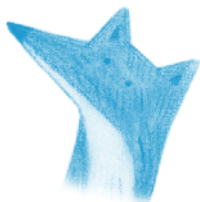




FOX
GOES
NORTH



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What Did Fox See?

Fox sat in the middle of the track. Her little blue suitcase was beside her, neatly packed. For some time a strange feeling had settled inside her. Something unusual and exciting was going to happen. Fox was sure that this was going to be the day.



She closed her emerald-green eyes and tilted her chin up towards the autumn sun. It was early

morning but already warm. Her fine whiskers twitched. There! That feeling again, deep inside her.

Fox picked a white daisy. She studied the petals and nodded. Turning the daisy over, she scanned the underside of the flower. This might tell her more about the odd sensation in her old bones.

Fox was a flower-teller:

a florologist.



Sometimes it was as if she could see into the future.

If she saw pale spots under the petals, it would mean rain was on the way. A missing petal or two would mean thunder, maybe a storm. Dark red on the petal edges would foretell something sad. But this time she was surprised to notice a faint blue halo round the centre of the daisy. Her eyes widened. This was definitely unusual. *Hmmm.*

A blue halo meant something extraordinary was going to happen soon.

She looked about her. Everything seemed normal. It was a glorious autumn day. The sky was blue. The wind was still. And yet something extraordi—

Oh! What was that strange noise?

From further down the track, beyond a hill, there came a low rumbling and some high tooting and tweeting. Something clattered. Something pinged. All in all there was a great deal of noise.

Fox scanned the top of the hill. The noises were getting louder. Whatever was making all that racket was drawing closer. Fox's tail was on alert. Her ears were on alert. Her nose was, well, on alert, sniffing the air.

And then, finally, at last, the clattering, rumbling, tooting and tweeting source of the noise began to *appear*.

First came a pair of vast plate-shaped antlers.

They belonged to a large moose that was plodding steadily towards Fox.

Fox stared. Moose was pulling something enormous. It creaked and squeaked and rattled. It made an entire symphony of sounds.

It was a house. On wheels.

Fox was astonished. It was not like any house she had ever set eyes on before. The roof was peacock blue. The walls were deep yellow, with window frames painted red, green and orange. Bright patterns were everywhere: zigzags of colour, dots and spots, straight lines and curly, circles, blobs and unruly rectangles. Altogether, the house seemed to be jiggling with colour – a wriggling rainbow on wheels. And Moose was in the wagon's shafts, pulling it along the track.

Fox got to her feet and waited. Was this the extraordinary thing that the daisy had foretold? The answer she had been waiting for?

The house on wheels drew closer until it was right in front of Fox.

“Aaaaand – STOP!” roared the driver, a bear, pulling hard on a large wooden brake lever.

Bear’s voice was so deep that it seemed as if a mountain was speaking. He was sitting on the front veranda of the house in a plump and comfortable armchair. He appeared to have dyed the fur between his ears an orangey red with a flash of green.

Fox was just thinking how strange the morning was turning out to be when the colourful stripe on Bear’s head detached itself and floated upwards on wings.

It was, in fact, the overly large beak of a toucan. Toucan flew forward to perch on one of Moose’s large antlers. He had a patch over one eye and a small telescope hanging from a string round his neck. He glared at Fox with his good eye.





Toucan hunched his shoulders and demanded, “Friend or foe?” His voice was sharp and clipped, as if each word had been carefully cut out with scissors.

Fox felt that this was a rather rude question first thing in the morning. Wouldn’t “Good morning” have been more polite? Or even a cheerful “Lovely day, isn’t it?”

“Friend or foe?” repeated the bird, leaning down.

“That depends,” Fox answered evenly.

Toucan frowned. “What do you mean? Depends on what?”

Fox smiled. “On you. What are you? Friend or foe?”

“She’s got you there!” Bear boomed. “Ha ha ha! Go on, Tookie, answer Fox. Tell us what *you* are, friend or foe?”

Toucan clacked his beak, shuffled his feathers and cleared his throat. “I’m a friend, of course,” he snapped in a rather *unfriendly* manner.

Fox smiled again. “Then I’m a friend too,” she replied. “I like your house.”

Toucan sniffed. “Actually it’s a caravan.”

Bear chuckled loudly. “Tookie loves to correct everyone! He always insists it’s a caravan, but have you ever seen a caravan with a veranda? Or a balcony? And a proper roof and chimney? I doubt it. Ha ha ha!”

“Have you ever seen a house *on wheels*?” Toucan hit back. “It’s a caravan.”

Then he leaned down even further until his beak was almost touching Fox’s nose. “What

would *you* call it, Fox?” Toucan asked rather slyly.

“Hmmm,” murmured Fox. This was clearly a test. She tipped her wise old head to one side and let the sun warm her brain. She eyed the house on wheels carefully.

At last she spoke confidently.



“I know exactly what it is: it’s a home.”

Bear clapped his enormous paws. “There! A perfect answer, Tookie. We can’t argue with that.”

Even Toucan looked pleased. “A home,” he repeated. He clacked his beak as if he was tasting the word. “Yes, it is, isn’t it, Bear? Our home.”

Bear looked at Fox. “So,” he began, “what are you doing, Fox, sitting there in the middle of the road with your little suitcase? Are you going somewhere perhaps?”

“I’m enjoying the day,” said Fox calmly, “and wondering what might happen. But you look as if you might be on an adventure.”

“Ah!” Bear smiled. “How right you are. We are going to see the splendour, the magnificence and breathtaking wonder of the Northern Lights. Poetry written in the sky.”

“And I’m the navigator,”
Toucan put in quickly.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what

a navigator is,” Fox admitted. “Is it something important?”

“Oh yes. VERY important! It means I tell Bear and Moose where to go. I have a magnetic beak, you see, and that means I know exactly where north is, day and night.” Toucan began to swing his beak in different directions. “That’s north,” he said. “That’s west,” he went on, pointing elsewhere. “South, east, north-e—”

“Ow!” Fox yelped as Toucan’s huge beak swung round and knocked her clean over.



“Oh dear. So sorry,” muttered Toucan. “Are you all right?”

Fox dusted herself off. “Fine, thank you. But north-east is quite dangerous, isn’t it?”

Toucan frowned. “Is it?”

“It was a joke,” murmured Fox. “Don’t worry. My jokes aren’t very funny.”

Toucan’s shoulders began to shudder. His beak opened wide and there was a strange high whistling noise as he drew in a deep breath. He laughed, clearly warming to their new friend. “That is

HILARIOUS! Jokes that aren’t funny! I love it. It’s back to front and upside down. Bear, maybe Fox would like to come with us to see the Northern Lights?”

Fox’s heart began to beat faster. In her paw





she still held the little white daisy with the blue halo. She knew in a flash that this meeting was meant to happen. It was one of the most important moments in her life. They were going on an adventure.

Bear sat back, closed his eyes and considered Toucan's suggestion. His left ear twitched. His eyebrows went up, down and up again. "Hmmm. Not a lot of room. We might have to build an extension."

Before he could say more, he was interrupted by a new voice.

“Would anyone care to introduce me?” Moose sighed lugubriously. “I know I’m only small and insignificant. After all, I only pull an entire HOUSE behind me ALL day, but without ME where would YOU be, eh? You’d be on the other side of the hill I have just pulled you up and over, that’s where. And still at the bottom of it, I might add.”

“Hello, Moose,” Fox said cheerfully. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to ignore you.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” murmured Moose. “It’s Toucan’s fault. He does like the limelight. He should have become an actor really. You know, for the applause. But it’s that magnetic beak of his. You’re no good on stage if your beak keeps pointing north.”

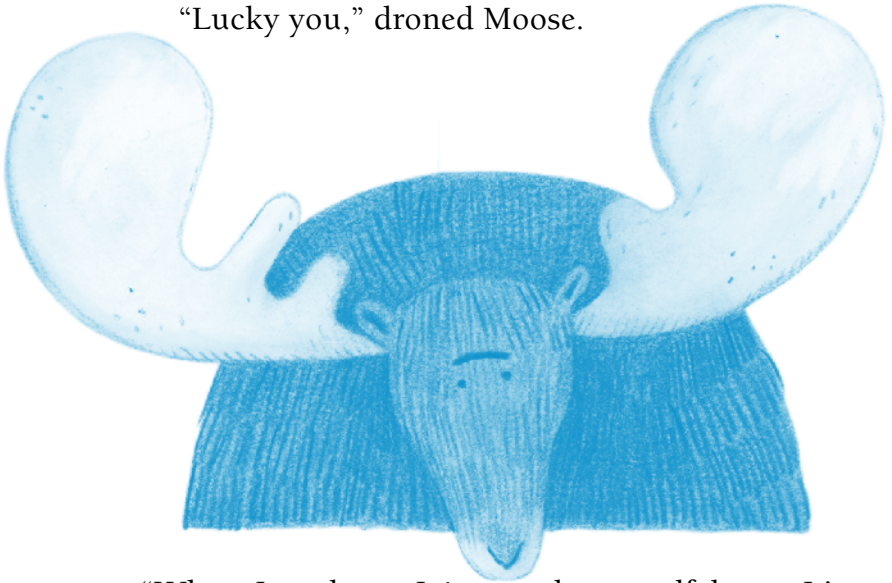
“Moose is talking rubbish as usual,” snapped Toucan. “I never wanted to be an actor.”

Moose lowered her head and whispered to Fox, “He had private lessons. I’m just saying. And he has two perfectly good eyes. He just likes dressing up.”

Fox smiled. What an interesting crew! And they were going on a magical, mysterious adventure to see the fabled Northern Lights! How wonderful.

“I would love to join you all,” she said. “Bear, I don’t think an extension will be necessary. When I curl up, I’m pretty small.”

“Lucky you,” droned Moose.



“When I curl up, I just make myself large. It’s these antlers. Everywhere I go I bump into things. I have to keep reminding myself I’ve got a dinner service on my head.”

“It must be very difficult for you,” Fox said sympathetically. Then she added, “Though I thought that only male moose had antlers.”

“Well, this is usually true,” Moose answered, “but I rather like antlers, so I thought I would grow my own. We can’t let the boys have all the fun things, you know.”

“They are truly splendid,” Fox said. “You are a walking wonder.”

“Thank you, Fox. You are most kind.”

At that moment Bear rose from his armchair. For the first time Fox could see just how big he was. What an imposing figure! What a belly! Bear grunted loudly and stepped to the front of the veranda.

“Tell us, Fox, what can you do that might help us on our long journey?”

“I’m quiet and tidy. I keep out of the way. I try to stay out of arguments. I like peace and quiet

and nature. I can cook and—”

“What did you say?” Moose jumped in. “You can ... cook?” She repeated the question in a hushed voice full of hope.

Fox was aware that a strange silence had fallen on the animals. Bear and Moose were looking from Fox to Toucan and back to Fox. Toucan appeared to be shrinking.



“Yes,” Fox went on. “Spaghetti with mushrooms and cream; pancakes with maple syrup and strawberries; lasagne—”

“You mean you don’t serve Carrots Boiled to

Oblivion or Burnt Broccoli with Dead Leaves?” said Moose, her voice shaking and her eyes wide.

Fox tried not to smile. She noticed Toucan nervously switching his eyepatch from one eye to the other.

Fox shook her head. “No, I’m afraid I don’t know those dishes.”

Toucan lifted himself to his full height, which was not all that much really. “Moose, I never wanted to be the cook but someone had to do it. You would have died of starvation if it hadn’t been for me.”

“Sometimes I wish I had died from starvation,” Moose said, and the peculiar slow sound of a moose chuckling to herself reached their ears.

“Moose,” chided Bear. “That was, um, uncalled for. Toucan’s managed to keep us all alive – just,” he added under his breath. Then, before anyone could reply, Bear raised his paw for silence. He was clearly the one in charge.





“My dear friends, the deal is done and we welcome Fox to our home, our hearts, our journey and our kitchen! Know that there will be hard times ahead. There will be moments when we get tired and lose hope. But we shall laugh and celebrate too. At all times we must remember what we are here for. And what is that? Tookie?”

Toucan, who had dozed off during Bear’s speech, jerked awake. He looked wildly about him, as if he might find the answer written on a bush or in the sky.

“Moose?” prompted Bear.

Moose raised her great head and looked straight back at her leader. “Wild places,” she declared with shining eyes.

“Exactly,” boomed Bear. “We are hunting for the breathtaking splendours of the world, Fox.

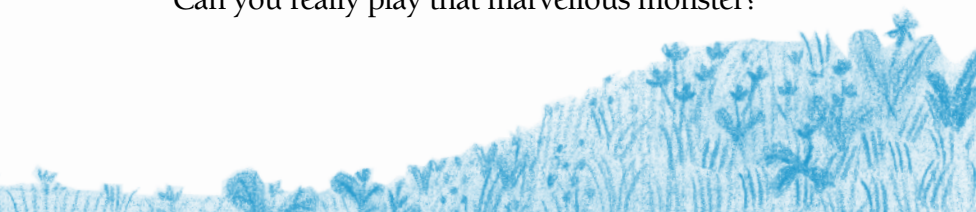


The Northern Lights. Such wild beauty feeds our souls. Now we must travel on, and I feel the need for some stirring music. Stride on, my magnificent Moose, stride on!”



As Moose began to haul the caravan forward, Fox snatched up her little blue suitcase and jumped on board. Bear showed her to the back of the strange vehicle. Waiting there was an extraordinary surprise. Fixed to the rear wall of the house on wheels was an organ. It had three keyboards, thirty-two pedals and ninety-three pipes. The smallest were as tiny as straws, the largest were like massive drainpipes, and each one produced a different musical note.

“My goodness,” Fox murmured, quite overwhelmed. “Can you really play that marvellous monster?”



Bear sat on the organ's bench. He pulled a lever. Air rushed into the pipes as the instrument wheezed into life. Then Bear raised his paws high above his head and brought them crashing down. His paws flew across the keyboards. His feet dashed about the pedals. The organ thundered, and the house on wheels trembled from top to bottom.

It made Fox's body vibrate deliciously. The sound was so loud, so deep, so thrillingly beautiful that tears sprang to her eyes. Yes! This was how it was meant to be.

The caravan lurched forward. Pots and pans clattered. The wooden wheels creaked and rumbled, and the mighty organ filled the universe with glorious celestial music.

The expedition to the Northern Lights had begun.