

JUDIT ÁGNES KISS

BABY FOX'S PRESENT



ILLUSTRATED BY MÓNICA EGRI



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MAMA FOX GOES TO WORK



When Baby Fox woke up, Mama Fox was already bustling about getting ready to leave.

‘Where are we going?’ Baby Fox asked, leaping out of bed.

‘Oh, my dear child,’ Mama Fox said, shaking her head, ‘don’t you remember? I have to go to work, and I can’t take you with me.’

‘So I’ll be spending the day with dad?’

‘Dad has to go to work too, as you well know,’ Mama Fox replied.

‘So I’ll be here all by myself?’ Baby Fox asked, with his lips curling into a puzzled frown.

‘Of course not! I asked Auntie Kittie to take care of you,’ Mama Fox said, gently stroking Baby Fox’s head.

Auntie Kitty lived next door, and sometimes she would play with Baby Fox when she dropped in to chat about something with Mama Fox. But what would it be like to spend a whole day with her until mom and dad came home in the evening? Baby Fox was on the verge of tears when Mama Fox waved to him from the garden gate.

ISBN 978-963-587-166-7

Megjelent a Pagony Kiadó gondozásában 2022-ben.
www.pagony.hu

Szöveg © Kiss Judit Ágnes, 2018
Illusztráció © Egri Mónika, 2018
Kiadás © Pagony Kiadó Kft., 2022

Felelős kiadó: Demény Eszter és Ürögdi András
Szerkesztette: Kovács Eszter
Műszaki vezető: Pais Andrea



Produkción munkák: Wunderlich Production Kft.
Produkción vezető: Mészáros Gabriella



Készült a Gyomai Kner Nyomda Zrt.-ben 2022-ben.
Felelős vezető: Csöndes Zoltán vezérigazgató
www.gyomaikner.hu



True, Auntie Kitty played with him a bit, but she seemed a little half-hearted about it. When Baby Fox wanted to play tag, old Auntie said her legs were too achy. When Baby Fox asked her to pick him up, she said her back was too achy. They tried all kinds of games. They built a tower and they played with a little car, but Auntie Kitty always stopped playing after a few minutes and started tending to her lovely kitty-cat coat.

‘Let’s go to the playground!’ Baby Fox said, but Auntie Kitty just shook her head.

‘Oh, I’m afraid that’s the last thing I need! I can’t race around after you or climb the jungle gym or go down the slide or push you on the swings! I’m way too old for that now. What would your mother say if something were to happen to you? Let’s just stay here and you can play with your toys.’

And with that, she again started licking her fur.

Baby Fox ambled around the house, stopping to munch on the food Mama Fox had made for his lunch but otherwise just waiting for the long day to wind to an end. He was dying for his mother to get home at last. Nothing was more fun than building a good tower with mom, except maybe pushing the racecar around or climbing on the jungle gym or going down the slide. And dad, who was an expert at playing tag, pushed him so high on the swing that he thought she was flying, and of course he always picked him up in his arms when he asked him to.

In the end, Baby Fox curled up with his little doll of a sweet little human boy and fell asleep. He woke up to the sound of Mama Fox's voice. Mama Fox was chatting with Auntie Kitty in the kitchen.

'Oh, we had the most wonderful time,' Auntie Kitty said a bit louder than would have been necessary, as she was a bit hard of hearing. 'He was as sweet as can be! A very well-behaved child. I'd be more than glad to look after him again, anytime!'

'That's the last thing I need!' Baby Fox thought to himself.

Mama Fox walked Auntie Kitty to the gate, and when she came back in the house, she saw that Baby Fox was awake. She stretched out her arms to give her son a big hug.

'Don't ever go to work again!' Baby Fox said, and he burst into tears.

'My goodness! What happened?' Mama Fox asked, wrapping Baby Fox in her arms.

'I missed you so much!' Baby Fox mumbled.

'But you got to play with Auntie Kitty,' Mama Fox said.

'Auntie Kitty just licked her coat all day long,' Baby Fox said with a groan. 'And she smells like mice,' he added, but in a very soft voice, for he knew that his mother didn't like it when he spoke ill of others. But Mama Fox didn't say anything this time. She just gently caressed Baby Fox's head.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's see if we can build a good tower before dinner.'



They built a very tall tower, and then they added railway lines and even a garage for the cars. Baby Fox was overjoyed at last to have someone to play with.

Later that evening, as he was beginning to fall asleep for the night, Baby Fox heard Mama Fox and dad talking in the kitchen. He knew they were coming up with some kind of plan. Presumably some way to be sure that Mama Fox would never have to go to work again.

THE KID CARE CENTER



Mama fox had told Baby Fox such exciting stories about the Kid Care Center every night at bedtime that Baby Fox couldn't help but be curious. Indeed, in the end, little Baby Fox urged Mama Fox so impatiently please, please, please to take him to see it, please not to make him sit bored all day in the den, that Mama Fox took him by the paw and the two of them set out together for the Kid Care Center.

When they got off the bus, Baby Fox immediately recognized it from all the stories he had heard. There was a huge yard with swings, a slide, splendid trees with boughs stretching towards the sky for the squirrels, an aviary for the nestling birds, a little pond for the goldfish, flat rocks for the lizards, puddles for the wild piglets, and holes both big and small for the gophers, the rabbits, and the little mice.

A weary bird-of-paradise ambled over to welcome them, dragging her splendid tailfeathers on the ground.

'Welcome!'

Baby Fox was about to say good morning, as he knew would be the polite thing to do, when suddenly he saw something so striking, so wondrous that he quite forgot about his manners.

'Mom, what on earth is that?' he cried out.

A tulip was walking towards them. Mama Fox stared in almost dumbfounded amazement too.

'A walking tulip,' she said. 'Very rare! I have heard of them, but I have never seen one.'

By then, the tulip was standing right next to them with a sunny smile on her face. There is no creature in the world who can smile as radiantly as a tulip.

'Pardon me,' Mama Fox stammered, a bit embarrassed to have been so taken aback.

'No trouble at all,' the tulip said, still smiling warmly. 'I often leave people a bit amazed! Now come, have a look around!'

And with that, she led little Baby Fox towards the slides and swings and toys and games. Baby Fox happened to be sitting right at the top of a twisty-twirly slide when suddenly a great clamor broke out, a burst of chirping and chattering and grumbling and grunting. An enormous hippopotamus was lumbering across the yard carrying a platter overflowing with all kinds of delicacies and delights. Its head was covered with baby birds, and a monkey was clinging to its arm. A little weasel perched on its back was screeching with delight, and all the other animals were bouncing up and down around it, all eagerly awaiting their midmorning snack. Baby Fox's mouth watered as he smelled the delicious aromas.

'She's the third caregiver here,' the bird-of-paradise said, nodding towards the hippo.

The walking tulip stroked Baby Fox's head.

‘I think there’s probably enough yoghurt for you to have a bowl too,’ she said, and then she tottered off on her long, slender stem.

Baby Fox was enchanted by what he saw. He was still licking his lips when he dashed off to try out the swings and the seesaw and everything in the yard. He dug a deep trench in the sandbox and then went to look for colorful, shiny pebbles in the shallow water of the pond. Mama Fox could hardly get him to bid a polite farewell to the caregivers and set out for home when the other animal children gathered around the bird-of-paradise to listen to the midday story before their afternoon nap.



When the sun rose the next day, Baby Fox was pacing back and forth impatiently by the door.

‘Come on, come on,’ he spluttered. ‘Let’s go to the Kid Care Center!’

But when they reached the tall gate to the center and Mama Fox bent down to give him a goodbye hug, he suddenly felt a wave of worry.

‘Wait,’ he said, ‘let’s not go in today.’

‘Of course we’ll go in,’ Mama Fox replied in a gentle voice. ‘Don’t you remember what a good time you had here yesterday? Look, you can see the sandbox, the little pond...’

‘Don’t go! Stay here with me,’ Baby Fox whimpered.

‘Now, now, no need to fuss,’ Mama Fox said. ‘You know I can’t stay, my dear. I have to go to work.’

But Baby Fox held his mother’s leg tight in her clasp.

‘Please don’t leave me here,’ he begged.

Mama Fox didn’t know what to do. She looked left and right, and then she saw the tulip walking towards them. She bent down and gave Baby Fox a good, warm hug. Baby Fox sniffled one more time and then stopped crying. He let Mama Fox nudge him in through the gate, and then he turned and watched as Mama Fox disappeared down the street. The tulip picked him up, held him close with her long, green leaves, and rocked him gently back and forth, humming a soothing melody in her flowery yellow-red voice. She strolled towards the center of the yard where all the other children were

playing. Baby Fox was beginning to feel a bit better. The tulip had such a lovely voice! When the tulip put him down, she kept one of Baby Fox's paws clasped in her grip.

'If you want,' she said, 'you can hold my hand all day.'

She smiled with her sunny smile. There is not a creature in the world who can smile as radiantly as a yellow-red tulip!



BABY FOX FINDS A FRIEND



The days passed. Baby Fox spent most of them in the Kid Care Center, and Mama Fox spent most of them at work. Baby Fox didn't cry when they parted in the mornings, or only a couple times when he simply couldn't hold back his tears. The walking tulip comforted him, but when she was not at his side, Baby Fox felt terribly lonely. And the walking tulip couldn't always be there for him. Neither could the bird-of-paradise, who was still just a little bit frightening to him but whom he had come to like, especially when she told stories. And neither could the hippopotamus, who was usually busy feeding the smaller animals.

The other pups would tumble and wrestle and chase one another, but Baby Fox didn't join them. If the walking tulip left him on his own, he would dig a hole, burrow in until only his tail stuck out, and cry quietly for his mother.

'Mom, mom!' he whimpered into the dirt.

He would nibble on something or have a few sips of something to drink, and he listened to the stories with the others, or sometimes he just sat on the swing or slid down the slide, but if none of the

adults had time to pay a little attention to him, he just wandered around, waiting for the afternoon to come and for Mama Fox finally to come from work to take him home.

One day, when Baby Fox was half buried in the ground again, crying for Mama Fox, the sand, which was still wet from rain the day before, suddenly moved, and two green eyes flashed in front of his face. And a moment later, they vanished. And a moment later, something bit his tail.



Baby Fox spun around, and again two green eyes flashed in front of him, eyes almost as green as his, but now, there was a kitten with black and white spots behind them.

‘Catch me if you can!’ Kitten shrieked, and the next moment he took off at a sprint.

Baby Fox took off after him, and he was just about to catch him when Kitten went scampering up a tree.

‘Bad kitty!’ Baby Fox shouted. ‘It’s not fair! I can’t climb trees yet!’

‘Alright, alright,’ Kitten said, ‘you’ll learn soon enough, I’m sure. We’ll say you won this round. But now you have to run, because now I’m it!’

And with that, he leapt to the ground in a single, nimble bound.

Baby Fox took off, with Kitten running after him. They raced around the pond, slid down the slides, splashed through the puddles, sped over the flat rocks, and finally Baby Fox leapt straight into the pond.

‘Hey, that’s not fair!’ Kitten protested. ‘I hate swimming! Cats don’t like water or bathing. We only like gently washing our coats with our tongues.’

‘You’ll learn to like it,’ Baby Fox said with a laugh as he shook the water off his fur. ‘Well, I guess you won this round, then. I was pretty tired anyway. I couldn’t have run another step.’

They lay down side by side in the soft sand, but soon, Kitten felt like playing again.

‘I’ll hide,’ he said, ‘and you see if you can find me. But first you have to count to ten out loud!’

Baby Fox searched for the Kitten with his nose pressed close to the ground, trying to sniff out the scent. He searched for quite some time before finding him hiding underneath a jasmine bush.

‘Now it’s my turn to hide!’ he said.

Kitten had already started counting when the hippopotamus came lumbering along with a big platter of snacks. It was surrounded on all sides by a throng of hungry kids. Kitten immediately forgot completely about the game of hide and seek and scampered over to get a bite to eat.

‘Can I have a slice of bread with bologna?’ he meowed.

Baby Fox stuffed himself with slices of boiled egg until he felt as if he were going to burst. He didn’t even hear the end of the story that the bird-of-paradise was telling because soon he had drifted off to sleep.

He woke up to find Kitten tending to his coat, which was shiny from being polished clean by the rough little tongue.

‘You were asleep for so long!’ he said impatiently. ‘Come on, let’s play on the train! I’ll push, you’ll be the safety bar by the crossing. If you say, ‘red,’ then I have to stop, and if you say, ‘green,’ then I can push the train over the crossing and then through the tunnel.’

He pointed at a nearby gopher hole in the dirt.

When Mama Fox arrived towards the end of the day, Baby Fox didn’t come sprinting out to leap into his arms like he usually did.

And when Mama Fox told him it was time to come home, he just shouted back, ‘just a sec, mom, just sec.’ And he didn’t stop playing with his new friend until Kitten’s dad, a no-nonsense tomcat, showed up to pick him up.

‘See you tomorrow!’ they shouted both shouted as they turned and set out for home.



MAMA FOX FALLS ILL



More than anything, Mama Fox loved to get a good night's sleep. Baby Fox knew that he had to rouse Mama Fox from her slumber every morning, but he had also learned from experience that it made a big difference when he tried to wake his mother up. If the clock read '6,' which looked sort of like a snail trying to crawl upwards, then Mama Fox would start by letting out an irritated grunt, but if Baby Fox kept pestering her, sometimes she would even give him a little nip on his ear. But when the clock read '7,' which looked more like a fancy straw, then Mama Fox would open her eyes and give Baby Fox a weary smile.

'Wake up, morning's here!' Baby Fox squeaked, pulling aside the willow curtain to let the sunshine in. But Mama Fox only groaned and pulled the pillow over her head.

'Wake up, mom,' Baby Fox said again, but Mama Fox turned away and curled up under the blanket.

'What's wrong?' Baby Fox asked.

'I have a terrible headache,' Mama Fox whimpered in a feeble voice.

'But morning's here, mom. It's time to get up,' Baby Fox said, shaking his head in bewilderment.

'I can't, my head is throbbing, I can hardly bear to move it!'

Baby Fox tried to pull the blanket off her and Mama Fox suddenly burst into tears. Baby Fox was very alarmed.

Dad came back from his morning shower.

'What's going on?' he asked.



‘Mom won’t get up,’ Baby Fox said. ‘Morning’s here, and I’ve drawn the curtains to let the sunshine in.’

‘I have a terrible headache!’ Mama Fox groaned.

‘Come, Baby Fox,’ dad said, taking him by the paw, ‘let’s go get some breakfast!’

‘But mom always makes breakfast for me,’ Baby Fox whined.

‘Let’s let mom rest a little for the moment,’ dad said. ‘I’m afraid she seems to have a bit of a cold.’

Dad shuffled Baby Fox into the kitchen and got him some breakfast. Then he took him to the Kid Care Center. And he picked him up that afternoon too. Baby Fox was dying to get home to play with Mama Fox.

‘Come on mom, let’s build a tower,’ he shouted.

‘Don’t you get it? Mom’s sick!’ dad said in a harsh voice. ‘Come on, I’ll build a tower with you,’ he added in much gentler tone.

Baby Fox did not understand. A whole day had passed, or at least half a day. How could Mama Fox still be sick? He built a tower with dad, much taller than the towers he usually built with mom, and he even helped him make dinner, but he kept expecting Mama Fox to come bursting out of the bedroom ready to play tag.

Mama Fox did shuffle out to eat a bit of dinner. She put a bunch of white berries next to her plate.

‘Feeling any better?’ Dad asked. Mama Fox just shook her head, slowly, because it still hurt.

‘Can I have one of the berries!’ Baby Fox asked.

‘No,’ Mama Fox replied, ‘it’s not candy, it’s medicine! It will help me feel better.’

‘Can’t I try just one?’ Baby Fox pleaded.

‘No, you can’t,’ Mama Fox said. ‘They would make you sick.’

That didn’t make any sense. Why would Baby Fox get sick from eating a single berry from the little pile of berries that Mama Fox was eating precisely so that she would feel better?



‘Then let me put them in your mouth for you,’ Baby Fox said.

‘Why?’ Mama Fox asked.

‘Because I want to help you feel better,’ Baby Fox replied.

Mama Fox obediently opened her mouth, and Baby Fox popped the berries in one by one.

‘Have some more,’ he said after Mama Fox had gulped the last of the berries down with a glass of water. ‘I want you to feel better as soon as possible.’

‘I can’t take any more pills now,’ she shook her head. ‘That would be an overdose. It would make me very sick.’

‘An overdose?’ Baby Fox thought. He had never heard that word before. He couldn’t quite grasp how, if two or three berries would help mom feel better, four or five might make her feel worse.

‘The best thing for mom right now would be to lie down and listen to the rambler roses for a while,’ dad said. He put his arms around Mama Fox and helped her back into bed. Soon, the garden outside was echoing with the soft singing of the rambler roses.

UNDER THE WISE OAK TREE



It was a hot summer afternoon. The sun was shining mightily. Baby Fox and Kitten were dozing under a majestic oak tree when Baby Fox suddenly saw a worm crawling up the trunk of the tree. It crawled a little higher, then a little higher, and again a little higher, until suddenly, it got stuck in the rough bark of the tree trunk.

‘Ahhh!’ the worm screamed. The other kids woke up. They all gathered around the oak tree and stared upwards, but they didn’t see anything unusual.

‘Who’s making that terrible racket?’ the tree asked.

‘Who’s making that terrible racket?’ the kids asked.

‘Ahhh!’ the worm shouted in reply.

‘Who is howling so?’ the tree asked again.

‘Ahhh!’ the worm howled. It was really all he could do, for the poor thing was stuck in the rough bark of the tree.

‘It’s a worm,’ Baby Fox explained. ‘And he’s howling because he’s stuck.’

The oak tree was very confused. The terrible howling didn't stop for a moment. Then suddenly a strong wind came, and it shook the branches of the stately oak. As the tree leaned left and right in the wind, the worm was able to free himself, and he stopped his pained howling. Again he set out, crawling higher and higher up the tree.

'I told you it was a worm!' Baby Fox said. 'You can see him climbing up the trunk of the tree.'

Suddenly there was sound of wings flapping on high and then a series of taps, ratatatatatat.

'Help!' the worm shouted, though now in panicked whisper. 'The big woodpecker is coming! He must have heard me howling! He wants to catch me in his beak! Save me, oak tree! Help me hide!'

'But how can I help you hide?' the oak tree asked. 'If you get caught in my bark, you'll just start howling again.'

The worm didn't dare breathe a word in reply. He just hid himself in a crack under the bark of the tree.

The big woodpecker came swooping down and alighted on a branch of the tree. He was wearing a suit of black and white feathers, and he had a red hat on his head. He looked at the trunk of the tree and then tapped it with his long, pointed beak.'

Ratatatatatat!

'Hey tree,' he said, have you got any worms today?'

'I'm afraid I don't,' the oak replied, giving its boughs a shake.



The woodpecker cast a suspicious glance at the tree.

‘Not a one?’ he asked.

‘Not a one,’ the tree replied.

The woodpecker looked at the little animals gathered at the base of the tree.

‘And what about you kids? What are you all staring at?’ He ruffled his feathers and then gave the tree another hard peck. Ratatatatat! Then he spread his wings and flew away.



‘Thank you,’ said the worm, peeping out from the crevice. His voice was a little hoarse with fear. Or perhaps from all the howling.

‘You saved my life,’ he said. ‘I will always be grateful to you.’

He then crawled a little higher up the trunk. And then a little higher. And then higher still. And then he disappeared in the leaves. The animals down below watched in silence.

‘But oak tree,’ Kitten suddenly burst out in a voice full of indignation, ‘you lied!’

‘I did?’ the oak tree replied.

‘Yes, you did!’ Baby Fox said. ‘You told the woodpecker that you didn’t have a worm, not a single one. But there was a worm hiding under the bark on your trunk!’

‘Perhaps,’ the oak tree nodded.

‘It’s wrong to tell a lie!’ Kitten said.

‘Why exactly?’ the oak tree asked.

‘My father taught me never to tell a lie,’ Kitten said.

‘Never ever,’ Baby Fox nodded.

‘And why is that?’ the oak tree asked.

‘You always have to tell the truth,’ Kitten said. ‘Even if it means you’ll be punished.’

‘Being punished is better than having told a lie!’ Baby Fox said.

The great oak sighed. Its leaves rustled in the wind.

‘But I didn’t do it to protect myself. Had I told the truth, the woodpecker wouldn’t have punished me. It would have snatched

up that poor little worm. I couldn't have done anything else to protect the little creature.'

He paused for a moment.

'And besides, who knows,' he continued, 'maybe I didn't even tell a lie. After all, the worm wasn't mine to have. It was just a simple little worm.'

BABY FOX AT THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE



Baby Fox woke up with a terrible throat ache. He leapt out of bed, ran to Mama Fox's room, and tucked himself under the blanket next to her.

'My throat hurts!' he whimpered.

'My poor child!' Mama Fox said, and she gave him a gentle pat on the head. 'I'll make you a nice hot cup of tea.'

Mama Fox made some raspberry tea with lots of honey, but alas, it didn't make Baby Fox feel any better.

'My throat still hurts!' he whimpered.

Mama Fox was busy straightening things up in the kitchen, and Baby Fox was always at her side.

'My throat still hurts,' he kept whimpering.

'I'm afraid there's not much I can do to help,' Mama Fox said, shaking her head. 'I think we need to get you to the doctor.'

'What will the doctor do?' Baby Fox asked. He was scared of going to the doctor.

'He'll just give you a quick examination,' Mama Fox said. 'He'll look at your throat, listen to you breathe, check your stomach, and

give you a few pats on the back. He might check your nose and your ears, too,' she added. 'And then he'll give you some medicine that will soothe the pain in your throat.'

'He's not going to prick me with anything sharp?' Baby Fox asked.



'Why would he prick you?' Mama Fox asked. 'No, he'll just give you a good look-over to see what he can see.'

'Right!' Baby Fox muttered. 'I know all about these good look-overs! He'll find something, and then he'll tell me has to prick me with something sharp!'

Baby Fox's fear was not entirely unfounded. He and Mama Fox had been to the famous doctor, the bear, once before, and the good doctor had looked down his throat, listened to his breathing, pressed his stomach, patted his back, peeped in his nose and ears, and then sat back.

'He's the picture of good health,' he had said with a satisfied nod.

'Then why are you going to prick me?' Baby Fox had protested.

'Because this little prick will save you from many very serious diseases,' the doctor had explained.

'A zebra mosquito, if you please,' he had shouted to his assistant, the shrew.

'But I don't want you to prick me!' Baby Fox had cried, but the doctor had already turned to Mama Fox, who had been wrinkling her brow with worry.

'No need to be alarmed, mother! Just a zebra mosquito, not a wasp! Give your little boy a nice, tight hug so that he doesn't wriggle too much. We wouldn't want the mosquito spear to snap in his skin!'

Mama Fox had held Baby Fox tight in her embrace. Baby Fox had already burst out crying, though the doctor had not even pricked him yet.

‘This may sting a little bit,’ the doctor had said.

A big zebra mosquito had appeared, and it had sunk its spear-like mouth into Baby Fox’s thigh. Baby Fox had given a screech, and the zebra mosquito had buzzed contentedly back to his spot on the doctor’s table.

‘What did you do to me?’ Baby Fox had asked, his voice trembling with outrage. ‘Show me what you pricked me with!’

The doctor had obediently placed the zebra mosquito in front of her. The mosquito was carefully wiping her mouth. Baby Fox had stared at it in horror.

‘I’ll never set foot in this terrible place again!’ Baby Fox had blubbered, and then he had turned and scampered out of the doctor’s office.

‘Excuse me,’ Mama Fox had said politely, and then she had turned and run after Baby Fox.

Baby Fox really had thought that he would never set foot in the bear’s office again, but now his throat was in terrible pain. Perhaps he should go and take whatever medicine the doctor prescribed. Anything to feel better!

‘I’ll take you,’ Dad said.

‘But you won’t let him prick me?’ Baby Fox asked.



The doctor’s office was very crowded. There was a little beaver with a broken tooth, a spider with a bandaged leg, and a snake with a bad fever. If he hadn’t felt so terrible, Baby Fox would have wanted to play with them, but now he just sat on dad’s lap and occasionally sniffled.

‘My throat hurts!’

When the doctor finally called them in, he felt so bad that he would have been willing to get another zebra mosquito prick if it would have made him feel better.

The good doctor welcomed them, as if remembering nothing of the time Baby Fox had snapped at him and scampered out of his office.

‘Come little man,’ he said, ‘let’s give you a look and see if we can figure out what’s causing that nasty sore throat!’

He told Baby Fox to open his mouth and say ‘ah,’ and then he listened to his lungs, pressed his tummy, patted his back, and peeked in his nose and ears. He didn’t do anything that hurt. Not at all.

‘Well done,’ the doctor said, and then he turned to her father.

‘He’s got tonsillitis,’ he said. ‘He’ll need a spoonful of this three times a day.’

He then gave him a small bottle of some thick liquid.

‘It’s bitter,’ he told Baby Fox, ‘but you’re a clever boy, so you understand how important it is to take it.’

He paused for a moment.

‘And then afterwards, of course, you can have a bit of chocolate,’ he added with a wink.



TOURING THE SKIES WITH THE OWL



When people think of owls, they usually imagine them wearing glasses, sitting in their dens, and reading all the livelong day. But that’s not true of our eagle owl! Yes, he lives in a den, and yes, he wears glasses, and yes, he loves to read, but he also wins all kinds of long-distance flying races. And short-distance races too. And he’s very good at reading while flying. Or flying while reading.

One of the greatest honors that can be bestowed on any of the four-legged pups of the forest it to be taking on a tour of the skies by an eagle owl, so it’s hardly surprising that little Kitten was overjoyed when his father, the strict, stern tomcat, told him that for his birthday, he could go on a flight with an owl. And not just any owl, a real eagle owl! And not just him, but anyone who wanted to join him.

The kids all jumped for joy when they heard the news, but when the huge owl landed in their midst, most of them were overcome with fear. Little kitten didn’t even flinch when the giant owl gently took him in his talons, but no sooner had they taken flight (they



hadn't gone too high, just to the top boughs of the oak tree), he had begun to whimper.

'Put me down! Please! That's quite enough! Put me down!'

'Coward!' one of the wolf pups snickered.

'I'm not a coward!' Kitten had protested. 'I'm just not used to not having the ground under my paws. And besides, you're one to talk! You wouldn't even dare climb up to the roof of a shed!'

'No need to bicker, children,' the owl said. And then he turned to the wolf pup.

'I'd be glad to give you a little ride. Not too far, just to the river, and not too high, just to the top of the willow tree. Would you like to give it a try?'

'No thanks, sir,' the wolf said, tucking his tail between his legs and skulking to one side.

The owl gazed at all the other animal children who had gathered in the little clearing.

'So, little ones, would anyone like to join me for a tour of the skies?'

The animals all gazed down at the ground. Not a single one of them breathed a word. The owl flapped its enormous wings.

'Keep in mind, I'm the birthday present! Now surely someone wants to go for a ride!'

Baby Fox glanced at Kitten. He could see he was about to burst into tears. Kitten was disappointed not to go for a tour of the skies, but also ashamed of being afraid to fly.

'Could you take us both at the same time?' Baby Fox asked meekly.

The owl scratched his beak with one of his talons.

'Well, neither one of you is an elephant, after all! I think I can handle the two of you. And maybe then you won't be so frightened,' he added with a smile.

'So shall we go, Kitten?' Baby Fox asked, offering his kitten friend his paw.

Kitten took a deep breath. He was still scared, but having Baby Fox at his side gave him courage. They held on to each other tight, and the great owl grabbed one of them in one claw, the other in the other, and slowly and silently they began to rise into the air.

Baby Fox felt as if his stomach were in his throat. The wind whistled in their ears as they left the ground further and further behind. He closed his eyes and buried his nose in Kitten's neck. He even whimpered a little. He was very afraid.

And yet nothing happened. His stomach soon felt as if it had slid back into place, and the wind died down. The eagle held them both tightly in his talons. Slowly, Baby Fox opened his eyes and looked around.

'Everything is so beautiful from up here!' he exclaimed.

They flew out over the meadow so as not to have to wind among the tree branches. They could see the crests of mountains in the distance and houses in the valley. The grass rolled in gentle waves under the gusts of wind beneath them, and the flowers looked as if they were waving to them.

At Baby Fox's cry of excitement, little Kitten pulled himself together, opened his eyes, and feasted his gaze on the wondrous sight of the world below him. Indeed the landscapes were beautiful, and he was starting to feel as if he could get used to flying.

'Just a little longer,' she pleaded when the owl began the descent, but the owl was implacable.

'One tour for each of you,' he hooted.

Once they had landed, the other children gathered around. They were all bubbling over with excitement.

'We want to take a tour of the skies too,' the shrieked.

'Two at a time? All of you with a friend at your side?' the owl asked with a smile.

'Exactly!' the wolf pup barked with glee.



BABY FOX GETS UP ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE BED



‘Nooooo!’ Baby Fox squealed. ‘I don’t want to!’

At the piercing sound of his squeal, the leaves on the trees outside began to turn yellow and a tiger lily dropped all its petals.

Things had been going badly ever since the moment Baby Fox had woken up. From the minute he had opened his eyes, it seemed as if the world had gone all wrong since the day before. Everything was wrong. He tried to think of something good, but he just couldn’t. He ran to the kitchen in the hope that Mama Fox might be able to comfort him. He imagined them making their morning hot chocolate together, and he saw himself drinking from the mug with flowers that Mama Fox always used for her coffee. But when he got to the kitchen, he saw that there was already a whole jug of chocolate milk on the countertop. Mama Fox had already made it! Without him! And she had already poured a steaming cup of it for him into the mug with a picture of the sun on it.

Mama Fox gave him a smile as he came in.

‘I wanted to make it with you!’ Baby Fox grumbled, instead of saying good morning.

‘What did you want to do?’ Mama Fox asked. She was a bit taken aback.

‘The hot chocolate! I wanted to make it. And pour it into the mugs!’

‘I’m sorry,’ Mama Fox said, ‘I thought you’d be happy if I had it all ready and waiting for you.’

She held out the mug with a picture of the sun on the side. Not the one with flowers that Baby Fox had wanted. The one that might have helped him feel a bit better on this rotten morning.

‘I want the one with flowers,’ he whined.

‘What are you talking about?’ Mama Fox asked.

‘The mug with flowers on the side! I want that one.’

‘But you always drink your hot chocolate out of this mug,’ Mama Fox replied. ‘The one with flowers on it is dirty. It’s in the sink. I’m not going to wash it for you and then pour the hot chocolate from this one into it. I’ve made you some hot chocolate. If you don’t want it, you don’t have to drink it, but do please let me have my coffee in peace. Come on, let’s go out on the terrace, and if you can’t have the mug with flowers on the side, at the very least I can tell you a story about flowers over breakfast.’

‘No!’ Baby Fox grunted. ‘I don’t want to!’

And then he threw himself on the floor in a fit of rage. Mama Fox crouched down at his side and tried to hug him, but Baby Fox pushed her away. He wanted the mug with flowers. And to make the hot chocolate himself. And Mama Fox wasn’t helping!



He was making such a terrible clamor with his bawling that Auntie Kitty came running over from next door, which was quite something, since at her age, she only rarely ran anywhere, and as she was a bit hard of hearing, Baby Fox must have been crying very loudly for her to have noticed.

‘Is something wrong?’ Auntie Kitty asked.

‘No, no,’ Mama Fox replied, but her voice made it quite clear that there was indeed something wrong. ‘My little Baby Fox seems to have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.’

She and Auntie Kitten went into the living room and started talking about some grownup matter, completely ignoring Baby Fox, who was still weeping on the floor.

And Baby Fox would have continued weeping had he not suddenly caught a glimpse of something red and shiny under the cupboard. He tried to fish it out, but it was too far back. He looked around for a long stick to dig it out with. It was a plastic cap. It must have rolled under the cupboard. Where there’s a cap, there must be a bottle, something you can screw it on to, possible to keep water from leaking out...

‘I’m going to the store,’ Mama Fox said, popping into the kitchen to grab her shopping basket. She had already said goodbye to Auntie Kitty.

‘I want to come too,’ Baby Fox said.

‘Not now,’ she replied, shaking her head. ‘I’m in a hurry, and it’ll go faster if I go alone.’

'I'm coming too!' Baby Fox protested, grabbing at her skirt.

'Then get your shoes on quickly!' Mama Fox was already bending down to help him get his boots on his paws, the ugly ones with long laces that she always made him wear when they went out on the street.

'I'm not putting those stupid boots on!' Baby Fox protested.

'Then you're not coming with me to the store,' Mama Fox replied.

'Oh yes I am!'

'Not if you don't get your boots on! You can't go out on the street without your boots! There's broken glass everywhere. You'll cut your paws.'

'Then carry me!' Baby Fox insisted.

'I couldn't possibly carry you! You're too big for that.'

'Yes, you can!' Baby Fox said, stomping his paws in anger. 'I'm going with you and you're going to carry me!'

Mama Fox finally lost her temper.

'Enough of your hysterics!' she snapped. 'No one is interested in your whining!'

And with that, she marched out and slammed the door behind her.

Baby Fox was shocked. What would happen now? Mama Fox had left him. She had stormed out because he had thrown a fit. What if she never came back? He dragged one of the chairs to the window so that he could look out. He was sobbing so hard he could hardly breathe.

When Mama Fox returned with a basket full of food, Baby Fox was still sobbing. Mama Fox took him gently in her arms.

'Are you crying because I left you here alone?' she asked.

Baby Fox tried to answer, but he couldn't because he was sobbing so hard.

'I'm sorry, darling,' Mama Fox said, giving him a gentle pat on the head. 'I lost my temper and I yelled at you. And then I left you here all alone. But you don't need to cry anymore.'

'But I can't stop,' Baby Fox said, still shaking with sobs. 'I ca-ca-can't stop crying!'

'I'll help,' Mama Fox said, and she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him so tightly that, in her soothing embrace, he no longer shook from his sobs.



BABY FOX GETS LOST



Baby Fox loved going shopping with his parents. But he did not particularly like being told, ‘hold my paw! Stay right in front of me! Don’t lag too far behind!’ And there were so many things he so badly wanted to get a closer look at, too! If only he didn’t always have to hold Mama Fox’s paw, or dad’s paw for that matter. If only he didn’t always have to stay right in front of them or not lag too far behind. He would have loved to have gotten a better look at the fountain in the middle of the market, for instance. The one with the big waterspout in the middle and all the little jets on the sides. And the fascinating water plants.

‘Stay here and keep an eye on our basket while I get some plums,’ Mama Fox said.

Baby Fox didn’t mind. They were in the middle of the market, not far from the fountain, where the big stream of water in the middle shot up high and the jets on the sides made playful splashes among the lily pads and other water plants.

Mama Fox was quite preoccupied with finding perfect plums, not too hard but not too ripe. After a while, Baby Fox got bored of keeping an eye on the shopping basket, so he decided to shuffle a little

closer to the fountain. He even sat down on the edge. One of the spouts was only arm’s length away! How fun it would have been to have put his paw in it! Baby Fox leaned forward a little, stretched out his arm, a little more, and then a little more, until all of a sudden, he lost his balance and fell right into the water. The next thing he knew, he was underwater, surrounded on all sides by water plants and, much to his surprise, fish.

‘What a funny fish snack!’ one of them gurgled.

‘It’s not a fish snack,’ said another fish with a dismissive wave of one fin. ‘It’s one of those four-legged creatures that loaf around on dryland all day. He must have come shopping with his parents.’

‘Hey kid,’ a third fish with bulging eyes said, ‘can you breathe underwater?’

Baby Fox shook his head. He couldn’t even give a proper answer, because in order to do that, he would have had to have been able to breathe underwater.

‘Then you’d best get out of here,’ the fish with bulging eyes said. ‘Come on, let’s give him a helping fin.’

Baby Fox felt himself rising higher and higher in the water as the fish under him pushed him further and further up. Soon enough, his head popped out of the water in the fountain, and he was able to reach the side. He was making quite a splash in the market. Until now, he had always thought he was a pretty strong swimmer!

He looked back at the surface of the water. He wanted to thank the fish for having given him a helping fin, but they had disappeared

into the depths. Only then did he have a moment to realize how much danger he had been in. What would have happened to him if the fish had not come to his rescue?

A moment later, he realized that the shopping basket was not where he had left it, and then his fear really grabbed hold of him. And Mama Fox was nowhere to be seen either.

'Mom! Mom,' he shouted, and he started sprinting this way and that through the crowd, with not the slightest idea, however, where he was actually going.

There was a huge throng of marketgoers, and everyone was much taller than him. Baby Fox was weaving his way through the thicket of long legs, but none of them were Mama Fox's! He was exhausted. He wanted to go home. But how? Which way was home? He would have recognized his house, of course, even the street they lived on, but he had no idea which way to go. Baby Fox sat down on the ground and burst into tears.

'Why are you crying, little boy?' an unfamiliar voice said. Baby Fox looked up. There was a kindly looking badger standing in front of him.

'Are you lost?' the badger asked.

'No,' Baby Fox said, wiping away his tears. 'It's just that my mom seems to have lost me. Or rather I seem to have lost her.'

'No wonder, in this crowd,' the badger said, shaking his head. 'Where do you live?'

'I don't know,' Baby Fox muttered. 'If I knew, I'd set out for home.'

'Don't worry, little boy,' the badger said, giving Baby Fox a reassuring nuzzle. 'We'll find your mother.'

The nuzzle felt soothing, though Baby Fox didn't usually like to be touched by strangers. He put his paw in the badger's outstretched paw, and the badger began to shout in a hefty voice.



‘Hey everyone! Has anyone seen this little pup’s mother? She looks just like him, only bigger!’

The animals passed the question on through the crowd, and a few of them scampered back and forth looking for a mama fox, but Mama Fox was nowhere to be seen.

‘The owl,’ a hamster selling ears of corn suddenly spluttered. ‘Someone tell the owl! He can see everything! He’ll find her.’

A crow who had been out for a morning shop spread his wings and took flight, and within a minute or two, he had returned with the owl. Everybody made space for the enormous owl to land.

‘Come, little one,’ the owl hooted in a soothing voice. ‘As long as you’re not afraid of flying, we can find your mother in a jiffy!’

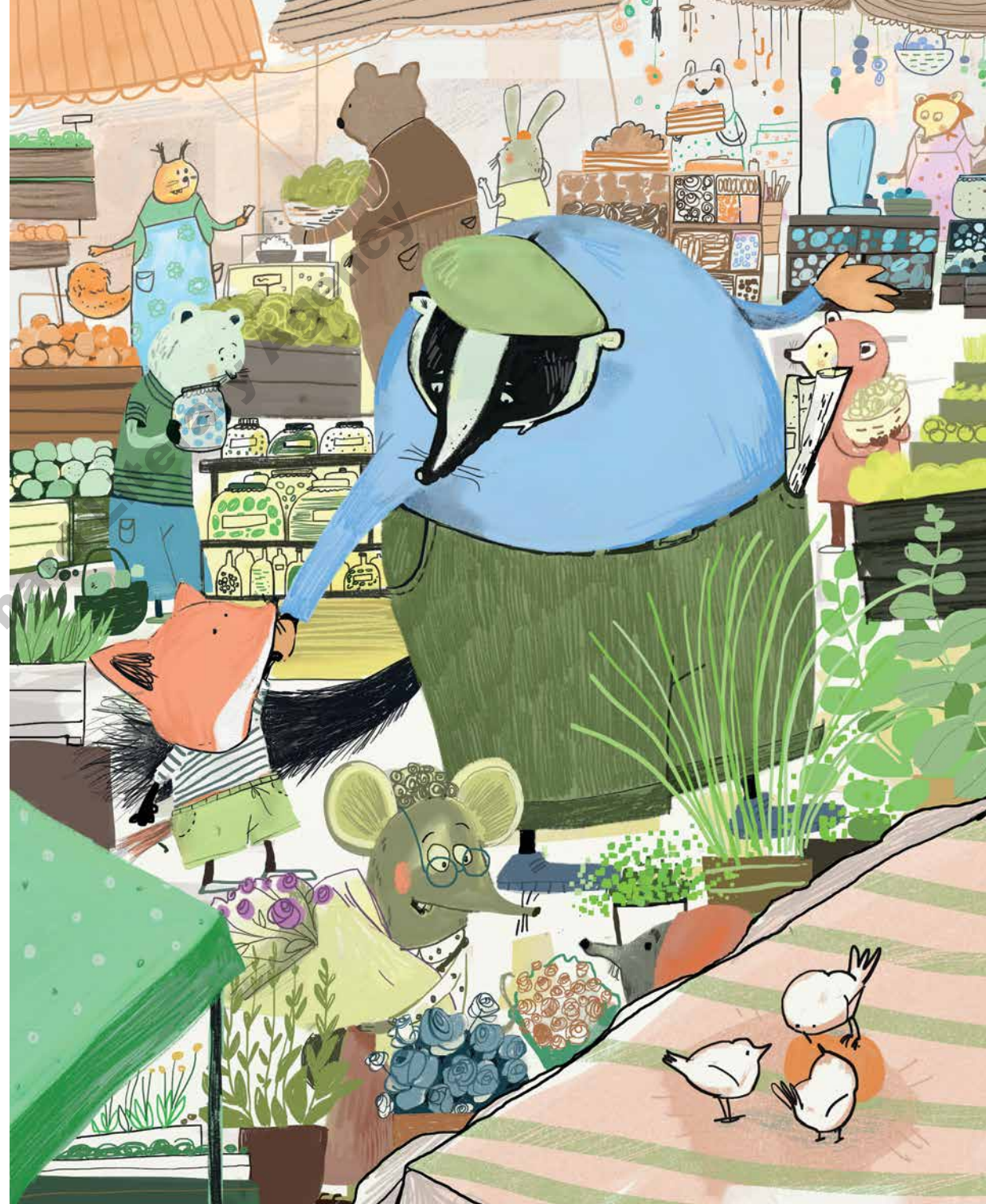
The owl grabbed Baby Fox in his talons and the next moment they were off, circling the sky high above the market. From there, they could easily see the fountain where Baby Fox had gotten separated from his mother.

And a minute later, they saw her, Mama Fox, running back and forth in terror.

‘Baby Fox, Baby Fox,’ she was shouting, ‘where in heaven’s name are you?’

The owl came swooping down and put Baby Fox gently on the ground. Baby Fox ran straight into his mother’s arms, forgetting entirely to thank the kind owl for his help.

‘I’ll never let go of your paw again!’ he whimpered, clutching his mother’s paw tight in his.





BABY FOX'S PRESENT

For the most part, Baby Fox knew how old he was, though from time to time, he forgot, and when that happened, he had to ask his parents. He was looking forward to his birthday, when he would get lots of presents. He always looked forward to surprises.

'They don't give presents to the birthday boy or girl everywhere, you know,' dad said.

'But then who gets presents?' Baby Fox asked.

'The person celebrating their birthday gives presents to their friends and family members,' dad explained.

That sounded pretty exciting to Baby Fox.

'What a neat idea!' he said. 'Then I'll get some presents as the birthday boy, but I'll also give some presents!'

He was hopping up and down at the prospect of giving his friends presents, but then something occurred to him, and he suddenly scowled.

'But wait a minute, I've got a lot of friends,' he said.

But then he scowled.

'I've got lots of friends,' he said, 'and then there's the three of you. How am I going to get presents for so many people?'

'You know what?' Mama Fox said, 'we can bake a cake and cut a slice for everyone.'

That idea sounded even more exciting to Baby Fox.

'Wonderful! We'll bake a cake, and everyone will get a slice!' he said, half giggling with joy. 'But wait a minute,' he said, scowling again. 'Mom, you never eat cake, because it has sugar in it, and I want to give you a present too.'

'Don't worry about that,' Mama Fox said, patting him on the head. 'I can make a cake without any sugar or flour, one that everyone can have a slice of, and it will be delicious. And don't forget,' she added, for she knew Baby Fox had a sweet tooth, 'sugar's not good for me, true, but it's not good for anyone, including you.'

'Let's get to work then,' Baby Fox squealed with excitement.

'Yes, let's!' Mama Fox said.

They got out the old coffee grinder that Mama Fox had inherited from her grandmother and set it off spinning and grinding and chopping up walnuts for the cake. Then they added cocoa and cinnamon. In the blender, which Baby Fox found a little alarming because it was very loud, Mama Fox mixed up prunes, dates, blueberries, a banana, the juice from an orange, and a little oil. They then mixed in the walnuts and baked the whole thing in a heart-shaped cake pan, which Mama Fox only used for big holidays. Baby



Fox licked the bowl clean, of course. And when the cake was done, they put it in the fridge.

Baby Fox never quite realized he had so many friends who wanted to give him presents. A wolf cub, a squirrel, and of course Kitten from the Kid Care Center all dropped in on him. Kitten gave Baby Fox a train, a locomotive, and two yellow train cars! The squirrel gave him a bag of crunchy nuts. The wolf cub had drawn a picture of all of them for him, including the wise old oak tree under which they had often taken afternoon naps.

The adults also wished him a happy birthday and gave him birthday presents. Dad gave him a book, as usual, because he knew how much Baby Fox loved stories. Mama Fox made cherry soup, which

was Baby Fox's favorite, and she also bought him a rainbow-colored ball that was so light he could play with it in the garden without damaging Mama Fox's beloved lilies.

The owl gave Baby Fox a real treat: a long feather from his wing.

'Not every kid gets something this special for his birthday,' he said as he proudly handed Baby Fox the plume.

The walking tulip brought a handful of yellow and red tulip bulbs. The little flowers that would eventually sprout from the bulbs wouldn't be able to walk, but they would sing beautifully and smile ever so warmly. And old Auntie Kitty gave Baby Fox a shopping basket so that he would be able to lend his parents a hand when they went to the market.

Baby Fox thanked everyone from the wonderful presents. He couldn't quite figure out which one he liked best. But he knew he was eager to give them their presents now!

'I have an announcement, everyone,' he said. 'Now I am going to give you presents for my birthday! Mom and I baked a cake, and there's no sugar in it, so everyone can have a slice, no matter what!'

Mama Fox was already standing in the doorway with the slices of cake on a platter.

'I want to bring it in!' Baby Fox said. 'But would you mind bringing in the plates?' he added politely.

They passed out the plates and knives and forks, though Baby Fox didn't really see the point of knives and forks. Cake was meant to be eaten with your fingers, he thought, and the plates could be

licked clean. But he knew it was polite to use a knife and fork, so they all did.

Mama Fox helped pass out the slices of cake.

Everyone waited patiently. No one had a bite to eat until everyone had been served. But now Baby Fox felt a little awkward. It was his birthday, but he had to make some kind of toast. He raised his fork and cleared his throat.

‘Happy birthday, everyone!’ he said. ‘And god bless us every one!’



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