



HOW FOXES GOT THEIR MEANDER

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For Mom, who encouraged my meanders.

— Jeff

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INTRODUCTION

THERE'S MORE TO THE STORY

The story you've been told is NOT the whole story.

Do you know the story I mean?

It goes like this:

Hare had made fun of Tortoise so many times for being slow that one day Tortoise challenged Hare to a race.

Once the race began, Hare dashed away out of sight. But, because Hare was overconfident — and because he was a bit of a stinker who wanted to make Tortoise feel bad — he decided to stop and take a little nap.

He thought, “I’ll wake up once Tortoise gets close, have a great big laugh, and then hurry off to win the race.”

But silly old Hare! He fell so fast asleep that by the time he woke up, Tortoise was almost finished.

Hare sprinted to catch up, but he couldn’t catch Tortoise.

Tortoise won. Hare lost.

The moral of the story, they tell you, is: *Slow and steady wins the race.*

It’s not bad, as morals go.

But there’s more to the story.

A LOT more.

And there’s a whole other moral.

The best moral of all.

Want to hear THAT story?

Want to hear THAT moral?

Are you sure?

Okay, here it is.



CHAPTER 1

ONE FOX WAS DIFFERENT

There was another animal in the race that day.

And that animal was Fox.

Now, back in the old days, foxes were known for one thing and one thing only: going in straight lines.

Walking, trotting, or running — it was always straight lines.

Straight lines at school. Straight lines at work. Straight lines at the grocery store.

Straight lines running away from the bears on Bear Mountain.

(Which, sadly, never worked.)

But one fox was different.

She meandered.

She didn't mean to, but *this* fox could never, *ever* go anywhere in a straight line.

During PE class, she wandered right out of the gym.

At recess, she moseyed over to the wrong forest.

Walking home from school, she always took a wrong turn somehow and before she knew it was out having a wonderful explore.

By the time she came home, her carrot soup was always cold and her parents were always frowny.

"You're too dreamy," said Mrs. Fox.

"Too wandery," said Mr. Fox.

"Too this-way-and-that-ish," said Mrs. Fox.

"We're worried," said Mr. Fox.

"Who knows," said Mrs. Fox, "where you'll end up?"

"If you're not careful," said Mr. Fox, "you could meander yourself ... "

"... right up to Bear Mountain," said Mrs. and Mr. Fox together.

They pondered what to do, what to do.

Finally they decided.

"You need a goal," said Mr. Fox.

"You need a purpose," said Mrs. Fox.

"Discipline!" said Mr. Fox.

"Direction!" said Mrs. Fox.

"Okay, Mom and Dad. I'll try," said Fox.



CHAPTER 2

TRYING TO GET HER MEANDER OUT

The next day Fox tried to go straight.

But the sky was so sparkly and the breeze was so brisk and the air was so airy, it was like the whole forest was saying, “Come play with me!”

How could Fox say no?

She got home especially late that night.

Her carrot stew was especially cold.

On one side of the stew bowl was a note from her parents: "Gone to bed."

On the other side of the stew bowl was a flyer: "Great Forest Race! Next week!"

Tortoise had challenged Hare, Fox read, but all animals were welcome.

"Well, Hare is the fastest creature in the whole forest, so that's just silly," thought Fox, putting away the flyer.

Her mind drifted to other things. Like how the clouds at sunset had made a quilted pattern and how they turned from white to red to pink to orange to a lovely shade of black.

But which shade of black? There were so many to choose from.

Fox was trying to decide whether it was onyx or ebony or obsidian when her parents came yawning out of their bedroom.

"Hi, Sweetie," said Mrs. Fox.

"You should eat," said Mr. Fox.

"I keep thinking about clouds," Fox explained.

"We want you to enter the race," said Mrs. Fox.

"You're faster than Tortoise and smarter than Hare," said Mr. Fox.

"The winner gets a big trophy," said Mrs. Fox.

“And the best den in the forest,” said Mr. Fox.

“Okay, Mom and Dad. I’ll try,” said Fox.

Since the next day was Saturday, she started her training.

Her parents taught Fox the ways of not-meandering.

How to cover her nose with sap, so she wouldn’t be distracted by smells.

How to stuff her ears with mud, so she wouldn’t be distracted by sounds.

How to focus her vision with blinders, so she wouldn’t be distracted by sights.

Fox *walked* back and forth and she *marched* back and forth and she *trotted* back and forth and she *sprinted* back and forth.

Till well after sundown.

She trained so much she missed one whole week of quilty sunsets.

“But that’s okay,” she told herself, “I’ll get my meander out. I’ll be like other foxes. Mom and Dad will be happy.”

By race day, she was ready.



CHAPTER 3

THE GREAT FOREST RACE

The course was a straight line. It stretched one exact mile across a field, into a small wood, up and down some grassy hills, through a stream, and over a meadow to the finish line.

Fox adjusted her nose plug and her ear plugs and her blinders.

She thought straight-ahead thoughts.

She toed the line.

The starting horn sounded and the racers were off!

Fox sped after Hare, tucking in close behind like her parents had trained her.

But running across a meadow with a bunch of sap and mud and other gunk on your head isn't like running back and forth in a ditch without that gunk on your head.

You can't see where the mouse holes are, for example.

Even swift runners can wobble.

Even skillful creatures can trip.

Even surefooted foxes can fall.

Fox fell.

Off popped her blinders!

She looked down. The blinders were certainly too tattered to put back on her head.

She looked up. "My, what a lovely sky," she said, gazing all around her.

Hare disappeared into the woods.

Tortoise plodded by with a friendly, "Hullo, Fox."

Fox gave a little shake and returned to the moment.

"Remember your training!" Fox told herself. "Straightness!"

She dashed forward.

Moments later, she felt an itch.

First in one ear, then the other.

Without thinking, she sat down for a scratch.

First the one ear, then the other.

Out plopped her earplugs!

The earplugs were certainly too dusty to put back in her ears.

She heard a wren warbling from the forest. Fox wondered what was making him so happy.

Tortoise plodded by with a friendly, "Hullo again, Fox."

Fox gave a little shake and returned to the moment.

"Do it for Mom and Dad!" Fox told herself. "Do it for straightness!"

She dashed forward.

It was a kind of dryish, dustyish day full of pollen and seedfluff. Enough to make your nose twitchy even if it's encased in sap.

Fox sneezed.

Ah-CHOO!

Off plonked her noseplug.

The noseplug was certainly too crusty to put back on her nose.

She breathed in the sweet scent of lavender from a far meadow.

What a beautiful day!

Green-jacketed grasses amassed in the fields. Trees in the breeze with their branches all dancing. And clouds overhead like bright boats in the blue.

What a musical day!

Choirs of crickets who chirped as they worked. A stream chit-chatting with stones it passed. And some ways away the hoorays of a jay.

What fragrant day!

The mossy forest funk of fallen logs. The wonderful whiff of wild wet fur. And the signature scent of mushroom perfume.

Tortoise plodded by with a friendly, "Hullo again again, Fox."

Fox gave a little shake, but just then the world said, "Come play."

"Good luck, Tortoise," said Fox.

She left the path.



CHAPTER 4

THE DANGEROUS PLACE

Fox forgot her training.

She forgot the race, the trophy, and the finest den
in the forest.

She even forgot her parents.

For a while.

But Fox remembered herself.

She snuffled one way for a time

She skipped another way for another time.

She hopped about. She nipped at mayflies. She lolled in the grass.

She ambled, cavorted, sashayed.

In other words, Fox meandered.

Before she knew it, it was dusk.

Fox realized where she was.

On Bear Mountain.

Surrounded by bears.

No fox had ever returned from Bear Mountain.

But Fox would try.

She gave a shake and remembered her training. "Focus! Discipline!"

She ran. Straight, straight, straight.

The bears gained. Closer, closer, closer.

Fox could hear the bears huffing, could feel their snorty puffs of air on her tail fur.

Closer. Closer. Closer.

Fox forgot her training!

She zigged.

The bears weren't expecting that.

They tried to left-turn as lickety-split as Fox but they failed and fell flailing across the meadow.

But there was no time to rest because another bear pair gave chase.

Closer. Closer. Closer.

Fox zagged.

The bears weren't expecting that either!

They went tumbling and somersaulting into a blackberry thicket muttering "Snickersnocks! You mischievous Fox."

Well, after that, Fox zigged and zagged all the way home.



CHAPTER 5

THE MORAL OF THE STORY

Her parents were so glad to see her that they forgot to be upset about her meandering off and losing the trophy and the best den in the forest.

They realized that they loved her just the way she was.

Over a supper of hot carrot stew they listened with amazement to the story of how Fox had danced away from the scary old bears with her meander power.

After that, Fox taught all the forest foxes how to meander.

How to wobble and waver and be roundabout.

How to follow whatever small thing caught their attention.

How to not worry so much about being late for supper.

It took a bit of practice, but foxes are smart. They caught on soon enough.

Some say Fox lost the Great Forest Race that day.

But those who truly understand know she did something much more important.

She followed her own path.

The moral of our story?

You can, too.

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