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Opening extract from

The Midnight Fox

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CHAPTER 1



Bad News

Sometimes at night when the rain is beating against the windows of my room, I think about that summer on the farm. It has been five years, but when I close my eyes I am once again by the creek watching the black fox come leaping over the green, green grass. She is as light and free as the wind, exactly as she was the first time I saw her.

Or sometimes it is that last terrible night, and I am standing beneath the oak tree with the rain beating against me. The lightning flashes, the world is turned

white for a moment, and I see everything as it was – the broken lock, the empty cage, the small tracks disappearing into the rain. Then it seems to me that I can hear, as plainly as I heard it that August night, above the rain, beyond the years, the high, clear bark of the midnight fox.

To begin with, I did not want to go to the farm. I was perfectly happy at home. I remember I was sitting at the desk in my room and I had a brand new \$1.98 Cessna 180 model. I was just taking off the cellophane when my mom came in. I was feeling good because I had the model, and all evening to work on it, and then my mom told me in an excited way that I was going to Aunt Millie's farm for two whole months. I felt terrible.

'I don't want to go to any farm for two months,' I said.

'But, Tommy, why not?'

'Because I just don't want to.'

'Maybe you don't *now*,' my mom said, 'but after you think about it for a bit, you will. It's just that I've taken you by surprise. I probably shouldn't have come bursting in like –'

'I will never want to go.'

She looked at me with a puzzled shrug. 'I thought you would be so pleased.'

'Well, I'm not.'

'What's wrong?'

'There's nothing wrong. I would just hate to stay on a farm, that's all.'

'How do you know? You can't even remember Aunt Millie's farm. You don't know whether you'd like it now or not.'

'I know. I knew I wasn't going to like camp, and I didn't. I knew I wasn't going to like figs, and I don't. I knew I wasn't -'

'The trouble with you, Tommy, is that you don't *try* to like new things.'

'You shouldn't have to *try* to like things. You should just very easily, without even thinking about it all, *like* them.'

'All right,' she said, and her upper lip was beginning to get tight. 'When I first saw this farm, I very easily, without thinking about it at all, *loved* it. It is the prettiest farm I ever saw. It's in the hills and there are great big apple trees to climb and there are cows and horses and -'

'Animals hate me.'

'Tom, I have never heard anything so silly in my life. Animals do not hate you.'

'They do. How about that dog that came running up at about a hundred miles an hour and bit me for no reason? I suppose that dog loved me!'

'The lady explained that. The dog had a little ham bone and you stepped on it and the dog thought you were going to take it. Anyway,' she continued quickly, 'just wait till you see the baby lambs. There is nothing dearer in the world. They are -'

'I'll probably be the only kid in the world to be stampeded to death by a bunch of baby lambs.'

'Tom!'

'I tell you, animals don't like me. Perfectly strange animals come charging at me all the time.'

My mom ignored this and went on about the fun I would have in the garden, and especially gathering eggs. There was, according to her, no such fun in the world as going out to the henhouse, sticking your hand under some strange hen, grabbing an egg, and running back to the house with it for breakfast. I could picture that. I would be running to the house with my egg, see, having all this fun, and then there would be a noise like a freight train behind me. A terrible noise growing louder and louder, and I would look around and there would come about two hundred chickens running me down. CHAROOOOOM! Me flattened on the ground while the lead hen snatches the egg from my crushed hand and returns in triumph to the coop.

My mom could see I wasn't listening to her, so she stopped talking about the fun and said, 'I should

think, Tom, that even if you do not particularly want to go to the farm –'

'I don't want to go at all.'

'– even if you do not *particularly* want to go to the farm,' she continued patiently, 'you would realize how much this trip means to your father and me. It is the only chance we will ever have to go to Europe. The only chance.'

My mom and dad were going to Europe with about fifty other very athletic people, and they were going to bicycle through five countries and sleep in fields and barns. You can see that parents who would do that could never understand someone not wanting to go to the farm. I could not understand it myself completely. I just knew that I did not want to go, that I would never want to go, and that if I had to go, I would hate, loathe, and despise every minute of it.

'Don't you want your father and me to have this trip?'

'Yes.'

'You're not acting like it.'

'I *want* you to have the trip. I want you to have a hundred trips if you want them, just as long as I don't have to go to any crummy farm.'

'You make it sound like a punishment.'

'Why can't I stay here?'

'Because there's no one for you to stay with,' she said.

'There's Mrs Albergotti.' This shows how desperate I was. Mrs Albergotti was the kind of sitter who would come in the room where I was sleeping to see if I was still breathing.

'Mrs Albergotti cannot stay with you for two months.'

'Why not?'

'Because she has a family of her own. Now, Tom, will you be reasonable? You are not a baby any more. You are almost ten years old.'

'I am being reasonable.'

My mother looked at me for a long time without saying anything. I lifted the lid off my model box. Usually this was a great moment for me. It was usually so great that trumpets should have blown - TA-DAAAAAAAAA! This time I looked down at the grey plastic pieces and they were just grey plastic pieces.

'Your father will talk to you when he gets home,' she said, and left the room. I could hear her cross the hall into her room and shut the door. My mom cried easily. The week before we had been watching a TV show about an old elephant who couldn't do his circus routine any more, and suddenly I heard a terrible sob, and I looked over and it was my mom crying about the old elephant. Well, we all laughed, and she laughed too,

only it was not so funny to hear my mom crying now, not because of an old elephant, but because of me.

That evening my father came in and talked to me. My dad is a high-school coach who likes to tell about things like the Lehigh-Central basketball game, when he won the game in the last two seconds with a free throw. If anything, I knew that he would be less understanding than my mom. He had not understood, for example, why I did not want to be in Little League even after he had watched me strike out seventeen times straight.

'This is a wonderful opportunity,' my dad said enthusiastically. 'Wonderful! There's a pond there – did you know that? You can go swimming every day if you like.'

'I'm not much of a swimmer,' I reminded him. This was the understatement of the year. Having a body that would not float would be a great handicap to anybody.

'Well, you can learn! That is why this is such a wonderful opportunity.' Then he said earnestly, 'If you go to the farm with the right attitude, Tom, that's the main thing. With the right attitude, two months on a farm can make a world of difference in you both mentally and physically.'

'I like myself the way I am.' I continued working on my model, which was what I had been doing when this conversation started.

'Put down the model, Son.'

I put down the model but kept it in my hands so he would know I was very eager for the conversation to be over.

'Son, this trip means a lot to your mother. She has never had a real vacation in her whole life. Remember last summer when we were all packed to go to the Smokies and you got the measles?'

'Yes.'

'And she stayed home and nursed you and never complained once about it, did she?'

'Well, no.'

'Now she has a chance for a real trip and I want her to have it. I want her to go to Europe and see everything she's wanted to see all her life. And I don't want her to be worried about you the whole time. As long as she thinks you don't want to go to the farm, she is going to worry.'

'But I *don't* want to go.'

My father sighed. 'You don't have to let her know that. For once in your life you could think of someone besides yourself!'

Sometimes when my dad said something like that to me - well, I wouldn't actually cry or anything; my nose would just start to run. It did this all the time really. One time after school my teacher said, 'Tom, I am very disappointed in you. You simply are *not*

working up to capacity this term.' Well, I wanted to tell her that I could not work up to capacity sometimes, the same as anybody else, that she need not expect me to be perfect just because my parents were teachers, only I couldn't say anything because my nose started to run.

Now, I put my hand up to my nose and said, 'All right, I *want* to go to the farm.' Then I picked up my model and started pretending to work, because my eyes were kind of wet too.

My father never knew when to leave me alone. Now was the time for him to say, 'Fine,' and walk out of the room. Instead he just stood there. After a minute he cleared his throat and said, 'You won't be sorry, Son. You're doing a fine thing for your mother.'

Silence from me. Nose running worse than ever. Couldn't even see what pieces I was forcing together.

'And I bet – I just bet that you're going to have the time of your life on that farm. Millie says they've got some baby pigs. I bet you can have one.'

'I have always wanted a baby pig,' I said. I thought sure he would know I was being sarcastic, because *no one* has always wanted a baby pig. Maybe some farm girls would see one little pig that didn't look too bad and say, 'Hey, let's dress it up,' and they would play with it and feed it from a baby bottle, but no one has *always* wanted a baby pig.

But my father seemed pleased and clapped me on the back. 'Good going!' This was what he said to his players when one of them excelled. 'I'll tell your mother.' He went to the door, then paused and said carefully, 'I'll tell her you've changed your mind and are eager to go to the farm. Right?'

'Yes, tell her that.'

He went out and I wiped my nose and eyes and looked down at my model, which was practically ruined. I have never had less fun for \$1.98 in my whole life.

CHAPTER 2



The Trouble with Leaving

The evening before I went to the farm, my friend Petie came over and we sat on the steps without saying anything. Usually we talked all the time, but that evening we just sat there and watched an ant on Petie's sneaker. Petie was transferring the ant from one sneaker to the other, crossing his legs all kinds of different ways, so that no matter which way the ant ran he was always on a sneaker. This ant must have thought, Wow! There are one thousand boys in sneakers lined up here and I will never get to the end of them.

Well, finally Petie got tired and let the ant get off his sneaker and run into the grass. I could just see that ant running home and his wife saying, 'Why, you must have had a terrible day. You look awful!' And this ant says crossly, 'Well, you wouldn't look so good either if you had run across one thousand boys!'

Then Petie said, 'I wish I could go to the farm.'

'You don't either, Petie Burkis.'

'Well, I wish I could go to the same farm you're going to. It's not going to be so much fun here by myself, you know.'

'It'll be more fun than at the farm.'

'I guess, I saw this tv show about a farm one time,' Petie said, 'and this city kid comes to the farm for a visit and gets lost.'

'So what happened?'

'Well, fortunately for this city kid, Lassie lived on this farm, so somebody said, "Go find him, Lassie, go find the little lost city kid."' "

'And did she find him?'

'Well, I turned to something else myself, but I think it's a pretty safe guess that she did.'

We sat in silence for a few minutes and then I said, 'I'll probably get lost on the farm.'

'You probably will.'

'Only there won't be any Lassie to come find *me*.'

'Yeah, but there'll probably be some other kind of animal, like a real smart horse -'

'Or a pig,' I said disgustedly.

'Yeah, there'll be a real smart little pig, and somebody will say, "Go find him, Piggie, go find the city kid," and Piggie will find you and the next day there'll be big headlines all over the world: **BOY RESCUED FROM DEATH BY PIGGIE.**' Petie was going to be a reporter when he grows up, so he was good at doing headlines. One time the teacher hit his hand with a ruler because he kept on tapping his desk after she asked him to stop, and he made up this headline - **BOY DEALT CRIPPLING BLOW BY TEACHER** - and then he went on to write a story that sounded like it really had come from a newspaper.

'Hey,' Petie said now, 'maybe you'll get to be on "I've Got a Secret" and your secret will be -'

'I was rescued by a piggie,' we said together.

'They'd guess it right away though. But you could still sell your story to *Life*.'

'Yeah.'

We didn't say anything then, because for a minute it had been like old times and we had forgotten that I had to go to the farm. Now we remembered and were quiet. Finally Petie said, 'Well, I have to go.'

'Aw, you don't have to.'

'I do, too. Mom said I could just come over for a

minute to say good-bye, and I've been here for a couple of hours.'

'All right. Write to me, Petie.'

'Sure, only you better answer.'

'I will.'

'And tell me what the farm's like and if you have to milk cows or anything.'

'And you tell me what's going on around here.'

Petie kicked the pavement with his foot, and then he said, 'Well, so long,' and went down the street. I went in the house and sat down on the bed beside my suitcase, which was all packed so that we could get an early start in the morning.

I wished Petie had not mentioned that about milking the cows, because that was probably exactly what I'd have to do. My first chore.

'Run out and milk the cows, will you, Tommy?'

And they'd give me this enormous ten-gallon galvanized bucket and send me out, thinking that anybody with any sense at all would know how to milk an old cow.

And I would walk down to the barn, real slow, and this very beautiful cowboy's voice would start singing like in the movies when the cowboy hero is walking into town to meet his doom. And this cowboy's voice would describe all the awful things that were about to happen to me, and the camera would show me walk-

ing slowly to the barn with the enormous ten-gallon galvanized bucket hitting me on the leg.

I stopped thinking about that and put the two models my mom had given me into my suitcase. It was surprising that my mom, who was smart enough to teach school, could not pick out a decent model. One of these was a race car which had about six pieces and I had done the same one when I was in first grade. The other was a horse model which had to be painted and I did not like to paint.

I got undressed and into bed. I had not bothered to take my suitcase off the bed and my legs were real tight and cramped under the covers. Downstairs my mom said, 'I still can't believe it!' She had been saying this in a very happy and excited way all week. Then my dad said something I couldn't hear and she said, 'I know, but I still can't believe it.' I, lying upstairs with a ten-ton suitcase against my legs, found it very easy to believe.

To pass the time I began to count all the things I was going to miss by going to the farm. For one, some hornets had started building a nest on the shutter outside Petie's window and he was making a special invention so he could spy on the inside of the hornets' nest in complete safety. Also Petie's Aunt May knew a lady in Anderson who had a secret room in her house, and she had said that she would take us over there and let us

see it, only we had to go this summer because they were going to tear the house down to make a new car park.

What I was going to miss most, though, were just everyday things that weren't planned at all. Like one time Petie and I found this awful-looking Kewpie doll's head, and Petie pretended to throw it away, only when I got ready for bed that night and turned down the covers, there was the Kewpie doll's head on my pillow staring up at me. So then, without saying a word, I took the Kewpie doll's head and secretly hid it in Petie's underwear drawer. Then he hung it on a string in my closet, so that it hit me in the face when I opened the door. And all the weeks we were hiding that Kewpie head, we never once mentioned it to each other. That's the kind of fun that doesn't sound like much when you tell it, but I would miss it on the farm.