

The Fox

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**'This was
a mistake!'**

There were more
people here than
she'd imagined.

She stopped in her tracks, nervously taking in the throng of teenagers on the mound up ahead. There were so many of them! Bustling around the trees, they were like vultures swarming a corpse. The thought unsettled her more. Why did her brain do this? The walk over was so much better, she'd even managed to forget they were even coming here. As she stood there, looking as if someone had grabbed her remote and paused her, she thought back to the bookstore they passed in town. What she would give to be at home reading under a fluffy, warm blanket right now...

Suddenly, she caught a flash of orange out the corner of her eye. Quickly, she swung her head in that direction, only to see the white tipped tail of something disappear into the patchy undergrowth. She frowned. The fox. She knew it wasn't real. She'd been seeing the same fox for years now. It seemed to follow her everywhere and she wasn't quite sure why. It wasn't as frightening as the wolf that used to stalk her when she was six, but sometimes the fox was still startling. Its presence, over time, had started to wear thin. She'd named it Rusty, hoping that if she humanised it, maybe it would go away. It didn't, but at least it wasn't just "the fox" anymore.

Noticing that she'd stopped, Brooke turned back to her with an encouraging smile,

*"Come on,
this will be fun, I promise!"*

Brooke was her only friend. They'd known each other since primary school and even now, so far into high school, they were still so close. She had some sort of infectious, carefree attitude that managed to radiate off her in waves of sunshine and chocolate; a heavy contrast to her own dulled down, worry-driven air. She was pretty, but not supermodel pretty. There was nothing fake to her beauty.

No makeup, no trickery, she didn't follow any fashion trends and she didn't shy away from her freckles, she embraced them with open arms and a kiss on the cheek. Her eyes were a brilliant emerald green and her hair was stuck in some bizarre limbo between chestnut and ginger, pulled back into a long ponytail secured with a crimson bow. She had on a white jumper with red details, black jeggings and red, knee-high boots. She also had white gloves on and a red scarf.

Brooke could sometimes be a little much for her, but she was all she had. She was also the only reason that she was here right now.

Trying to shake away the thought of being prey to these teenagers, and the newest sighting of Rusty, she hesitantly shadowed Brooke as she got closer to the mound. After glancing at the generous dusting of snow under the feet of the others, she shivered and unconsciously pulled her purple scarf closer. Whose idea was it to get together outside during winter anyway? It was far too cold for her liking. Brooke told her that they met in all sorts of weather simply because they rarely cancelled a meeting.

Once the day was chosen it was set in stone, come snow, sleet, hail or shine. Unless the weather was truly horrendous, they always met up. She couldn't even imagine doing something like that just to see the same faces she had to pass in the school hallways every day. It sounded exhausting.

The snow crunched under her boots, sounding much louder in her ears than it should have. Was her walking obnoxious? Could they all hear her coming closer? Were they watching her? She refused to look up and kept her eyes on her dark purple boots. She felt a little sicker with every step. A quieter crunching followed her, but she wasn't too worried about that right now; Rusty could do what it wanted because she had more important things to worry about. The talking died down as they reached the mound and Brooke took her by the arm, practically dragging her towards the others gathered there.

"Hey guys!" Brooke greeted with a wave and gestured towards her, "This is Julie." Forcing herself to look up, she felt the last of her resolve leave her,

"Ju-just Jules is fine..." She mumbled.

They all greeted her with smiles, but she still felt like she wanted to upchuck her guts. Everyone went back to talking amongst themselves as someone started to set up some sort of improvised whiteboard made out of what appeared to be old road signs. The pen, she was told, was from one of the supply rooms in school. She wasn't surprised. Brooke told her they were meant to have an audio recorder soon from the gallery to make things more efficient, but for now the recycled road signs would have to do for their meetings. Jules was momentarily entranced by the slightly reflective surface of the blank signs. Brooke broke her out of her trance as she moved Jules' onyx hair from covering her face, tucking it behind her ear.

"How do you even see with all this hair everywhere?" Brooke teased.

"Hey!" She swatted away her friend's hand playfully and shook her head to move the hair back, "I can see just fine, thank you."

Jules sent Brooke a mock glare. Her friend made her feel better, but she couldn't distract her from the crowd of people completely. She felt trapped. Warily, she shifted from one foot to the other, grasping the sleeve of her cobalt hoody like a lifeline.

"Come and meet Kriss and Jack!" Before Jules could respond, Brooke was already pulling her over to two other teenagers, the steps of the fox ever present behind her.

She recognised Kriss from her art class, she was pretty sure her full name was Kristy. From what Jules had gathered, she was a quiet girl with glasses and amazing drawings. Jules could never work up the courage to talk to her during lesson time. Kriss had sandy blonde hair and hazel eyes. She was wearing a pastel pink jumper, scarf and gloves with black leggings and pink ankle boots.

'Mental note: she likes pink.'

Jules had no lessons with Jack, so she knew even less about him, but she was fairly sure she'd seen him around school before. At least, his face looked vaguely familiar. He had messy brown hair and blue eyes, a lighter shade than her own. He was wearing a crimson jacket and blue jeans with red trainers.

"Hi, Jules, isn't it?"
Jack greeted, giving
her a friendly smile
that seemed
surprisingly genuine.
'And Jack is kind of
cute...'

Jules nodded, but was otherwise distracted by Rusty. It was rolling around in the snow, flecks of white sticking to its pelt. It looked wider than usual because it had fluffed up its fur against the cold. She also supposed that it still had its winter coat, it was January after all. If Jules didn't know any better, she'd have thought it was trying to get her attention on purpose.

Brooke chuckled,
"She's not very
talkative."

"Good, 'cause neither
am I!" Kriss waved at
her,

"You do art though,
right?" She asked.

"O-oh, um, y-yeah.
I do."

Jules tried to ignore Rusty, but the fox was skipping around her feet now; she almost felt like she could feel its fur brushing against her but it was just her imagination. The blonde-haired teen thought for a moment, "I think I've seen your drawings, they're always of foxes. They're really cool!"

Jules blinked, "You th-think they're cool?"

She always drew Rusty because despite it perpetually pestering her, it was sweet. Sometimes at night it would curl up by her bed. When she was younger, she used to worry about stepping on it when she got up. That was when she still thought it was real. She knew better now, but it didn't stop her from including it in most of her art. Subconsciously, she realised, a part of her was desperate for someone else to be aware of its existence, for

someone else to acknowledge Rusty so she wouldn't feel crazy anymore. But it wasn't real, so she knew no one else could see it. The fact that no one was reacting to it hopping around her like a rabbit on caffeine was enough evidence to remind her of that.

"Yeah, I love foxes; they're so fuzzy! I wish I could own one!" Kriss was beaming at the prospect, "But I don't think I'd ever let it go." 'Do you want mine then?' Some sarcastic part of her mind laughed.

It wasn't as if she hated Rusty. It had its charm but after years of being followed by it, she wanted a break. Jules had thought that if she went to this meeting thing she'd either make some friends or at least distract herself from Rusty for a few minutes, but neither outcome seemed to be happening as of yet. It was nice listening to Kriss, but she wasn't really sure how to properly talk to her. Now with the conversation being steered towards the bushy-tailed creatures, it was almost impossible to pretend like Rusty wasn't there. It had stopped circling her ankles at least and now it was calmly sitting beside her like an obedient dog. All it was missing was the collar to complete the illusion. Its dark brown paws and orange fur really stood out against the harshness of the snow and gave it sort of a surreal quality, though Jules supposed that was fitting. Jack chuckled at his friend and rolled his eyes, "Ignore her, she'll probably be out of it for a while now."

Brooke shook her head, "The meeting should start soon anyway."

"What is this meeting about again?" Jules asked, only now feeling guilty for agreeing to come without paying attention to Brooke's excited jabbering the day before.

"We meet up every two weeks to come up with ways to help our local community and wildlife or discuss previous plans. It gets us active, not only in the physical sense, but also with our community. We should be planning a charity event today - the gallery typically lets us use some of their equipment and chairs when we set up things like stalls, so we don't have to worry about that bit."

Jules nodded but found that she couldn't fully pay attention to the meeting itself. She was listening to some of the things they said, some of which gave her ideas, but her anxiety kept her from opening her mouth. It was probably a silly idea anyway, she told herself. With a lack of anything informative to contribute, she instead resigned to watching Rusty attempting to dig in the snow. Its fluffy front paws beat at the ground in a rhythm that got her entranced. She didn't have to contribute, she told herself, there were other people here and her ideas weren't any good.

Towards the end of the meeting, Rusty was scampering around the mound in wide circles. Honestly, it was going loopy. Jules had to fight down a chuckle to avoid looking loony herself. She wondered what had gotten the fox so worked up. Brooke tapped her on the shoulder and asked her if she was ok.

**"I'm fine I just...
Um..."**

Jules messed with her black hair as she debated whether or not to bring up her idea to her friend,

**"I... never mind, i-it's
silly anyway."**

Brooke rested her hand on her shoulder, giving Jules a strange rush of hope, "No idea is a terrible idea here, Jules. If you don't want to tell them, I can for you." She added.

That one understanding suggestion was what she'd needed. That was Brooke, she always knew what to say and Jules couldn't have loved her more than in that moment. She leaned closer to her friend, cupping her hands around her ear to whisper her idea. Though no one was listening to them, Jules was too wary to risk it. Brooke began to smile, a smile that widened by the second. Jules pulled away and Brooke hugged her and whispered back, "it's perfect" before shooting off through the crowd to get to the makeshift whiteboards. Jules grew nervous with excitement.

Brooke stood by the recycled signs now and, "borrowed" blue whiteboard pen in hand, she began to explain Jules' idea for her,

"Everyone does the classic cake stall, but what about something different? We could make things to be sold. We could have sketchbooks or notepads with card covers, hand drawn, and the pages stapled together. Or decorations made out of clay - Valentine's Day is coming up soon, after all - so we could ask to use some of the supplies from the gallery to make hearts and pottery, hand painted with a love-theme. Or how about necklaces and bracelets made out of beads? We could have a whole range of hand-made items that would catch the attention of anyone and, better yet, we could all contribute with our own stuff to make the stall more diverse and interesting!"

Once her idea was out there, Jules suddenly felt dread. What if it really was dumb and Brooke was just being nice? But then people started to show their agreement, enthusiasm rushing through the crowd like a wave. Someone asked Brooke if she'd come up with the idea herself, to which she simply shook her head and pointed out Jules in the swarm. All the eyes on her were pretty disconcerting but knowing that they all loved her idea and were currently praising her for it gave her the strength she needed to forget about it. A glance at Brooke revealed a face full of pride for the quieter of the two. She couldn't stop a grin from creeping on her own face. She was so stunned that she never even noticed Rusty slipping away into the forest. As she stands there, she imagines the teens around her with enormous, arching wings and talons as she watches their collective breath gather in a cloud that disperses almost as fast as it appeared. But they're not vultures this time, they're mighty dragons. Picturing herself as she does filled her with a foreign feeling that overshadowed all her doubts. Yes, she was a powerful voice, one among many, one that was significant - she was worth listening to! Here, huddled beside the trees, she was part of something more. Here, she could forget the voices telling her she was worthless, forget the thoughts that kept her timid and be herself for once. Here, she felt like she could finally breathe.

Jules talked to more people that afternoon than she felt had ever spoken to in her entire life. She discussed other items they could make, designs for the stalls and areas around town they could do it. Conversations slowly turned from awkward interactions with Brooke at her side, to friendly one-on-ones. She came here with the vague want for more friends, and she was leaving with a gently growing confidence.

The sky was darkening beyond the arms of the trees, the first wanderers of the night sky winking at the young teens gathered below them. Jules didn't notice the absence of Rusty until she and Brooke were leaving the mound. She was waving goodbye to some newfound friends when the thought hit her like a train. Rusty was gone. She glanced around, puzzled; it was always there, so how come she hadn't seen even a flash of fiery fur since the meeting? She shrugged; it would come back.

Except, it never did.

Gone were the pitter patter of footsteps that mirrored her own when she walked around the house. Gone were the flourishes of fluffy fur, the pointed nose and triangle ears she'd learned to tolerate, even sometimes love. The amber, the white, the brown... She found that a part of her missed it, but it felt like she didn't have to look over her shoulder all the time anymore. She was no longer being stalked by a tame, entertaining but wild creature that only she could see. It was refreshing. She couldn't remember a time when Rusty wasn't in her life before now.

Rusty still infested her drawings, but it was no longer the focus. She cycled through new animals that would take the spotlight: dogs, deer, mice, sheep, even birds. Nothing quite stuck until she got to cats. With a self-confident air and wise, calculating eyes, cats seemed to give her a completely different feeling. A feeling that she decided she greatly preferred. Kriss, who she now sat by in art, was disappointed at first until she noticed that Rusty was hidden within every art piece somewhere. Kriss adored staring at her art, trying to locate the sly creature, and Jules loved Kriss' quirky obsession with foxes - it was part of the reason that Rusty's memory never truly left her life.

Brooke would always be her best friend, but Jules also found herself talking to other people around school more often. She regularly attended the meetings that her friend originally had to drag her to, and she found that every new gathering made her more confident. The charity stall was a hit, she'd even sold a painting of Rusty there. She was now an active part of these meetings, constantly encouraging more creative ideas to be formed. She felt needed for the first time in years.

She felt oddly... free.

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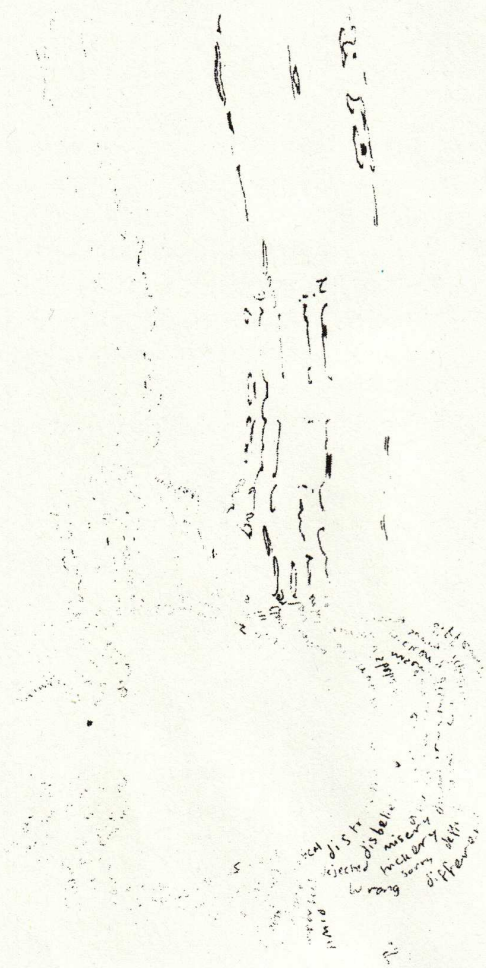
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- X Peaceful protest protecting the land (less likely to go with)
- X Gathering of friends
- X Meeting of a club

- X During walk and after
- X Meeting
- X As the evening turns to night

- X Winter (definitely)
- X Getting darker

- X Borrowed from the gallery for a school project
- X Borrowed from the gallery for a personal project of a club/group of friends
- X Trying to find something out there?
- X Confidence building - main character lacks confidence (just moved here?), meets up with some new friends in a club that she hopes will boost her confidence and help her deal with her anxiety

- X Fox
- X Symbolism to show loss of anxiety
- X Possible schizophrenia...?
- X Stalked, followed, shadowed, mirrored

- X Idea for stall comes from personal experience - hand-made sketchpads with hand drawn covers

- X Brooke - the friend, positive, carefree, encouraging
- X Jack - new friend
- X Kriss (Kristy) - quirky new friend, loves foxes and art (and pink!)
- X Julie (Jules) - main character, shy, anxious, in need of friends and a distraction

The ODG Assembly



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