



Beholder

My encounter with that fox still haunts me. As I finished a run on a fall morning, it slinked out of the thicket.

This happened where I once lived for twenty years, in a central New Jersey hub bursting with townhomes and coffee shops where millennials seldom noticed Gen X-ers like me.

I was jogging on a slice of the three-and-a-half-mile greenway that runs through the county. It's a ten-foot-wide asphalt path hemmed with snarled flora and root-exposed maples that could pass as the backdrop for a *Walking Dead* scene. The route supports cyclists, runners, young mothers pushing strollers, and whoever craves fresh air—save for the pigeon-breasted man who moseys the trail smoking a cigar. *Good grief*, I'd think, whenever I saw him, *this is the greenway. Can't you smoke toxic log somewhere else?*

That morning I wanted to be alone. The chitchat from the ladies at the gym (pleasant though the ladies are) would've lanced a nerve, so I pulled on my tights and a fraying sweatshirt and ran in the filtered sunlight and relative seclusion of the greenway. Its thread of pavement meandering under the tree canopy obliterated my family calendar's obligations, dishes and laundry, my sons' impending homework dramas, chicken thighs that needed defrosting—unsung work that demanded more head space than I wanted to relinquish. I loved how that chunk of the trail tucked below street level—it felt like a secret. Strangely, even when I insisted on aloneness there, I smiled and waved at passersby. It vaguely annoyed me when they didn't smile or wave back. Were they preoccupied? Standoffish northeasterners? Maybe it was me: women of my age are invisible. It's an imposed inconspicuousness that clicks with my penchant for solitude. Nevertheless, I like to be acknowledged.

Three-quarters through my run, I was deep in the zone. I ignored my android's high-volume warning and let the bass throb. Endorphins silenced the ache in my right hip, and the scent of damp dirt and pine deepened as I focused on my breathing. Exuberant, I tore across an imaginary finish line.

But I froze when I saw her.

I can't explain why I'm certain the fox was female.

A few yards ahead, a cinnamon red fox stole out of the shrubs. The white splotch of her décolleté was a dazzling scarf. One front paw rested on the trail; she bent the other coyly, as if uncertain of her next step. Her easy pant reminded me of my childhood dog, Lady, just before she'd plop down beside me on the couch. Was the fox smiling? She looked straight at me.

Waiting. For what?

Could she be rabid? I yanked my earbuds out; I needed all my senses to detect danger.

A woman of about sixty and with a slight limp strode in my direction. She greeted me from across the trail.

"Good morning!"

I waved and pointed out the fox. The woman swerved away from her and continued along the path. The fox didn't budge. I chanced two steps. The fox mirrored me. I stopped. She stopped. What did she want? Was I a threat? Did I remind her of a human who'd fed her? I once read that fox cubs are reared in summer and strike out alone in fall. Could she have been an almost-adult toying with me in one last frisky, adolescent hurrah?

This was not my first encounter with a fox. Five years earlier, I slammed on the brakes when a fox darted in front of my SUV at a congested intersection. And a fox family traipsed through my yard late one summer; the cubs tumbled through the juniper rugs while their mother scanned the perimeter (the town rumor mill claimed coyotes had disrupted their den). And, oh, that fox I saw in Ocean City, New Jersey. I was power walking down Tennessee Avenue, a wide road that leads to the boat slips, when, up ahead, I spotted a fox at the corner of Tennessee and Bay Avenues. That fox was the biggest I'd ever seen. Was it the size of a slender Labrador? Its plush tail may have tricked me into thinking the fox was larger than it really was. Still, it was big. Across the street, a gentleman on the golf course examined the fox. He scratched his head, adjusted his flat cap hat, and turned to me. I threw my hands in the air. *It's not mine*, I would've said, if he'd been close enough to hear. What happened next, I swear is true: the fox looked both ways before crossing at the light on Tennessee and Bay.

And what of all these sightings?

An animal that repeatedly appears, the Internet alleges, could be a spirit animal. This animal will show itself when I am in an unconventional state of mind—like daydreaming, meditating, or the flow state I'd entered while jogging on the greenway that morning. It might exhibit unusual behavior or vie for my attention. Supposedly, a spirit animal will choose me. Arguably, the fox could be my spirit animal. Although, according to these guidelines, it could also be the squirrel, or my neighbor's German Shepherd.

She stood like a figure in a taxidermy collection, her yellow eyes with their slender vertical pupils transfixed. I chanced a step. So did she. Why couldn't I run past her? Everyone else did. Behind me, the pace of a runner's foot strike gained momentum. A college-age woman tossed me the runners' half-wave as she whooshed past, her blonde ponytail whipping figure eights in her wake as she zoomed by the fox. At the same time, a forty-something man in a fishing hat ambled my way. He stopped bickering with the caller on his cell phone long enough to snap a photo of the vixen. She didn't even look at him. And he didn't react when I waved. Am I mostly invisible to men? My vixen days are over, and that instinctive part of the

male brain responsible for identifying a suitable mate must know I'm no longer suitable. Or are men uncommunicative as a courtesy, so I won't, on an empty path, perceive them as a threat?

I don't know.

Anyway, the fox.

"What?" I blurted. "I have no food and I can't play with you."

Jolted from her trance, she peeked down the length of the trail and scampered to the other side. In quick bursts she pressed her snout into the mounds of fallen leaves. While the scent of something gripped her, I reinserted my earbuds and restarted a Spotify playlist. I continued jogging, peering over my shoulder a few times before concentrating on my next imaginary finish line.

That lasted about thirty seconds. I couldn't resist. I spun around.

Ha!

There she was, two car-lengths behind, trotting casually along—with that smile.

I wondered if, like me, she was looking for a diversion from domestic duties, a break from barking at her young—*Pick up those rabbit carcasses! Do you pups think this den is a pigsty?*

Clumsily, I jogged backward to see what she was up to. And I guess because her demeanor seemed so playful, I waved.

With that, she craned her neck and dashed behind a mass of reeds and ivy.

And that was the end of it.

Maybe she just wanted to be acknowledged.

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