

Reynard and Hermeline

Fiction

by Matias Travieso-Diaz



*The world contains many weeds left by Reynard, which now spring up everywhere, even if they have no red beards. There are more foxes found now than ever existed in the past.
Reynard the Fox, medieval tale, James Simpson's 2015 Translation*

The Story Begins

Gather around your mother, kits, and listen carefully to the story of your grandparents, Reynard and his mate Hermeline, who were famous among us foxes for many leagues around their den. They told me most of their life story, more or less, when I was just a five-week pup like the four of you, and I will repeat it the best I can remember.

Reynard came from a long line of foxes that once dwelt in the wilds, far from this burrow. His ancestors were famous hunters that preyed on the birds and small rodents found in the vicinity of a big pond that perhaps you may get to see someday. Foxes have many enemies, including bears, wolves, mountain lions and, worst of all, the vile coyotes. When Reynard was young, his father was slain by a bobcat and what remained of his leash came to this area, which is for the most part inhabited by the two-legged animals that call themselves humans. Now, as you will see when you go out into the world, humans are powerful but stupid. They chase us and sometimes even try to kill us by sending large dogs after us, but at the same time help feed us by leaving edible things out in the open or in flimsy enclosures into which anyone can get without difficulty. Luckily, we can (and do) eat everything: little squirrely rodents, eggs, fruits, birds, insects and worms, dead animals, garbage, and the small animals and fowl that humans keep for various purposes. Let a fox have water and shelter and we will manage to keep fed. We are clever and almost always find ways to evade our pursuers, which as I said are many.

Reynard

Reynard was a particularly clever fox. He was not big, but very handsome. The coat underneath his long guard hairs was a lovely dark red in color and very soft to nuzzle; his tail was long and thick and was tipped with a clump of hairs the color of milk. The tail helped him balance himself when he climbed human-made structures or the tops of their dwellings. He was very quick and could jump high in the air. He would crouch down to hide himself in the terrain and use his hind legs to leap up and pounce so fast on his intended prey that the victim was dead before noticing it was being attacked. His hearing was so keen that he could detect the noises that chipmunks make inside their burrows. He was as perfect as a fox can be.

He was also a trickster: on many occasions he would use his ingenuity to get out of trouble or to deceive others. Once Reynard came upon a crow perched on a tree branch, about to have lunch. The crow had stolen a chunk of cheese from a nearby human dwelling and was set to devour it. Reynard began flattering the bird as follows: "O, wondrous bird! Your black plumage is so lustrous, your sharp beak shines like silver! I bet your voice is as beautiful as that of the nightingale! Would you please sing something for me, so I can report to everyone how enchanting your call is!"

At first, the crow ignored Reynard's pleas but after a while it decided to go along and let the world know how fine its singing could be. Balancing precariously at the end of the branch, the crow stretched its body to its full length, puffed up its chest, and emitted a string of loud "caw! caw!" sounds that mortified every creature within hearing. The cheese flew out and was intercepted in midair through one of Reynard's prodigious leaps. He seized it within his jaws and ran away with it before the crow could give chase.

I could tell you many other stories about how Reynard tricked a wolf, and a bear, and a pack of dogs, but I will leave those for another day.

Hermeline

Your grandmother Hermeline met Reynard near the end of the cold time of the year, when both of them were out one night in one of their first hunting forays. Their encounter took place in the woods, near some human dwellings. Hermeline was still a virgin and was in heat, so she was announcing her availability for mating with piercing summoning screams. Reynard responded eagerly to the call and chased after her high and low. He was taken by her delicate triangular face, the curve of her narrow snout, the reflection of moonlight on her vertical pupils, the graceful way she walked on the pads of her legs. She beckoned him coquettishly and, when he approached her, she rebuffed his advances and ran away to egg him on.

He was on his second or third attempt to capture her when he became aware of fast approaching padded feet. In moments, another male fox, somewhat larger than Reynard, came into the scene and challenged him over the right to couple with Hermeline.

They fought viciously, standing on their hind legs, forefeet on each other's shoulders, mouths open displaying their sharp canines, the upper and lower sets offset to work together to tear flesh. They bit each other on the face and neck and the other fox took advantage of his larger size to push Reynard around, seeking an opportunity to flip him over and bite his belly. Reynard resisted at first, and then allowed himself to be dropped to the ground. As the other fox readied to take his bite, Reynard, quick as lightning, snapped his jaws around his opponents' front right leg and snapped furiously until the sound of a bone cracking made it clear that the leg was broken.

The other male let out a pained yelp and limped away, giving up on the fight, never to be seen again. Reynard then resumed his amorous pursuit, approaching the waiting female with his tail high in excitement. He nuzzled and groomed Hermeline, who no longer resisted.

They mated time and again, locked together in an embrace that lasted half the night. As dawn broke and they retired for their daylight rest, they were as happy as a newly mated couple can be.

Afterwards, Hermeline searched for an abandoned animal burrow, found it and expanded it to become their new home, the den where she would raise her pups. She made a nest of leaves inside the



burrow to create a nesting chamber and lay there to wait for her pups to arrive, two months afterwards. During that time, Reynard solicitously cared for his mate and made sure there was ample food in the den to keep her and the unborn well-fed. Reynard stayed close to the burrow to protect his new family and be able to bring his kill home without delays. Often, he overkilled and had to bury some of the catch for later retrieval and consumption. The rediscovery of some forgotten buried food was always the source of excitement for him and those of his leash.

Our Family Life

My five siblings and I (four dogs and a vixen, my sister Felicity) were born as the weather started to warm up. We were blind and helpless. We suckled greedily off our mother Hermeline's teats until our eyes opened and we were able to start walking. Then the fun began.

We would spend hours begging for food: we would hold our bodies low to the ground, wag our tails rapidly, and whine loudly, trying to attract the attention of our mother (or father if he was around). When we were not feeding, we were fighting for dominance. The fights resembled those among adults, and were sometimes fatal. Felicity was mauled and bitten to death by her brothers within days of getting on her feet.

I escaped death by being cunning like my father. I would fake submission by approaching one of my brothers with my body held low, and then wriggle on my back at the feet of my brother, trying to appease him. It worked every time; I was left alone and, in a few weeks, when the kits were allowed to go with the adults in hunting forays, I was a member of the pack and learned to get my own food. Not much later, I was out on my own fending for myself, although I stayed close to the den for a while to remain on the safe side. I was also accompanied by two female helpers, not breeding, that were Reynard's elderly siblings.

Throughout this period, my father was protective of me and my brothers. He established a large territory for himself, whose boundaries he marked with urine and conspicuous droppings to keep away competing foxes, and actively defended the territory from non-related visitors. He led us to safe hunting grounds, far from potential predators, and ensured everyone's well-being.

It was in one of my early hunting forays that I met and coupled with Rufus, your father. Rufus was not as distinguished-looking as Reynard, but was very passionate and, without getting into details, I can report that he made me quite fulfilled and produced the four of you.

I was confined, since you were only a few days old, when our peace was disturbed by an interloper. A large coyote had spotted the remains of food outside our den and started digging into it, putting you kits and me in mortal peril. Rufus was out foraging but came back in a blur of motion, charging squarely at the gray beast, which was almost twice his size. Thanks to the element of surprise, Rufus was able to force the marauder to retreat a few paces, but the coyote recovered, grasped Rufus by the side of the neck with his powerful jaws, shook him violently in the air a few times, and crashed him onto the ground, already dead.

The coyote resumed its excavation but stopped at the sound of a loud growl. It was Reynard, who had puffed himself to make it look as if he was larger and more intimidating than he really was and was challenging the coyote with a series of threatening combative barks. The coyote turned around and began chasing his smaller opponent. I did not witness the pursuit that ensued, but Reynard described it to me later. Coyotes can run fast, yet Reynard was much faster and led his enemy in an unending chase over hills and dales, within tracts covered by vegetables planted by humans, through ditches, and across creeks and brooks. Finally, Reynard climbed up a tall oak tree and began barking challenges to the furious

coyote, who scratched the trunk of the tree trying to climb it, but could not find purchase. The entire episode lasted a considerable time, long enough for the coyote to forget its initial objective and disappear into the woods, leaving us alone.

So that is how Reynard saved you, and probably me, from a certain death. Our den has several exits, but you were too little to escape through them and I was not going to run away and let you be devoured. Remember this and be grateful to your grandfather.

Hermeline's Death

Mother stayed with us for a few seasons, longer than most foxes do. She no longer bred but stayed at home, helping rear kits and run the household. Late one season, at the onset of winter, Hermeline became afflicted with a strange disease that made her hair drop in patches and caused her unbearable itching. She would run outside the den, circling around trying to bite at her tail to alleviate the extreme discomfort. This went on for a couple of moons, during which she ignored food and failed to seek shelter, even when the first snows started falling.

We found her one frigid morning slumped against the trunk of a fallen tree, dead from frostbite and starvation. Reynard, disconsolate, kept calling her with yips, growls, whines and howls, and the multitude of other sounds that foxes use to communicate with their mates. She never responded.

Reynard's Disappearance

Not long after Hermeline's death, Reynard went missing. Foxes mate for life, and even though an attractive dog like Reynard can couple with several vixens, there is always a main one with whom they share the pleasures of hunting, mating, and roaming the fields. Hermeline was Reynard's chosen one and her demise left a hole in his heart he could not find a way to fill.

From time to time, we hear rumors that he went further north, where it is really cold, and made an even more famous name for himself by evading hunting humans and wild bears through numerous tricks, including playing dead a number of times to escape capture. This was many moons ago, so I tend to believe these stories are not truthful.

Whether these rumors are true or fanciful legends matters little to me and the rest of our leash. Reynard was and will always remain our hero, the object of love and veneration for every dog and vixen in his territory and beyond.

END

To My Wife

