had never seen anything like it. Deputy Crumpler cha-cha'd into a filing cabinet. Inspector

Mumble-Toast performed an involuntary spin and knocked over the Official Clock of Record, which stopped at 10:02am and couldn't be restarted because nobody was not dancing.

Citizens stopped on the pavement, staring through Bureau windows. And then—one by one, starting with three children who simply couldn't help it—they began to laugh. The Wibble-Blob, four blocks away, shuddered. A small shudder. But the right direction.

Starch's 10am Address was held in the main square, which he insisted on even now, with the Blob looming behind him like a sentient pink mountain. He had a

script. He had a megaphone. He had not noticed Priya behind the clock tower base with the Chuckle Cannon at a range of eleven metres.

"Citizens of Clockwork Crumble!" Starch began. "Despite the unauthorised custard situation—"

The wave of concentrated silliness washed over Starch from head to toe. He froze. His clipboard trembled. His eyebrows, those magnificent eyebrows, unclenched for the first time in thirty years. He made a noise. It started low. It built and built and then—

Grimshaw Starch laughed. It was not a small laugh. It was a laugh

that had been sealed inside a very rigid man for approximately his entire career, and now that it was out it showed no signs of stopping. He laughed until tears ran down his face. He laughed until he sat down on the steps. His V-shaped eyebrows became something closer to a W, which on Starch's face looked almost like a smile.

The square erupted. Every citizen who had been holding their breath for three days—every adult who had been terrified and rhyming and rigid—looked at Comptroller Grimshaw Starch laughing and let go of everything they'd been holding. The Wibble-Blob trembled, shrank, produced an

extraordinary quantity of gumdrops, and shrank again.

Ned was in the clock tower with the Prankophone, hands shaking. He wrote in the Chaos Diary: Possibly nerves. Possibly excitement. Both, probably. Will distinguish later. He raised the instrument, tuned to "uncontrollable giggling at forty decibels."

The sound rang across Clockwork Crumble like nothing the town had heard in fifty years. Every window rattled. Every clock swung. Every bird in every tree took flight simultaneously. And every single person in the town—adult and child, official and citizen, baker and

banker—laughed. Properly.  
Completely. Without permission.

The Wibble-Blob dissolved from the outside in. The outer edges softened into harmless custard that smelled of birthday cake and something not quite a feeling but adjacent to one. Then the middle. Then the top. The caramel eyes blinked twice and disappeared. The Blob retracted, collapsed, shrank to the size of a house, then a car, then a table, then a hat. And then it was just a small, round, softly glowing flan sitting in the middle of the factory yard, trembling with what could only be called relief.

Ned ran. He reached Quiver first.

He scooped the tiny flan into his hands with extraordinary care.

"Got you," Ned said. "You're alright."

Quiver wobbled once—slowly, gently, enormously—and glowed gold.

## CHAPTER 9

# THE FLAN AT THE CENTRE OF EVERYTHING

Clockwork Crumble had never seen a Saturday quite like this one. People were still laughing—not hysterically, but the quiet kind of laughing that happens when the pressure has finally come off. Custard was everywhere—in the gutters, on the lampposts, inexplicably in Mrs. Fitch-Crumble's window boxes—but it was ordinary custard now, and it smelled of hope.

Ned stood in the town square holding Quiver, with the whole town crowded around him. He told them everything. The Emotion Suppressor. Vault 9. Fifty years of captured feelings compressed into pink custard. The Wibble-Blob, which was never a monster but always just joy with nowhere to go. And Quiver, who had been alone in a sealed vault for half a century because one very rigid man had decided feelings were inefficient.

Quiver wobbled on Ned's palm throughout. When he said "fifty years alone," it glowed a dim, sad amber, and several adults in the front row had to look away.

Grimshaw Starch had been

standing at the back of the crowd. He looked different. Not dramatically—his suit was still pressed, his eyebrows still met in the middle—but the V was softer. More of a shallow U. He stepped forward when Ned finished.

"My grandfather built the **S**uppressor," he said. "He told my father it was for efficiency. My father told me the same. I never questioned it. I thought—" He paused. For **S**tarch, pausing was an act of considerable courage. "I thought order was the kindest thing you could give a town."

He looked at Quiver.

"I was wrong," he said. Three

words that had never before been assembled in that order in Starch's vocabulary.

Quiver glowed gold.

"I know," Ned said, kindly. "The whole town was trained to be. That's the thing about fifty years—it becomes normal." He held Quiver out to the crowd. "This is what we were trying to suppress. And this"—he looked at the streets gleaming with harmless custard, at the adults who had laughed for the first time in years, at the Boggle Twins grinning at absolutely nothing—"is what happens when you finally let it out."

Starch retrieved a form from his

inner pocket. He always had forms. He borrowed Ned's pen and wrote for two minutes in small, precise handwriting. Then he read it aloud.

"By order of the Bureau of Clockwork Compliance: The Great Custard Calendar is hereby amended to include, on the last Friday of every month, one hour of Unsanctioned Joy. All spontaneous emotional expression, including but not limited to laughter, dancing, singing, and—" He cleared his throat.

"—wobbling—are reclassified as Grade 1 civic amenities. The Emotion Suppressor is to be decommissioned. The factory is to be converted to civic use. Signed: Comptroller G. Starch.

Witnessed by: Q. Quiver, via glow."

Quiver glowed. Very brightly. The whole square turned gold for a moment.

Then Zola Zestwick started clapping and her bell-shoes rang out, and then everyone was clapping, and someone started dancing (not in the Dance Shoes—just dancing), and for the first time in fifty years, Clockwork Crumble made noise that wasn't on any schedule.

## CHAPTER 10

# CLOCKWORK CRUMBLE GETS ITS CRUMBLE BACK

Three months later, the old Clockwork Crumble Custard Factory had been transformed. The walls were painted in colours not previously approved by the Bureau. The machinery was gone. In its place:

The Wobble Wing—a full-scale model of the Wibble-Blob, non-sentient and purely decorative, though it wobbled slightly in draughts. The exhibit

explained, in clear language with excellent diagrams, exactly what the factory had been doing for fifty years and why this had been inadvisable.

Ned's Chaos Archive—all forty-seven volumes of the Chaos Diaries, displayed under glass alongside the recovered factory blueprints. A sign above the entrance read: **EVIDENCE THAT THE GROWN-UPS WERE WRONG: EXHIBITION CONTINUES INDEFINITELY.** Starch had read this sign three times and hadn't removed it. Everyone agreed this was growth.

Granny Tick's Gadget Gallery—the Dance Shoes, Chuckle Cannon, Grand

Prankophone, and the Wobbly-Wobbly Whatsit, which had turned out (when accidentally activated during installation) to produce a very pleasant vibration at the frequency of a distant brass band. Visitors were encouraged to try the shoes. There was a non-slip dance floor for exactly this reason.

The Admiral Crouton Wisdom Wall—all forty-three sleep-observations, framed and annotated. The Admiral himself was usually nearby, asleep in a specially constructed exhibition-quality nest, occasionally murmuring new observations that the staff wrote down immediately.

Quiver's room was quiet and warm and lit with soft amber light. Quiver sat on a velvet cushion, wobbling gently. Visitors came in two at a time and stood in silence for as long as they liked. Quiver glowed when people laughed, dimmed very slightly when they were sad, and everyone agreed this was the most honest thing in Clockwork Crumble. There was always a queue.

Comptroller Grimshaw Starch was still the Comptroller. The town still had schedules. But on the last Friday of every month, Starch closed his office and went to the museum. He sat with Quiver for exactly one hour. Nobody knew what they talked

about. Possibly nothing. Possibly everything. But afterwards, Starch's eyebrows stayed in their softer U-shape for the rest of the day, and he said good morning to people in the corridor, which was new, and which everyone pretended not to notice in case he stopped.

Volume 48 of the Chaos Diary,  
page 94:

Clockwork Crumble is still not perfectly messy. It is also no longer perfectly rigid. It is something in between, which does not have an official name yet, but which I am tentatively calling "a town that is trying." This is, it turns out, the most interesting thing a town can be.

Admiral Crouton delivered his latest observation this morning, mid-biscuit. He said: "The next one will have more sprinkles." I have written it down. I don't know what it means yet. I'm looking forward to finding out.

"The best thing about chaos," Ned told the town at the museum's opening, "is that you can't schedule it. You can only leave the door open and see what wobbles in."

Quiver produced a small, satisfied gumdrop. It was, by general consensus, the best gumdrop anyone had ever tasted.

## EPILOGUE

Six months after the Grand Opening, Ned found a letter tucked into Volume 48 of the Chaos Diary, which he hadn't put there. It was written on custard-yellow paper, in handwriting that was extremely small and slightly wobbly.

"Dear Ned. I wanted to write to say thank you for finding me. The vault was very small. The new cushion is much better.

Starch came again on Friday. We sat together for a while. I think he is learning. It takes time. That's alright. I have been waiting fifty years. I am good at waiting. But waiting is better when someone knows you're there. Yours wobblingly, Quiver. P.S. Tell the Admiral: yes, there will be sprinkles."

Admiral Crouton, informed of the postscript, opened both eyes simultaneously—an event that had never previously occurred—and said with great clarity: "Excellent." Then he fell asleep, smiling.

Ned pinned the letter to the Wisdom Wall next to Observation #43. He wrote one

final entry in Volume 48:

"The Wibble-Blob is gone. But the wobble is still here. It's in the laughter at the wrong moment. The gumdrop that appears from nowhere. The Friday afternoon when Starch says good morning and almost—almost—smiles. The wobble was never the monster. The wobble was always the point. Chaos Diary, Vol. 48: Complete. Vol. 49: Beginning shortly."

# MEET THE CHARACTERS

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## NED NOODLEWICK



*Thoughtful 11-year-old observer  
with Chaos Diaries and  
bureaucracy-seeing goggles*

# ADMIRAL CROUTON

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*Narcoleptic golden hamster of enormous character who speaks wisdom while asleep*

## COMPTROLLER GRIMSHAW STARCH

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*Narrow ironed-face bureaucrat  
with permanent V-eyebrows and  
rigidity ray*

# GRANNY TICK

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*Small energetic inventor granny  
with seven-direction white hair  
and matching goggles*

# PRIYA PUFFCHEEKS

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*Inquisitive girl in an orange  
raincoat, always mid-question*

# THE WIBBLE-BLOB

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*Enormous wobbling pink custard  
creature with caramel eyes made  
of suppressed feelings*

# ABOUT M.C. WOBBLE

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M.C. Wobble writes books about the sort of characters nobody ever puts in books — blobs, beasts, and things made entirely of baked goods. The stories are silly on the outside and surprisingly warm on the inside.

Every Wobble Book is designed with dyslexic readers in mind — not as an afterthought, but from the first word. Because every child deserves a book that feels like it was made for them.

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