

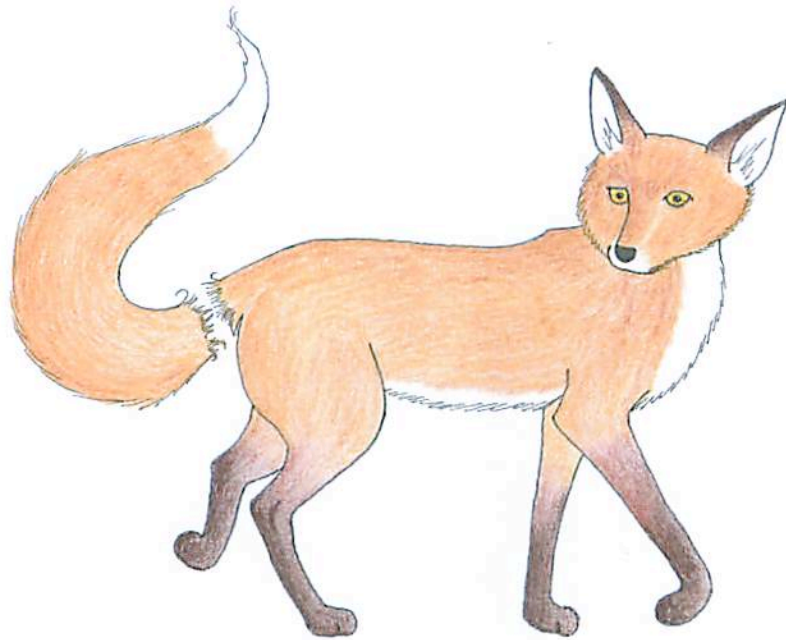
The Magnificent Tail



Once there was a fox who had a magnificent tail. It was a golden-red tail with bright white fur at the end, and it was beautiful. It glowed golden in the dawn, gleamed white in the afternoon, lit up on fire in the sunset, and shone silver in the night. One sunset, as the setting sun made his tail glow orange and gold in fiery splendour, the fox was trotting

along by himself, thinking of how wonderful his tail was. But the rest of his body, sick of his bragging, got so jealous of his tail that they banished it from the fox, and it flew off of the body and went fluttering away over the treetops. The fox started to feel a little bit funny, and decided it was high time to sit down and admire his tail again to make himself feel better, so he looked around behind him. There was no tail. The fox thought that he was simply sitting on it or something. After all, tails are a bit hard to keep track of. So he tried to wriggle his tail, but nothing happened. He tried standing up and turning around. Still no tail. But the fox didn't panic.

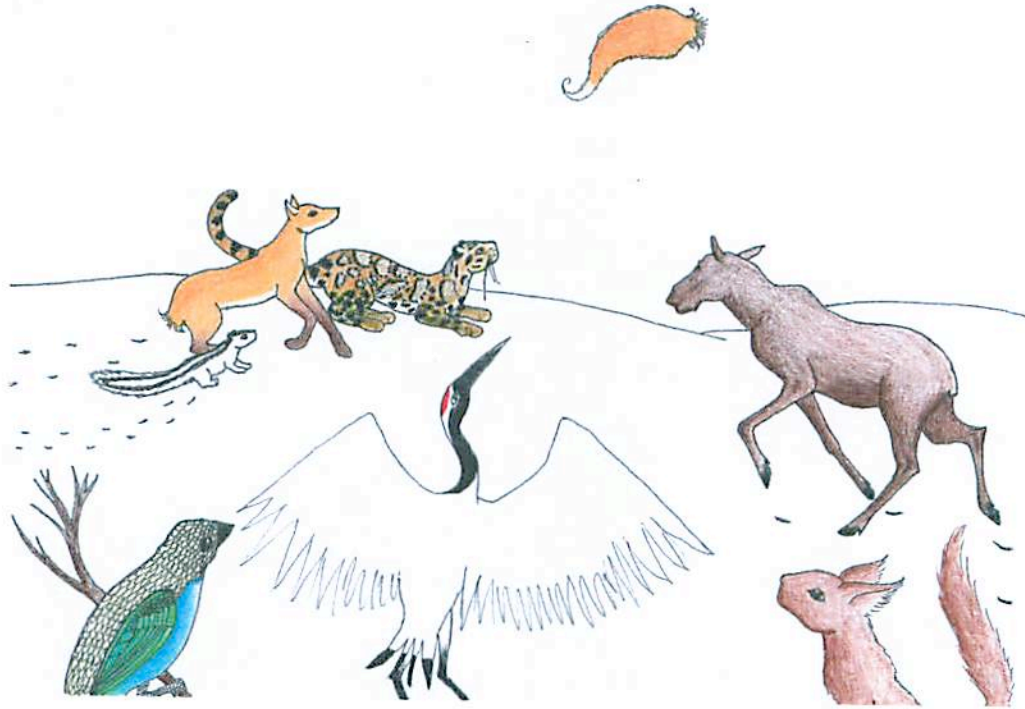




He simply thought to himself, *This is ridiculous. It is entirely impossible for a tail to disappear, so I am obviously mistaken. I'll go back to my cave and try looking for it again in the morning.* And so the fox padded happily back to his cave, not worrying about it at all. Everyone knows a tail can't just go *missing*.

THE NEXT MORNING, THE FOX WAS WOKEN UP BY THE RAVEN, CAWING AND CAWING SO LOUDLY that every creature in the entire forest was immediately awake and immediately annoyed. He shrieked and shrieked, telling them of a beautiful golden bird he saw over to the north of the forest, and suddenly all the animals found that they were more interested than annoyed. The fox got so excited about this news that he completely forgot about checking on his tail again and ran along with the other animals to see this bird. And what a beautiful bird. The animals stopped and stared at it, mesmerised. Its feathers were shining golden-red with bright white at the end. It was gorgeous. Of course, you couldn't see the wings, but birds always look different in the air anyway. It was heading north, towards the mountains, so the animals set off after it. It twisted and turned and writhed through the air in lovely patterns. And the animals followed.

They chased it for three days, never stopping, without food or water. Everybody was much too caught up by the beautiful golden bird to notice that the fox's tail was missing. Not even the mouse that ran behind the fox noticed. And who could blame them? The bird was wonderful. It glowed golden in the dawn, gleamed white in the afternoon, lit up on fire in the sunset, and shone silver in the night.



On the fourth day, the animals followed the bird into a path that led through an ancient forest. The most ancient of the trees was an old oak that stood on the outskirts of the forest. Looking down at the path, he noticed the fox missing a tail and didn't like it at all. "What's the use of a fox," he remarked to his neighbours, "without a tail? He'll lose his balance and fall over soon enough, mark my words. We'll have to stop him before he trips over a plant and crashes into our branches. I don't know about you, but I'd like my branches to stay nice and safe, thank you very much!" So the old oak sent a message through the trees, saying that the fox must be made to turn around and leave the forest. Just as the fox passed a rowan tree (which is of course the most magical of trees), the branches swooped down, and the animals had to stop because of the thick spiny twigs that blocked their path. They were about to leave for home when the mouse who had run behind the fox squeaked urgently, "What about the golden bird!? The one we have been chasing for three whole days! He is disappearing as we speak; quickly, quickly, we must continue! We can jump over the branches! We can find a way through." The animals stared disapprovingly at the mouse, as it was frowned upon to have attention span of more than three seconds. Then they turned and headed back towards their home, remarking only to each other, "What golden bird?" The poor little mouse sighed and scampered off after them.

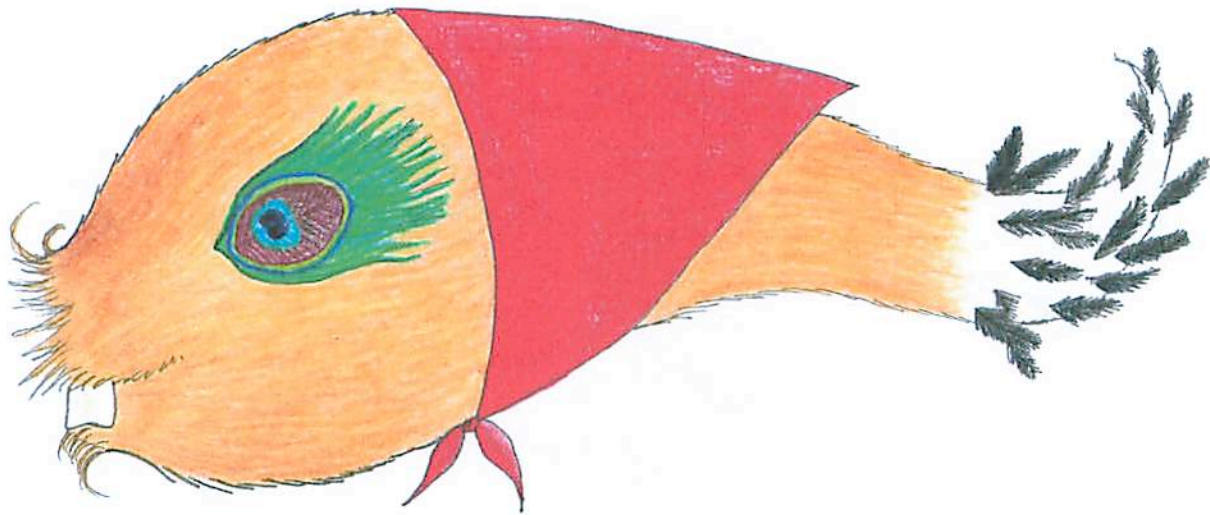
The fox, puzzled, turned around and followed the others, but as he turned he suddenly noticed his tail missing. Only a little tuft of fur was left in its place. His eyes widened and he stared at the place where his tail used to be, but he couldn't for the life of

him figure out where it had gone. Everyone knows tails don't just go *missing*. He tried waving it around, but all that happened was this: his little tiny stub of what used to be a tail wagged back and forth in the air and made a tiny little swishing sound. The fox tried it a few more times. He noticed that it was a lot lighter without his tail. He noticed that he didn't have to worry about it getting dirty on the ground any more. He listened to the little swishing sound it made. "I'm not so sure I need a tail, he said to himself. I think I'm even prettier without it."

"Sour Grapes!" squawked the raven. "Sour Grapes!" But the fox held his little stub of a tail high in the air and skipped off home. And he found that he could skip a lot more easily without his tail, anyway.

Of course, it wasn't a bird at all that the animals had chased, but the fox's tail, flying swiftly through the air. It was enjoying its freedom immensely -- it was so much more fun to fly than to trail along behind a fox! As it went, it gradually picked up things it found pretty and interesting. It found a red bandana that it tied around itself, and got an eye from a peacock's tail. It even managed to collect a horse's tooth for a mouth, and it stuck raven's feathers in its white plume, nearly hiding the white from view, but not quite.

The tail soon came to a lake. It had never seen a lake before, so it landed and stopped to gaze at its reflection. It looked at its bandana, and its eye, and its raven tail, and even its horse tooth. Its reflection was beautiful. And as it stared in pleasure, it made an odd little sound, the happy little sound of a content tail: "prrrr-tha, prrrr-tha, pingledey, pingledey!" After looking at itself for a long time, it sighed and flew into the air.



Finally, exhausted from flying for so long, the tail landed to rest on a church spire in a fairly large village. Almost immediately, the villagers decided to send Medea up to investigate. Or rather, Medea decided for them that she was going to be the one to investigate.

Medea was a burly farmwoman, named after a certain hen in her parent's henhouse that had killed her children and been extremely temperamental. Though Medea the human didn't have any children, she had lived up to her name by being temperamental, certainly. And in this particular village, anyone who lived up to their name was highly respected. So Medea climbed up the ladder-- actually three ladders all tied together. It had taken the village two days to set it up, as it would keep on falling and squashing villagers -- and arrived at the church roof, where she grabbed the tail with a fist and threw it over the side. She started climbing down again, but noticed that it was fluttering in mid-air. It wasn't falling at all! So she grabbed it and held it tightly as she went down, then, without saying a word to the curious villagers, stomped to her house, where she stuffed it in an old rat cage and charged everybody twenty karnukks to see it for two seconds. At least, it started out as 20 karnukks. By six months, it was up to 50 karnukks, and at the end of the year, she charged two hundred.

One day, the parson who lived in the church came in to visit Medea and ask her to bake 5,000 cakes for the church. It ended up with her agreeing on five (that was how business was conducted in the village). The parson, turning to leave, noticed the cage in the corner and, seeing the tail, hurried towards it and held his hand through the bars. Before he became a parson, he had been a zookeeper from a far-off land, and his specialty had been the study of tails (Queueology, as they call it). He had never seen a tail so magnificent, so fluffy, but most of all, so very lonely. Of course, Medea didn't know anything about the parson's job as a zookeeper, and she certainly didn't know the first thing about tails. Medea was just about to yell at the parson when she heard a very odd noise. It went, "prrr-tha, prrr-tha, pingledey, pingledey!" The parson, turning around, asked if he might borrow the tail for five days. He promised he'd take care of it. Medea thought about it. The thing was dirty and grey now anyway, and hardly anyone came to see it. So she asked for 200 karnukks, which the parson gladly paid. She kicked herself for not asking 400.

The parson returned five days later and begged her to let him keep the tail just for a few more days. He promised he would take good care of it. It was such a beautiful tail. Finally, Medea told him she supposed he could have it for two more days... if he paid her five hundred karnukks. The parson paid willingly, and again Medea kicked herself for not asking more. She was a very greedy woman.

I suppose you're wondering what the parson and the tail were doing while Medea was fuming. For the days they were together, the parson had been collecting together the oddest assortment of things. First, he went out and managed to bring together a branch of every tree in the entire world -- ash, oak, rowan, elm, eucalyptus, dogwood, aspen, black acacia, fir, pine, manzanita, larch, linden, willow, spruce, maple, magnolia, cypress, crabapple, and other trees that no one has ever heard of before or since, like the Tivalese Sugar-gingko, a tree whose fruit is crystallised ginger and whose leaves are made of teabags, and the Fermented Swampats, which grow upside down and die if their leaves

are touched by sunlight or their roots touch dirt. Then he carved them all into wonderful, twisted shapes, and, as the tail watched, he set them up in the middle of the room, all the branches twirling around each other to form a thick arch of wood and bark and colours and textures. Then he carried out a curious square box, small, smooth, and made of a dark wood that felt cool to the touch. Out of this box he took ribbons of every imaginable colour: red, orange, yellow, deep green, pale blue, and a violet so vibrant that it was hard to look at. He placed the ribbons all over the arch, hanging them down from the entwined branches. Finally, he carefully lifted out the last ribbon. It was a black ribbon that looked as though the space inside it went on forever. If you looked hard, you could even see the tiny twinkling of stars in the deep velvety blackness. He hung this up in the very centre of the archway. He then placed candles of all different colours in a wide circle around the arch, and solemnly burned them, one by one, saving the black one in front for last. Then he motioned for the tail to move closer. The tail moved right up next to him. It didn't want to admit it, but the tail was just a little bit scared.

At last it was time. Taking out one last little box, a round, deep green one, the parson cautiously opened the lid and showed the tail what was inside. All the leaves and flower petals of the whole world had been collected in this tiny box and ground to a powder so fine that all that could be seen was a glimmer of bright dust that seemed almost transparent, and this was what the parson sprinkled thoroughly over himself and the tail. Then, the parson picked up the black candle and set the black ribbon on fire. And as the flames rose up the ribbon, the most amazing scene appeared in the arch.

There were so many tails! Badger tails floated serenely along, green dragon tails flitted through the air. There were fluffy cats' tails, and here and there a dog's tail wagged itself wildly back and forth. A mouse's tail shot like an arrow through the background of sky. Oh, the sky! There were so many colours! It faded from dawn to afternoon, then sunset, then night. And suddenly, the tail saw another fox tail, flying through the air in the archway of tree branches. As it travelled through the arch, it glowed golden in the dawn, gleamed white in the afternoon, lit up on fire in the sunset, and shone silver in the night. The parson held tight to the tail and they stepped through the arch together. And as they did, an odd little sound came from the tail. It went, "prrrr-tha, prrr-tha, pingledey, pingledey!" It was the sound of the happiest tail in the world.

At that very moment, Medea, who had been boiling with anger for all this time, and had suddenly decided to try to chase down the parson and ask for more money, came bursting in through the door. Seeing what she thought was the parson escaping having to pay her even more money to keep the tail, she charged straight at them. But it was too late. They were already happily in the tail world, and oblivious to her threats. Medea came crashing through the arch, but she didn't have the magical powder that ensured that she would stay in the one world that had appeared through the arch, so she came rolling on through and plummeted straight onto another planet. But she was Medea; she was

determined, she knew how to handle money, and whatever else, she lived up to her namesake. So she set up a chicken coop and a ramshackle hut and charged the local villagers of that world a few hundred dollars to hear her tale.

Speaking of which...