

• IVAN SYSOEV

FOX LIGHTS



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The paintings are made by the author, using watercolors and Bombay inks.

There once was a very small fox, and he really wanted to grow up. What exactly he would do when he grew up, he didn't know. Or, actually, he knew it very well, but every day he knew it differently.

"I'm going to be a foxbus," he thought one day. He imagined how he would carry on his back a big box with doors and windows. He would announce in a loud voice, "Attention: doors are closing. Next stop: Birch Meadow." Clumsy hedgehogs, blind moles, tiny mice – in short, all animals who struggle to travel on their own feet – would enter and exit through the doors and thank him.





“Actually, I’m rather going to be a fabric dyer,” he thought another day. He dreamt how he would set up a big field and plant it with golden safflowers. At sunset, the flower heads would softly rock, like little suns talking to their big brother. Before fall rains would start, he would cut the flowers, carry them in big baskets to his workshop, and turn them into dye, which he then would pour into big vats. Plain cloth dipped into such a vat would come out shining like a flame! Such flames truly warm hearts during cold winter days. He would sell them to every creature whom Mother Nature hasn’t given a fiery coat.

But foxes are also known for another kind of flames – ones they light up on cloudy evenings in desolate places. Travelers watch their mysterious glimmer with awe, knowing that the bushy-tailed wizards are crafting their strange summer magic. Even among foxes, few know who ignites these lights. After all, magic is a delicate thing that doesn't like idle onlookers. This is why its masters keep their craft a secret. In the foxling's family, there were whispered rumors that his gran-gran-granpa was one such master of summer lights. The little one didn't know what exactly wizards do, but deep inside felt that it must be very important. And above all other foxes' trades and occupations, he wanted to become a master like that.





What the little fox didn't want was to continue being little. This way, he had to sit alone in the burrow all day, because every morning the father-fox and the mother-fox departed for their very important foxy jobs. And sitting alone in the burrow all day was very boring.

"Behave yourself, little one," said the fox-mother on one such morning and gently licked the child behind an ear, which caused him to close his eyes in delight.

"Please come back soon," responded the little fox. "Not like yesterday. Yesterday you came at 8pm!"

"I will try, my dear," sighed the mother. "You see, mom has a small deadline at work. We are submitting a very important project. Please, wait just a little, and soon I will be back with you!"

The little fox was not entirely certain what "project" and "deadline" meant. They sounded like something from a book about

pirates, especially the second word. He climbed onto his bed and imagined that it was a type of ship called a "project." Something like a schooner, but faster and overall much better. He firmly stood on the captain's bridge, ignoring the squally wind. The first mate ran up to the bridge, with disheveled fur and panic in his eyes. "All is lost!" he exclaimed. "We are being attacked by Deadline himself!" The moment these words left his mouth, the waves on the port side split, revealing a terrifying head with a ragged beard, entangled with brown seaweed, conch shells, and starfish. "Ha-ha, you landlubbers," roared the head, "Your journey is over! Submit your project to my will!" "Not so fast!" bravely exclaimed the little fox, pulling out his rapier. "All hands, to arms!"



The great battle with Deadline lasted three days and three nights. So, the little fox was very disappointed when he looked at the clock and found that it was still 10am, and thus still a very long wait until his mom and dad came back from work. And being alone, nothing was of much joy. He tried to read a book – nope; tried to build a tower of blocks – boring; tried to play with toy cars – no fun. Only a pile of toys appeared in the burrow. The little one sighed, laid on the floor and started to be sad. Then, he suddenly heard:

“Hard, isn’t it, my friend?”

The little fox turned around, looked, and behold: in the far corner of the room, by the mirror, stood none other but his gran-gran-granpa, complete with his usual fan of tails! So many tails he had that the little fox struggled to even count them at first. And he was always very proud of how well he could count! One, two, three... One, two, three, four, five... One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... Eventually he counted nine. Nine tails was not a joke! It was said that a fox grew a new tail only once in a hundred years. The little fox was very proud of his gran-gran-granpa: not everyone had a relative like this!

“But how did I not notice you?” wondered the little one. “Did you magic yourself in here?”

“I may have,” purred the old fox. “True magic is to be where you are needed. Didn’t you want someone to visit you, perchance?”

“Very much so,” shyly admitted the young fox. “Will you play with me then?”

“Why not! What game do you want to play?”

“Let’s play hide-and-seek!”





“Very well!” said the old fox. “But you shall hide first.”

This was exactly what the little one wanted. The moment his ancestor closed his eyelids, he scurried under the bed, crawled under an upside-down box used for storing toys, and turned still. The old fox counted to ten, opened his eyes, and started to wander around, sniffing the air and saying,

“Where did he vanish? Tricky little one! Looks like I will never find him with those old eyes and ancient nose!”

The old fox searched all around the burrow. He inspected the cabinets, examined the shelves, dug into the pile of toys, looked under the bed - only somehow it didn't occur to him to check under the box. Finally the search became rather silly: the elder went to the cupboard and started to turn over mugs. The little fox couldn't hold it anymore, and snorted out a tiny laugh. The elder perked up his ears, hopped under the bed and lifted the box:

“There you are!”

He poked the little one gently with his nose. They laughed together. Now it was the small fox's turn. He counted to ten, then opened his eyes - and it was as if the elder fox evaporated. No

matter how hard the kit searched, there was not a trace of him anywhere. But just as he started to be upset, he saw a white tip of a fox's tail flicking on the floor: flip-flop! He went pounce! - and caught it. It turned out that the old one stood in the plain sight all this time, only somehow the foxling hadn't seen him.

"Found you, found you!" laughed the little fox. Then he asked suspiciously: "You didn't reveal yourself on purpose, did you?"

"How could I?" exclaimed the elder. "I barely managed to hide from you as is. Too good you are at playing hide-and-seek!"

So pleased the young fox was at these words that rolled over his back three times in delight. Then he rose back to his paws and remarked, "You are also quite good at hiding. Will you teach me how do you do that?"



"Hm!" said the old fox, and flicked his fan of tails from one side to the other. "In this art, I happen to know a better master than myself. Why don't we both learn from him?"

He invited the foxling to the wall across from the window. Outside of the window, there grew a great, old maple tree. Sunlight shone through its foliage, spattering bright and dark spots through the window and all across the wall. They jumped about like white hares playing in a shadowy meadow.

"Look how much fun they are having!" said the elder.

The young fox nodded, and started to look at one hare, whom he named Tail Tailsson. Tail Tailsson ran across the field, jumped left, dashed right, turned around and ran back. "Looping," thought the little fox. He once read in a book that hares retrace their steps to confuse predators. He watched Tail Tailsson's tricks for a while, but his eyes grew tired, and he blinked. When he opened his eyes, the hare was nowhere to be seen. Where did he go?

"Tail Tailsson turned into Martha Brightspot and Silver Hopper," answered the old fox. "Actually, while I was talking, they became the three Quickfeet sisters. Oh! And now they are King Gvidor the Fierce and his retinue. And look, it seems that Tail Tailsson is back! Turns out that all this time, they hid in one another. Quite clever, huh?"

"And you can do this too?" asked the small fox with widely open eyes.

"Maybe not exactly this, but something close enough," purred the elder again. "The trick is to find out whether those are the hares playing on a meadow, or the sun playing with the maple tree."



Little fox put his paws over his head, feeling that he didn't understand a thing.

"Don't be sad, my friend," said the grand-grand-grandfather. "I grew half a dozen tails before I figured out what is the game that we all play: you and I, the sun and the maple, and those hares on the wall. Although...why don't we try to find out together? All we need to do is to listen very carefully."

"Really?" said the tiny fox and perked his ears.

"Yep," nodded the elder. "But you need to become really, really quiet inside. Otherwise, you won't hear anything. It is a delicate thing."

"Like summer magic?"

"Perhaps this *is* the summer magic," smiled the old fox.



The foxling jumped in excitement; he couldn't wait to learn how the magic is done. His ancestor sat him still, then ran his paw down the kit's spine to straighten it. Then he showed the tiny fox how to breathe slowly, deeply, and fully, so that no hectic breath would disturb the listening. After that, the old fox sat in front of the young one, closed his eyes, and became still – so still that not a single muscle nor a tiny hair moved on his entire body. It was as if a carved statue of a noble beast stood in front of the tiny fox.

“Cool,” thought the little one. He closed his eyes and tried to do the same. But no matter how hard he tried, nothing interesting happened. Soon he started to become bored of just sitting still and doing nothing. “When will the magic start?” he thought. “How much longer must I wait?” He opened one eye a little and looked at the elder. But the old fox was still in the exact same pose.

The little fox sighed, closed his eyes again, and tried to listen even more attentively. Still nothing interesting was going on. Even worse, his nose started to itch. He tried to ignore that, and then his side started to itch as well. Then he felt itching on his back and in his ears. Soon, in all of the foxling, only the tail didn't itch.

“Don't fidget; scratch it already,” laughed the gran-gran-gran-pa. Slightly embarrassed, the little one heeded his advice.





"I tried very hard, but I heard nothing," he said, dejected, and lowered his ears.

"You worked very hard indeed," agreed the old fox. "Maybe even a bit too hard. Your ears became so tense, one could have balanced a plate of biscuits on top of them!"

"And still – no result!"

"This is because summer magic is very shy. You chased it, so it ran away and hid. Magic doesn't like when someone tries to capture it."

"But I really want to hear the magic," said the bewildered little fox. "If it is afraid of me, then what do I do?"

"Rather than chasing magic, why don't we invite it to come visit us?"

"But how?"

"Let's make it bright and joyful inside our hearts. Then, maybe, the magic wouldn't mind to visit a happy place. Besides, isn't it joyous that we are alive, that we have each other, that we have this beautiful summer day, surrounding us with kindness and warmth? Also, tell me, have you ever listened to your own breath? Or the beat of your heart?"

"No... Why would I do that?"

"Oh, just to notice it better that you are alive. Isn't that wonderful – to be alive?"

"I guess so... Though it is often very boring."

"Well, now is not the time to be bored," said the grand-grand-grandfather. "Let's appreciate this wonderful moment, before it is gone!"

He closed his eyes, and now the foxling noticed a soft half-smile wandering along his long snout. The old fox was clearly enjoying his time. Joy and calmness flowed from him like a strong and steady breeze. Even his statue-like firmness appeared to come from being full to the brim with quiet delight.

The little fox took a deep breath, closed his eyes again - and now indeed noticed how his heart was beating under the white fur of his chest. He smiled at this faithful and trustworthy friend, who not for a second let him down. He noticed how air moved through his nostrils - coming in cold and dry, going out warm and moist. All parts of his little body were busy with their quiet work; there was his enigmatic, fun, and magical gran-gran-gran-pa nearby; and there was no reason to hurry. And slowly it started to become calmer and calmer inside the foxling's heart, until quietness enveloped him.



And this quietness was so tender and warm that the little one didn't want to leave it. He felt as if a warm sea caressed him in its waves. Or maybe those were the soft paws of his mother. He sat like this for a very, very long time. And when the quietness started to slip away, he opened his eyes. Then he marveled, seeing the world as if he saw it for the first time.

He had never noticed before how maple leaves looked like they were carved by the paws of a skillful master. On the eve of autumn, the leaves started to have yellow spots, which made them touchingly similar to someone elderly, but still full of life. They danced a slow waltz on the stage of the deep, deep blue sky. An invisible orchestra of grasshoppers and cicadas pro-

vided the music, and the white tails of pampas grass rocked in unison. And not only them – for the music streamed like a river through the entire world, and every creature, big or small, spun in its flow. Even hawks – the eternal nemeses of tiny foxes – and even tiresome midges were part of this great dance. Everyone had a unique and necessary part in it – nobody could be removed from the stage. Neither could the little fox. He was an important bit of this vast and wondrous world, and the world was kind to him.

He closed his eyes again, and for a moment he saw what looked like a little sun shining inside. He wondered, “What if I’m a beam of this sun, like those frolicking hares on the wall?” The thought made him laugh with joy. The elderly fox looked at him and nodded.

“This, my friend, is the true fox light,” he said. “The lights of our magic are mere reflections of this one – just like the moon reflects the sun.”



At this point, tiny foxling realized that it was not the first time when gran-gran-granpa replied to his thoughts. How did he do that?

"You already know how," said the old fox. "This is because you and I are two parts of the whole."

"Wow," thought the little fox. It occurred to him that if this was indeed true, then he didn't have to wait until the evening to be with his mom. He closed his eyes and tried to imagine her as well as he could. But he didn't see her. Instead, he suddenly felt how tired she must be at work, and how hard it would be for her to do the cleaning once she came back.





“We need to help my mom!” he exclaimed. The old fox agreed.

Together, they gathered the toys from the floor, put them into the box and shoved it under the bed. The foxling straightened the bed cover. Then they watered the plants, dusted off the shelves, and even swept the floor. After that, the old fox started to wash the dishes, while the youngling carried to him the coffee-stained mugs, which had been forgotten near the computer by the father-fox. The little fox marveled at what was happening. He had never liked housework. But now the work was brewing, and it was fun. Was it because he was doing it for his dear mom?



"It really is," replied the old fox to his thoughts, while drying clean plates with a patterned towel. "Actually, almost every work can be done with joy."

"Really?"

"Really really. The secret is in how you do it."

The old fox cast a cheerful glance at the reflected sun frolicking on the painted border of the plate. Then he carefully placed the plate on the shelf and continued:

"Tell me whether this has happened to you. You were told to do something, and you didn't want to. So, you did it just to tick the box, and couldn't wait for it to end. But instead it dragged ooooooon and ooooooon, and there was no end to this mis-

ery. Well, has this ever happened?"

The little fox nodded, because it happened to him all the time. The elder took the next plate and initiated a vigorous action with the scrubber, raising a mountain of foam in the sink.

"Then, my friend, know this: when such a thing happens, half of you basically runs away. To hide, that is, from the boring job. But then, it turns out that you are only half alive. And is it fun to be only half alive?"

The little fox shook his head.

"There you go. And then, there are times when you do something for someone dear. And while you are doing it, you imagine how happy they will be to see your work, how their smile will shine. This is when the magic starts."

"So, there is magic in here as well?" asked the little fox in disbelief.

"Well, what do you think? When you work like that, you forget about yourself," the old one started to scrub a coffee stain off a mug. "Like a sugar cube dissolving in hot tea, you dissolve in your work. This is when the sun hares admit you into their game, and the midges, leaves, and stars start to dance with you. Haven't you guessed what magic is really about?"

"I don't think so..."

"Then here is the deepest secret of fox magic for you: true magic is oneness."

"True magic is oneness," repeated the little fox in his mind. Like any magic formula, it sounded properly mysterious and obscure. And yet, watching the dust specks dancing in the sunlight, he felt that the secret must be not that complicated after all.

"Tell me this," he asked his gran-gran-granpa. "What job is the most interesting one? Whom shall I become when I grow up?"

"Well, whom do you want to become?"

"A gardener," said the foxling. "And also an astronomer and a foxbus." He started to describe the advantages of each profession, while the old fox continued the cleanup and nodded.

"Your heart will tell you whom to become," he said when the little one ran out of steam. "But you know what? Don't rush to grow up."

"Why?!" exclaimed the tiny fox, feeling that something near and dear was put into question.

"When I still had my kit fur," said the old fox, "I very much wanted to become an adolescent. When I became an adolescent, I hurried to become an adult. When I became an adult, I yearned to become respectable. About the same time as I became respectable, I also became old. And then nothing in this world brought joy to my heart anymore. But one day by some chance my heart became quiet, and then I was a kit again. And I have been a kit ever since," winked the old fox.

The young fox looked at him with doubt: gran-gran-granpa didn't look like a kit at all. Though he didn't much resemble other adults either.

"You are strange," said the foxling.

"Then you be strange, too," said the elder. "Remember that the world is playing a marvelous game with you. Don't forget that even when you grow up!"

At this moment, keys rattled in the front door lock.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" asked the old fox. "Run greet your mother!"

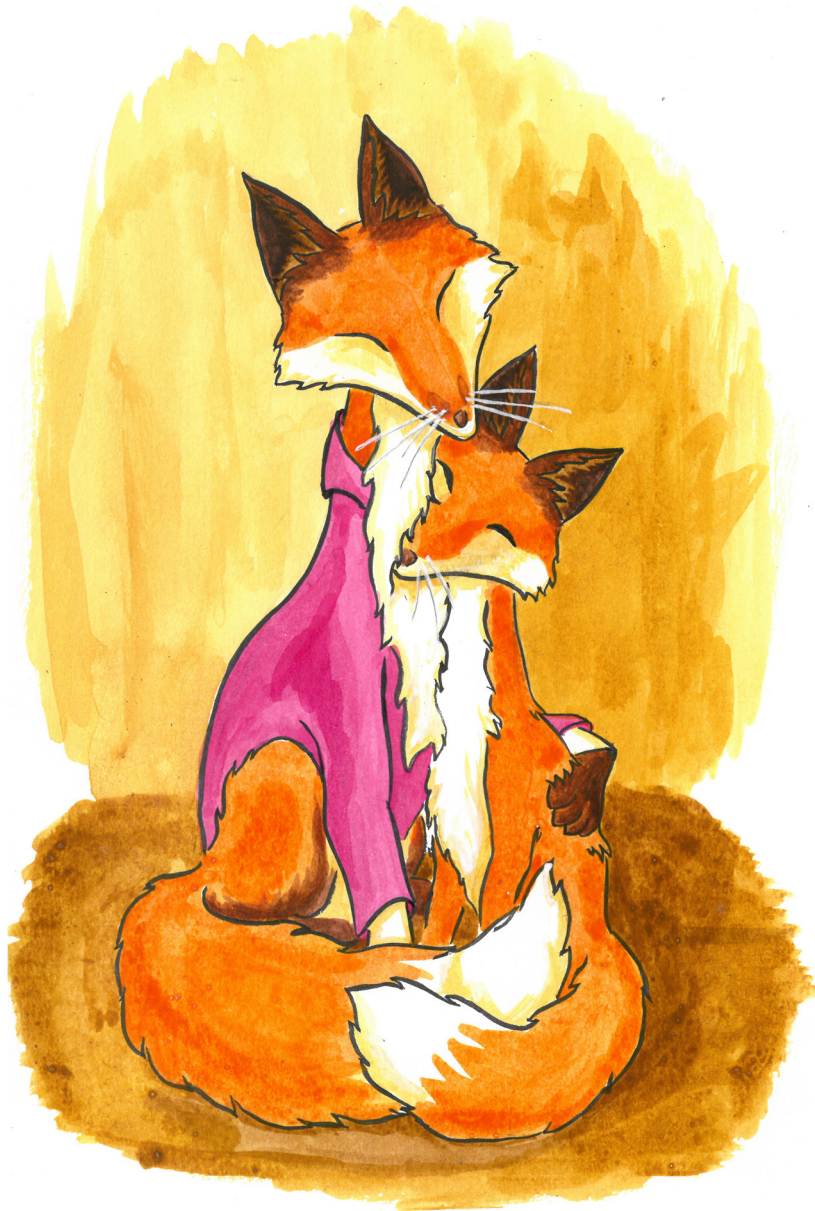
And the little fox rushed into the warm embrace.

When hugging was over, the mother-fox looked around the room and was amazed by its tidiness.

"What a good boy you are!" she said.

"It's not just me!" said the foxling. "We did it together with gran-gran-granpa!"

"Gran-gran-granpa? But where is he?"



And the old fox was nowhere to be seen. He left as quietly as he had appeared. Only a few strands of fur remained stuck to the kitchen towel. Or perhaps they belonged to the foxling? They looked longer and dimmer, but no one could tell for sure.

In any case, ahead was a great evening with father, mother, tea, and cookies. And when the little fox went to bed, for a while he laid with his eyes open and gazed out the window. Outside, the stars shone cheerfully, the maple leaves circled in the wind, the crickets played their song, and bats zipped by like quick shadows. And the little fox sensed that the world was full of his friends, and that he was never going to be alone again.



