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Category: Short Story

The Fox

“Put your phone away, we’re almost there!” Mom commands, swiveling her neck towards the backseat, her brown eyes scowling at the dim screen nestled between my fingers. “Why don’t you take some time to appreciate the beautiful scenery?”

“How much longer till we get there anyway? We’ve been driving for...,” I peer at my watch. “Four hours already!”

“Patience! The GPS says that we’re almost at the park.”

“But my legs are numb already,” I shift, the stitched edges of the leather seat poking into my leg.

“You’ll be able to walk once we get there. In fact, that’s all you’ll do on the trail,” Mom says.

Suffocating a grunt, I lean my head back against the beige headrest and stare out the window. Vivid yellow and orange leaves sail through the damp air, depositing sticky dew as they skim behind the thin glass. Specks of pollen splatter across the trunk, punted by the car’s exhaust. Sticks crunch as our tires crawl over them. Branches arch over the narrow road — their thick foliage swaying in the subtle breeze. Sprouting from the trunks of each tree, shadows cast themselves across the cracked asphalt, waving between the periodical peeking of the bright sun like dancers in a spotlight.

“Nice, we should be there any second now,” Dad says, stretching his fingers.

I yawn as I slip my worn sneakers back on. Resting my chin on my curled knuckles, I glance back out the door. Cold air conditioned wind blasts at my face. Mom shifts in her seat as we descend through a deep slope. Crunchy gravel replaces cracked asphalt. A corroded wooden sign framed in rusted steel erupts from the soil: *Welcome to The Great Smoky Mountains*, the occasional woodpecker hole peeking through the letters.

“And we’re here!” mom exclaims. “Now we just have to find somewhere to park.”

“Oh, there’s a lot right there.”

Loose stones and pebbles pelt the underside of our SUV as we swing into the parking lot. Dad swears under his breath: “...*have to repair.....dealership.*”

“Huh, seems like there aren’t many people here,” Mom says.

Eagerly unbuckling my seatbelt, I hop out of the car, stretching my half-asleep legs. I nudge the black, pollen-covered door shut. Mom reaches back into the car and tugs a pack of water bottles out.

“Where to?” I ask.

“Here, hold these,” she replies, handing me the water. “We’ll hike that trail over there,” she adds, pointing towards a dirt path littered with pebbles, twisting past boulders as it cuts into the mountain.

“You guys ready?” calls Dad.

I nod, trudging across the sharp gravel, the rocks crunching beneath my shoes with every step. The ground shifts back to soft dirt and leaves as we pass a park directory: a dull red star proclaiming “*YOU ARE HERE*” sauntering beside an intersection of trails.

“Hurry before it gets crowded,” dad instructs, quickening the pace of his footsteps. “It’s early, so people are going to arrive at any minute.”

Fresh and cool wind glides through the wisps of my hair, the dusty pollen tickling my nostrils. Worms squirm through holes in the ground. Squirrels chew on acorns inside hollow tree trunks; birds twitter and soar through the branches above them. Tiny fish dart across the patchwork of creeks, the constant dribble of flowing water ringing in my ears as puddles cascade over the ridge. Dad plucks a camera from his bag, snapping photos of scrambling minnows. We trudge past damp puddles of mud as the wind rattles through the bushes. Faint buzzing appears below my ear, louder, closer.

“Ow! I just got stung by a bee!” I yell, examining the small red welt on my hand.

“Shoot, the ointment is still in the car. We can get it if you want,” Mom replies.

I glance at the endless trail behind us. "Never mind."

"Alright then, let's keep going," they say.

Shrubs jostle ahead of me, their branches shuddering with activity.

"Did anybody else hear that?" Mom asks, panicked.

"It might be an animal," I reply.

"What if it's a snake? Is it poisonous? Quick, let's get out of here. Hurry!" she shouts.

"Mom, seriously? It's probably just a squirrel," I roll my eyes and pull out a water bottle.

The bushes rattle again, this time closer. I pause. Distant sounds of footsteps and panting echo in my ears.

"Are you sure it's just a--"

A bright orange paw struts out of the bush.

"It's a fox! Hold on, let me get a picture," Dad whispers, fumbling with his camera.

Oblivious to our presence, the fox trots across the trail, its bright orange fur glimmering as the sunlight reflects off of it. Its fur shifts into dark black along its legs as it paws the ground, releasing a soft whine. Three pups stumble out of the dead brown leaves, bickering and wrestling with each other. They sniff the air. The mother fox's tail grazes the snout of the pups; she crouches on her hind legs as she bends down to preen their tangled fur.

Distant wind rushes into the trees, shriveled leaves slipping from brown branches and gliding to the ground.

Clouds of pollen drift away from flowers, their petals shaken by the breeze. One by one, each small pollen particle wafts by my nostrils. I sneeze.

Whipping her head around, the fox freezes, her eyes locking on to our faces. Her tail drops, the bushy fur scraping against the ground. Sets of sharp, pale teeth emerge from her jaws as estranged growls emerge from her throat. She nudges her cubs away from us as her hind legs crouch. Birds flutter to treetops, the crickets ceasing to chirp.

We back away.

Inching back to her cubs, the fox closes her mouth and eases her muscles. She studies us, head cocked to the side. After producing a loud, sharp cry, she twists her body back towards her whimpering cubs as they leap off the trail. Besides a distant tree, she glances at us once again. Muttering a huff of approval, she trots down the hill, cubs clinging to her tail.

Finally bringing the camera down from his face, Dad clicks through photo after photo. "Shoot, they came out blurry!"