

THE TALE OF AN URBAN FOX.



WRONG SIDE OF THE FENCE

VIBHU VENKATESH

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JUNE

The early June summer bestows its golden splendor upon a lone acre of deciduous woodland tucked away in the mazes of suburbia. Beams of light dapple through the alder canopy, beckoning seedlings in soil and cracked pavement to extend their spindly growths to the heavens. The creatures dwelling upon shingled roofs and honeysuckle branches bask in the glow, rejoicing in the new season of abundance.

In a few hours, the fleeting rays of sunset fall upon a grass-lined burrow beneath two claw-marked, crooked trees in the forest. The evening radiance dances right on the face of a nine-week-old fox cub, who slumbers right at the burrow's entrance.

This little fox's name is Appleseed.

She scrunches her face at the harsh glare, blinking away her last few traces of sleep. The cub stretches her scrawny form in a bow, savoring the fading day's warmth on her smokey-red fur. As she shakes the weariness from her black-socked limbs, she feels a pang in her stomach, for she has not eaten since the early morning.

She turns away from the outside world and stares into the underground crevices of the burrow. Two older ginger cubs, Sedge and Fog, are curled up in the main den, full-bellied and snoring. Past them, the burrow's food cache has nothing but stray bones and fruit seeds, the scant leftovers of the older cubs' unsparing gluttony throughout the day.

Deciding to sleep until her next meal, Appleseed crawls into the den's pleasant shade and tries to settle in the narrow space between the two other cubs. As she does so, Sedge awakens and snaps his mouth open in a warning bark. Appleseed stumbles back, stepping right on Fog and jostling her awake. The two cubs gekker at Appleseed, lunging with open mouths to back her out of the den space.

Before the conflict escalates, the three cubs' ears

prick up as they hear a series of chirping barks at the burrow's opening. Sedge and Fog barrel past Appleseed to the surface, romping through the leaf litter. Appleseed exhales, settling into the conveniently empty den, but she hears the same vocalization again. She huffs but rises to her paws before exiting the burrow.

As the light shines upon her face again, she is greeted by the fire-colored fur of Amber, Sedge and Fog's mother. The two other cubs jump and play around her, soon running off to nip at the nearby flower buds. Appleseed pokes her snout at Amber's muzzle only to find her mouth devoid of prey. Amber licks the cub's face with an apologetic but assuring murmur before stepping away.

Amber faces northward and whoops at the three cubs to follow her. Appleseed rushes forward to stay close to Amber's side, only for Fog to shove her away in a bout of play-fighting. Amber sharply chuffs at Fog, but Appleseed relents to the older cub's strength and steps away. The group continues on through the undergrowth, but Appleseed trails behind, while the other cubs flank their mother.

As she traverses the shift of seasons around her,

Appleseed stares down at her paws as they overlap with Amber's tracks. She has grown physically through the spring months, but not enough to fill in the footsteps of an adult fox yet. She is still young, but knows she must learn to survive on her own before dispersing in the autumn. Although the thought of fending for herself sets her fur on end, she cannot forever depend on Amber for food and remain in a burrow with so little room for her.

She picks up her pace, rushing past seedlings now obscured by lengthening alder shadows.



As dusk falls and the foxes stride through the terrain, Appleseed feels the creeping velvet grass of the forest dwindle into uniformly-cut turf under her paws. Before her is an expanse of parked cars, pungent and overflowing trash bins, and looming houses with paint-chipped fencing that was illuminated under the streetlights. At the sight of the landscape, Appleseed shrinks back into the tall vegetation, ears flattened. Her stomach forms a pit as she watches Fog and Sedge take in their surroundings for the first time.

Amber proceeds forward and sniffs the concrete below. Her posture is relaxed as she observes the environment, and she looks back at Appleseed with an encouraging chirp. Only slightly reassured by Amber's ease, Appleseed emerges from the last caresses of woodland.

Suddenly, Amber halts the cubs with a flick of her tail and angles her ears forward at a nearby trash bin. She remains in place, muscles tensed as she crouches down. Appleseed recognizes the hunting stance and directs her senses to the bin. She becomes aware of the skittering footsteps echoing within the metal structure.

Within seconds, a crumb-mouthed rat comes tumbling out of the bin, landing on the curb with a quiet plop. He starts to run away, but Amber pounces and seizes the rodent in her jaws. Without sinking her teeth too deep into her prey, she approaches the three cubs with the struggling rat. She chirps at them, gathering them close.

Understanding the instruction, Appleseed copies the older fox's previous crouch. When Sedge and Fog do the same, Appleseed knows that tonight, she must prove herself a capable hunter or go hungry.

Amber lowers her head to the ground.

She relaxes her jaw.

The injured rat takes off, and the other cubs barge past Appleseed. They sprint much faster than Appleseed, yet they lose the rat as it disappears into a weathered gap in a fence. Sedge and Fog try to squeeze through simultaneously, but they cannot both fit and start to quarrel for the right of way. Filled with adrenaline from the fleeting opportunity, Appleseed darts past the distracted cubs and wriggles under the fence in hot pursuit of her rodent target.

On the other side, the injured rat is nowhere to be seen.

Instead, two humans, a man and a woman, are gathered at a table by their house's glass door, eating away at what appears to be roasted meat.

Before Appleseed can flee, their gazes are trained on her.

The humans rise from the table, pieces of their meal in hand, and take looming steps toward her.

Her legs will not move.

The present interlocks with a memory of scarlet in the early May, at a distant fence on the western edge of

the woodland. It's the scarlet red patch on a still-ripening crabapple that drew her attention from the other side of that fence, plucked foolishly before a rifle's sight. It's the scarlet, sticky-dried blood of a mother and father shielding their cub from the shots. It's the scarlet of that smokey red fox cub who ran away, who wailed alone for hours in a frightened, hungry, cold staccato.

Then, the trance ends as Amber leaps to Appleseed's side, just as she had done for the cub on that desolate day.

Amber's ears are flattened against her skull, and she flashes her incisors at the two humans. They back away from the foxes with their hands lowered, mumbling to each other in tongues Appleseed cannot comprehend. Appleseed finds it in herself to move and scrambles back, reorienting herself to the surroundings. Sedge and Fog have also managed their way into the yard, watching the scene before them with upright tails.

Appleseed races to the gap and squeezes through the fence. As she looks back, however, the other foxes have not followed her out. Feeling a chill deep within her bones, she peers through the opening.

Amber still assumes her defensive posture but no longer displays her teeth. She and the cubs' heads tilt at the humans' lowered hands. The humans glance from the foxes to their hands, which still grasp the morsels of meat.

Then, one human raises her hand and tosses the meat to Amber.

It lands on the lawn with a soft smack, and Appleseed flinches despite her distance. Sedge and Fog also jump away at the action. Amber, however, slowly sniffs the food. She shifts back and forth in place, eyes darting between the offering and the onlooking humans.

She stills.

The humid dusk air stills.

Then, Amber snatches it up and rushes for the fence, Sedge and Fog hot on her tail.

They nearly crash into Appleseed as they wriggle out of the fence opening, making a beeline for the woods. Appleseed runs with them, heart hammering as they careen through the dark undergrowth, all the way back to their home under the two crooked trees.

Safe once more in their loamy-soiled burrow, Sedge and Fog collapse, exhausted from the night's

activities. Appleseed's vision also turns into a haze as she feels a mix of anxiety and relief dragging her to the ground, but she then feels Amber's snout propping her up.

The older fox places the humans' offering of meat before the cub with an insistent trilling sound. Appleseed props herself up and stuffs her mouth with a hearty bite of the roasted meat. She doesn't even finish chewing before she lunges to eat more. As Appleseed devours the small but long-awaited meal of the day, she sees Amber giving the remaining meat to Sedge and Fog and sniffing at the empty food cache.

When all three cubs finish eating, Amber walks to the exit of the burrow. She announces her departure with a gentle murmur, and then she slinks off into the night to find more prey.

Hunger now satisfied, Appleseed settles away from Sedge and Fog and wraps her tail around her paws. She finally falls asleep, far enough from scarlet-stained fences to rest peacefully.



The next morning, Appleseed stirs to Amber returning to the burrow with a freshly caught wood mouse in her jaws. Appleseed gets up to take the mouse, but the already-awake Sedge and Fog beat her to it and begin to fight over it.

Steering clear of the older cubs' scuffle, Appleseed turns to the food cache, which she notices has grown over the previous night. She finds a few rats whose scents intermingle with that of garbage, along with a young rabbit who must have come from a bustling warren.

The most interesting new additions, however, are two more pieces of roasted meat, bearing the same scent as the humans' hands from the previous night.

While Sedge and Fog settle their dispute over the wood mouse, Appleseed opts to eat the rabbit.

The cubs, after finishing their meals, follow Amber out into the muggy morning air. They begin to travel into the dew-adorned greenery of the south woodland, rustling past the growing seedlings and snapping at the insects buzzing about.

After a few minutes, when they near the south edge of the forest, Amber stops them. She gazes at a

shrew foraging for aphids on the undersides of daisies. Amber flicks her tail, and the cubs crouch in the dense vegetation, preparing to pounce upon the unsuspecting rodent.

The shrew pulls away from the daisies, before moving closer to the obscured foxes.

Appleseed readies herself, tensing her muscles.

Then, a piercing, mechanical WHIRRRRR rumbles through the forest floor, causing the shrew to dart away under some thorny brambles. Amber digs at where the shrew had made its daring escape, but she soon gives up and shakes off her fur with a snort.

The storm of noise comes to a stop, and Amber flicks her ears with relief before turning to hunt elsewhere. Sedge and Fog are quick to follow, but Appleseed lingers, staring deeper south towards where the horrid whirring came from.

Through the dense brambles, she sees a tree swaying in place haphazardly some meters away.

Then, a human comes into view.

He shouts and kicks the tree over.

When the alder branches crash and snap against the ground, Appleseed turns back and sprints after Amber,

into a still-standing forest where nothing is wrong.



A week passes. The cacophony of whirring and crashing trees persists throughout each day, getting louder and closer to the foxes' den. The chaos sends the woodland creatures into hiding, and even after the noise dies down in the late evening, the prey is left displaced and difficult to locate.

Consequently, Appleseed still has not made a single catch.

For the past few nights, Amber and the other cubs have gone to the neighborhood for better luck at gathering food, while Appleseed has stayed behind at the forest's edge to forage. Sedge and Fog had already caught their first mice in the previous few days, and she is determined to keep up with them while hunting separately in the woods.

Tonight, while Amber, Sedge, and Fog proceed forward into the neighborhood, Appleseed stays shrouded in the tall grass.

Amber turns around and chirps to Appleseed, beckoning her to follow.

Appleseed steps back, diverting her gaze from Amber.

The two are silent for a moment, and then Amber gives Appleseed her usual understanding but cautionary trill. Appleseed watches Amber guide Sedge and Fog along the sidewalks until they find the gap under the familiar fence. They wriggle underneath, leaving Appleseed to stand at the edge of the woods alone.

Shaking off her unease, she listens for nearby prey in the surrounding forest. As the sharp breezes from passing cars fade into the night, Appleseed hears the chirping of a robin. Surprised, she looks around and spots the red-breasted bird singing on the illuminated pavement. She wonders if the robin is confused by the streetlights, as most birds in the forest would have gone home to roost for the night.

The robin hops towards a nearby lawn, pecking at a crinkling piece of human refuse that had fallen from a trash bin. Noting the bird's distraction, Appleseed cautiously steps out from the thick vegetation onto the concrete, her movements quiet and nimble. She crouches, attention focused intently on the passerine before her.

When the robin drops his head to the soil, Appleseed pounces.

The robin becomes aware of Appleseed's presence a moment too late as the fox closes in. Appleseed struggles with the bird's wings beating frantically, but she swiftly sinks her teeth into her prey until it goes still.

Thrilled, she scurries back to the forest's edge with her first successful catch, tail held high. She begins to eat, savoring the familiar taste of freshly caught prey with an extra swell of pride in her heart.

Mid-bite, she hears the cracking of a branch behind her.

She turns to see a patchy, golden-gray adult fox approaching her, his eyes reflecting yellow in the street-light.

When he spots the easy prey in Appleseed's jaws, he flattens his ears and lets out a piercing shriek at her.

The cub grabs the robin and dashes into the neighborhood. She chokes out a series of muffled warning barks as she hears his paw steps behind her. Desperate for help, she sharply turns into the gap under the fence.

Amber, Sedge, and Fog turn around as Appleseed

sprints into the yard. Amber makes her way over, thoroughly inspecting the trembling cub. Appleseed drops the robin and glances around the yard, noticing that humans are nowhere to be seen.

Then, the golden-gray fox slips through the fence gap, teeth bared.

Amber immediately shields the cubs, mouth agape. The two foxes leap at each other, latching their mouths onto each other's shoulder blades as they roughly shove each other back and forth. They rear on their hind legs and lock their front paws together, their blood-curdling screams piercing the tranquility of the night.

Appleseed suddenly hears a click at the sliding glass door in the yard and turns around. The humans from the previous night rush out, shouting and pointing at the dueling foxes. With a yelp, Appleseed stumbles away from the humans and sprints to the fence gap. She wriggles out of the yard before turning to watch Amber and the other fox, who stop their fight to look at the human newcomers.

Tonight, the humans hold greasy, triangle-shaped slices of some food that Appleseed does not recognize.

The humans toss a piece onto the lawn, clicking at the foxes. Sedge, being closest to the slice, approaches it first.

Before he can grab it, the stranger fox breaks away from Amber and slams his body into Sedge's, sending the cub twisting and reeling. He grabs the slice and bounds for the fence while the humans make a startled sound. Amber sets off after him, gekkering with fury.

Appleseed swerves out of the way as the golden gray fox darts out onto the parallel street, clearing the distance to the other side swiftly. Amber emerges from the gap, her tail lashing as she pursues the thief. Before she can leap into the road, multiple cars go speeding past her, causing her to halt on the sidewalk. She freezes, locked in place she watches the headlights zip past.

In the gaps between the roaring vehicles, Appleseed sees the golden fox on the opposite side of the road, just as he approaches one house's front porch.

He coughs in a raspy vocalization into an opening under the porch.

Suddenly, a litter of six cubs in colors ranging from tawny to dark silver scamper out from under the porch, excitedly chattering as he places the triangular slice in

front of him. The cubs shove past each other in flurry of black and gold, their tiny tails wagging as they grab what they can of the already small offering.

Amber stares at the family for a moment. She then turns to Appleseed and noses at her face, combing through the cub's fur between sighs of relief. Amidst the warm attention, Appleseed hears shifting under the fence and sees Sedge and Fog carrying smaller scraps of the humans' food. Sedge walks with a slight limp from the previous altercation but holds his head high. Amber finally turns to face her own cubs and guides them back into the woods, fussing over Sedge with each step. Appleseed starts to follow, but she turns back and looks under the fence.

The humans have gone back inside.

She scurries under the fence, retrieves her remaining robin carcass, and follows the others with her meager but earnest contribution to the burrow.



The next morning, just before daybreak, Appleseed stirs to Amber's insistent calling from just outside the den. Appleseed stretches away her grogginess, feeling

slightly energized by the previous evening's robin, and exits the den.

Appleseed trills in greeting to Amber, and the two wait for Sedge and Fog to surface. Appleseed wanders around the surrounding vegetation, letting the pleasant, damp smells of the dawn drift into her nostrils. She notices the scents of their territory's latrines have gone stale, and looks to Amber, expecting her to reinforce the borders of their home.

She does not.

Soon, Sedge and Fog come tumbling out of the den. Amber beckons the cubs northward until the usual neighborhood comes into view, surrounded by the lavender-gray morning haze.

To Appleseed's surprise, Amber walks past the usual gap in the fence and makes a beeline for another house, one directly next to their usual house. Stepping onto the muddy lawn in the front yard, Amber stops at an ivy-covered brick wall of the building.

When Appleseed approaches, she sees a freshly-dug burrow leading beneath the brick wall. She also takes notice of the grass surrounding the new territory, which carries Amber's fresh scents.

Amber chirps quietly to the cubs, inviting them to go inside.

Appleseed is the first to venture into the new burrow, stiffly wriggling into the main den under the wall. It is slightly smaller than their old burrow, with a system of bulky pipes that juts into the food cache and sleeping quarters. She tries to settle down in the unfamiliar soil when she hears a dull thumping sound shaking the den, no doubt the footsteps of a human in the house above.

Sedge and Fog wander in, trying to cram themselves into the limited space around her. Appleseed gets up before they can start a conflict over her presence, having no intention of staying in this new burrow.

As she backs out of the den and runs back to the forest, she sees Amber marking her scent upon the gap in their usual fence. Her caretaker suddenly looks across the street, where the golden-gray fox has come out from under from his porch. The two lock gazes for a moment, and Amber lets out a sharp, growling alarm bark at him.

The golden-gray fox returns under the porch, glowering as he turns away. Amber relaxes, having

asserted her claim on the fence and the food provided behind it.

She turns her attention to Appleseed, head tilted in surprise at the cub's departure from the den.

Appleseed sprints past Amber into the woodland into the familiar dense undergrowth, the human landscape finally out of proximity. Soon, she catches sight of the two claw-marked crooked trees through the shrubs, the grass-lined comfort of her familiar home below them.

Before she can reach it, a human steps into view, a familiar dreaded tool in his grasp.

Then, the whirring of metal blades erupts through Appleseed's ears as the human brings the rumbling tool to one tree's trunk. The cub watches helplessly through the brambles as the bark splinters away at the tool's contact, the already crooked tree swaying in new, sickening angles.

When the blades' hum comes to a stop, the human kicks the tree over, quickly moving away from its falling trajectory.

The tree makes a horrific crunch as it lands on their old den, causing it to cave in.

Appleseed feels Amber suddenly beside her, the older fox's comforting warmth grounding her in the unreality unfolding ahead of them. Amber pulls at Appleseed's scruff, trying to guide her away from the sight of their collapsing burrow.

The human drags the trunk out of the way and starts up his whirring tool again.

Appleseed lets Amber usher her back to the neighborhood before the other tree falls on their thrashed home.



Two weeks go by.

Unlike the other cubs, Appleseed does not leave the den during the day. Despite escaping the thundering collapse of the woodland, the summer urban landscape brings the nonstop tumult of hurtling cars, human youths' boisterous activities, and dogs with clacking jaws lunging against their restraints at the surrounding wildlife.

The nights, on the other hand, allow Appleseed to navigate the quiet ambiance of the empty sidewalks in search of prey. With continued success in catch-

ing trash-dwelling vermin and displaced wildlife, she notices her scrawny form becoming stronger as she fills up on the plentiful urban prey. She also learns how to evade human presence during the night, darting away from trash bins when the nearby houses' doors open.

Appleseed notices how the proximity of the new den to the humans' fence allows Amber to quickly snatch up food before other foxes can. She and the other cubs show up to the yard early in the evening, waiting idly for the easy meal and leaving before any conflict arises. Sometimes, Appleseed sees the golden-gray fox and his six cubs visiting the yard much later in the night, as well as the passing lone fox knocking over trash bins outside.

On this dusk, Appleseed roams outside as usual after Amber, Sedge, and Fog squeeze through the gap in the fence. She rummages through the toppled trash bins out front, eating the stale human food and maggots wriggling within.

Mid-bite, she hears the familiar coughing vocalization from the porch across the street. Fleeing behind the toppled trash bin, she sees the golden-gray fox and his cubs crossing the street towards Amber's

fence, much earlier than they usually would.

The golden-gray fox arrives at the fence, sniffing at Amber's scent surrounding it, and overwrites it with his own scent. Then, he and the cubs squeeze through the fence opening.

Appleseed rushes back to the fence, peering through the gap as Amber, Sedge, and Fog turn to the newcomers.

The golden-gray fox addresses Amber with a low, growling bark. Sedge backs away, hiding behind Amber. The adult foxes and their cubs freeze in place, tails occasionally lashing as they stare each other down.

A few minutes later, Appleseed hears the click and slide of the glass door as the humans step outside, holding a tray of eggs that seem strangely firm.

They toss an egg onto the lawn, and chaos breaks loose. The adult foxes and their cubs swarm the area trying to grab the egg, screaming and sinking their teeth into each other as they scramble for the food. The humans throw a few more eggs into the midst, but it does nothing to quell the violent conflict before them.

Appleseed steps away from the fence opening, over-

whelmed by the fighting, and waits for her family to finally escape from the brawl and return home.

Then, a flash of piebald fur races past her on the sidewalk.

Appleseed swerves out of the way as a white-legged fox suddenly makes a skidding turn past her, squeezing under the gap in the fence.

Then, she hears a mix of humans gasping, foxes screaming, and the distant rumbling of a car on the road.

Appleseed moves forward to observe the gap, when the piebald fox charges out holding a slightly damaged but intact egg. She bolts out into the street, and the golden-gray fox chases after her.

The piebald fox reaches the other side of the road, taking an abrupt turn as she runs down the sidewalk, weaving between trash bins.

The rumbling of the car grows closer.

The golden-gray fox bounds into the street.

His fur shines like the summer daylight in the headlights hurtling toward him.

SCREEEEEEEECH!

THUMP.

His body goes flying several meters away from the car, landing against the curb at an unnatural angle.

The car slowly maneuvers away from the scene, pulling over at a nearby curb. A human steps out with his hand gripping his face, and he stares at the fox's body. He pulls out a rectangular object, taps it a few times, and then begins to speak into it in a shaking but stable murmur while gesturing to the corpse. He returns to the car, continuing to speak.

The golden-gray fox's cubs emerge from behind the fence, some holding pieces of egg and finishing them off with swift licks across their faces.

They immediately notice the golden-gray fox's motionless body lying in the road. They rush to his body, nosing at him and whining when he does not respond.

Amber, Sedge, and Fog finally exit the yard. Nicks and scratches litter their faces from the scuffle, but they each hold eggs triumphantly in each of their jaws. They pause, looking out into the road. Amber watches the cubs snuggling close to her former competitor's body for a moment. Then, she turns away and places her egg in front of Appleseed before returning to the den with Sedge and Fog behind her.

However, Appleseed lingers in place for a long time. She looks at the orphaned cubs as they cuddle up to their father's fading warmth under the flickering streetlights.

She wonders if they will be found by an Amber of their own, a fox who guides them home in their desolate hour.

But no one runs to save them.

Appleseed picks up her egg and bolts out into the road, looking out for oncoming cars. She places the egg in front of the cubs. They snap at her intrusion, but Appleseed races back to the sidewalk before they become too stressed over her presence.

Appleseed turns back one final time to see a large vehicle approaching and stopping in front of the cubs. A human steps out, carrying a large, wire-gridded kennel. Setting down the kennel, the human reaches for the cubs with their hands covered in a protective accessory.

Appleseed freezes as the human picks up each of the cubs and places them in the kennel. Some of the cubs let themselves simply be carried away from their father's corpse, while others struggle and bite the hu-

man's hands.

No matter the cubs' response, the human remains calm and handles each with a gentle, soothing touch.

In the final cub's jaws, Appleseed sees the egg she gave being clutched tightly.

JULY

Two weeks later, the start of July brings immense humidity upon the neighborhood, culminating in a series of heavy rainstorms.

The humans retreat into their houses to avoid the barrage of droplets, allowing Appleseed to freely roam the neighborhood in the daytime. As she eats the earthworms wriggling in sidewalk puddles, she sees the rippled reflection of a larger fox with a striking auburn pelt, the same color as her parents' fur.

The humans still open their doors in the evenings to throw food to the foxes. Appleseed has not seen the golden-gray fox's cubs since they had been taken by the human, but competition continues to fester in the yard between Amber and the surrounding foxes. She has seen the return of the piebald fox, as well as a variety of

other foxes in colors of russet, silver, and white. Amber always stands her ground in encounters with them in the humans' yard, but the other foxes always return with each evening's feeding time. Each day, new scars litter her body, as well as Sedge's and Fog's.

One quiet, drizzling afternoon, curiosity overtakes Appleseed as she watches her family idle in the yard. Through the gap, she sees Sedge and Fog tumbling about, accidentally trampling the flower beds in their lively scuffle. Amber sits on the lawn with her eyes closed, raindrops falling from her whiskers. Appleseed has noticed that they do not come back to the den as often anymore, and she understands why. She marvels at how they treat the yard no differently from their old burrow in the forest.

With the humans nowhere in sight during the day, Appleseed feels a surge of confidence and wriggles under the fence.

She shakes away the wet flakes of paint from her fur and looks around the yard. Amber welcomes her with a chirp, and Sedge and Fog stop their playing to stare at Appleseed's unexpected presence.

Appleseed knows she has always been absent from

the other cubs' activities, but feels strong enough to approach them in play.

She turns her ears outward and wags her tail, head held high as she looks at them.

Sedge and Fog watch her, heads tilted.

Then, their tails also wag as they welcome her into their raucous play-fighting. Appleseed feels herself shoved about by the cubs at first, but starts to display her own strength in the scuffle. The three cubs cackle as they engage in their play, not caring about the trampled peonies under their damp-furred bodies.

Even amidst their excited chattering, the unmistakable squeaking slide of the glass door catches their attention.

Appleseed backs away from the door as one human looks outside, surprised by the foxes' presence in the daytime. Amber looks up to inspect the humans' hands, but they do not seem to have any food with them.

Then, the human crouches down and makes a clicking noise to the cubs. Appleseed stays in place, but Sedge and Fog take enthusiastic steps towards the human.

The human begins to stroke Sedge's fur, while Fog slips past to enter the humans' house. Fog begins to explore the entrance of the house, nosing around in a small box of sand and scat. Through the glass, Appleseed sees a housecat jump into the box and bat at Fog's face with hissing displeasure.

In the corner of her eye, Appleseed notices Amber tense at the cubs' proximity to the house. The older fox steps forward to supervise the human, ears alert at his every move. The human stills when he looks up at Amber, and moves his hands away from Sedge. He gently shoos Fog out of the house and closes the door behind her.

Appleseed decides to duck out of the yard before the human comes back. As she exits, she sees Amber and the other cubs staying behind, but Amber stays close to her cubs, more alert than she had been before.



One week following the cubs' close human contact, Appleseed notices that Fog has fallen terribly sick.

There is an empty look in Fog's dilated pupils as she keeps crashing directly into fences and trash cans. She

keeps wandering about aimlessly, sometimes with food dangling from her jaws, as though she is oblivious to her surroundings. She once nearly wandered straight into the path of an oncoming vehicle, though she was saved by Amber yanking her scruff back. During their bouts of play-fighting, Fog does not put up a fight as Sedge and Appleseed engage with her. She just lets herself get tackled to the ground, tail not even wagging as she stares blankly at the lawn.

One damp morning, Appleseed steps out of the burrow and quickly ducks back in, as she sees a large dog walking alongside his owner, restrained only by his lead as he rears on his hind legs at the nearby scents of the fox. Thankfully, his owner pulls him past the burrow and continues walking.

When the two are far enough away, Appleseed comes out of hiding, trotting on the moist lawn in the day's warming air. She makes her way to the fence and wriggles through the gap underneath, only to knock heads with a leaving Fog.

Appleseed shakes herself off and glares at Fog, but the other cub shoulders her way past Appleseed, not even meeting her gaze. Appleseed watches Fog travel

down the sidewalk when Amber and Sedge also come running out, trying to guide Fog back to safety.

Then, they hear the clattering of a chain and loud, approaching barking.

Amber, Sedge, and Appleseed turn to see the earlier dog bounding towards them with heavy footsteps, having broken free of his lead. His tongue and teeth visibly loll out of his mouth, for he has locked onto the scent of the foxes.

The three foxes scramble back under the fence, away from the dog's malicious trajectory. When Appleseed makes it into the yard, she looks through the gap to ensure the dog cannot get through the fence.

Her blood runs cold as she sees Fog standing exactly where she was before, staring blankly at the dog.

Her throat goes hoarse as she barks to Fog, but she is too late.

The dog latches onto Fog and furiously shakes the cub, who cries out but makes no motion to fight back. Amber rushes through the fence gap and leaps at the thrashing dog, desperate to free her cub from his unforgiving jaws. Her efforts are futile, for the dog's sturdy, muscular build allows him to shake her off and

slam her onto the concrete.

The dog lets go of Fog's limp body and turns his attention to Amber. He fixes his teeth on Amber's tail before she can get up and yanks her back. A sickening crunch rings through Appleseed's ears as she hears the snapping of vertebrae.

Then, she hears the footsteps and frantic yelling of the dog's owner. She sees him yank the dog off Amber and put distance between him and the foxes. The human quickly re-attaches the lead and pulls the dog away from the scene.

Appleseed and Sedge rush out to Amber, who unsteadily rises from the sidewalk, tail bent at an unnatural angle. With shaking steps, the older fox steps over to Fog and chirps to her. She noses at her cub, trying to awaken her as she usually would each day.

Fog does not awaken.

Amber moves to a nearby trash can and topples it over, nosing around the garbage until she finds a rotting piece of meat. She places the meat in front of Fog, chirping insistently.

Fog does not awaken.

Amber's chirping eventually fades away in the

trimmed hedge leaves' somber rustling. Her head held low, she guides Sedge and Appleseed back into the humans' yard.

Behind her, Appleseed hears Amber make one last coaxing trill to Fog, urging her to come back into the safety of the yard.

Fog does not awaken.

AUGUST

Over the next two weeks, as the heatwaves of August become fiery, Appleseed watches the once-blazing, confident demeanor of Amber morph into something she no longer recognizes.

Each day, she sees her caretaker trudge down the sidewalk with her tail crookedly dragging behind her, jumping at every sound across the street. When Amber visits the humans' yard and fights with other foxes over the limited food, she always flees back to their den empty-jawed and patchy-furred.

Without Amber's fierce defense of the territory, other foxes make themselves comfortable in the yard to wait for the humans' food. As more foxes populate the area, Appleseed catches their intermingling scents across the lawns and house structures, as well as the

pungence of trash cans that they have knocked over in their searches for sustenance.

Appleseed manages to hunt amidst the increased fox activity, but she notices how scarce the rodents and birds have become, with bloodied pigeon feathers scattered about and the last rats running into the shadows with each fox's hunt. Amber and Sedge have even less luck hunting, having fallen out of practice in the weeks spent waiting for the humans' food.

One evening, as Appleseed steps out of the burrow to track down the scant prey, she sees Amber and Sedge making their way along the brick wall above their burrow, eventually finding the wall leading to the house's backyard. They squeeze through a narrow, ivy-obscured opening in the wall where the bricks have become dislodged.

Appleseed turns and follows them through the gap. As she shifts her way through the ivy curtain, she tenses as the plant's tendrils pull at a loose brick in the wall above, but relaxes when the brick stays in place.

She finds Amber and Sedge inspecting the new yard in search for food. Amber digs through the neatly trimmed lawn, licking up the insects she finds in the

loamy cavities. Sedge soon comes across an unripe mulberry on a bramble thicket and plucks it from the branches, paying little attention to how the branches snap under his careless pulling.

Appleseed's claws dig into the ground at her family's destructive exploration of the unfamiliar territory. She turns her attention to the glass door leading to the yard's porch, behind which a human silhouette moves about, sweeping a long, bristled stick along the floor.

The cub catches Amber's and Sedge's attention with an alarm bark as she gestures to the door.

Before they can react, the door opens.

A man steps out, the long bristled stick still in hand, and freezes when he catches sight of the foxes.

At the sight of the unfamiliar human, Amber runs out of the yard, broken tail tucked between her legs as she leaves the conflict. Appleseed is about to follow when she realizes that Sedge has approached the human, tail wagging and mouth drooling as he looks at his hands.

The man takes a step away from Sedge, but the cub only approaches closer. Sedge stands on his hind legs, front paws prodding at the man's leg.

Without a moment of hesitation, the man kicks Sedge away with a hiss, sending the cub flying back. Before Sedge can recover himself, the man raises the bristled stick and brings it down on the young fox. Sedge yelps as the object smacks him and tries to wriggle free, but the man continues hitting him.

Appleseed looks to the gap in the wall, and meets Amber's terrified, helpless gaze. She looks at her protector's petrified legs and withdrawn posture, and the cub knows that her protector cannot fight back this time.

Before she knows where her paws are taking her, Appleseed finds herself rushing forward at the human's legs.

She sinks her teeth into the flesh of his ankle.

The human cries out in pain and twists away from Appleseed, giving her enough time to shove Sedge forward and run for the wall gap.

The stony drag of the unstable bricks marks their escape as the cubs come bursting through the ivy-covered gap. Joined by Amber, they take a sharp turn past their nearby den and head straight for the old woodland, ducking through the few trees and familiar grass-

es bordering the suburbs and making their way into a desolate region of stumps and trampled seedlings.



Appleseed awakens the next day under a shrub by a fallen log, the quiet morning dew tickling her nose. She sees Sedge and Amber lying upon nearby stumps, in a deep slumber from the previous night's exhausting events.

The humans toppling over the trees are nowhere to be seen, and Appleseed figures they have not arrived to continue their work so early in the day. She knows they must still be working, as the woodland has shrunk significantly since she last saw it.

She can't remember where the two crooked trees used to be.

Appleseed takes advantage of the silent morning to hunt without noise disruption. She travels back into the small region of trees dividing the depleted woodland and human civilization, searching for the prey lurking in between.

As the empty log-littered turns into a leafy forest floor once more, Appleseed finds an exceptional-

ly large rabbit munching away at a cluster of clovers. She creeps upon the animal, ready to pounce, but the rabbit swivels his ears as he hears her step upon the soil and leaps away through the trees.

Appleseed pursues the rabbit through the terrain, continuing the chase even as the rabbit enters the familiar neighborhood in his daring escape. The rabbit tries to dart away through the familiar fence, but Appleseed catches him by the haunches and drags him back. She kills him in a quite bite and prepares to carry the rabbit back to her family.

Then, she hears human conversation coming from the house next door.

She picks up the rabbit and hides inside a toppled trash bin as the humans come out of the door. When she peers out, she recognizes one man as the one she bit the previous night, evident from the teeth marks on his ankle and his limping. The other man is someone Appleseed has never seen before, but he carries a long case with him.

From her scarlet memories, Appleseed recognizes it as a rifle case.

She freezes, careful not to make a sound in the

trash bin, as she keeps her gaze attentive to the humans' movements.

The man from the previous night gestures to his ankle, and then emphatically points at the fox scat around the neighbors' grass, the food scraps left behind, and the toppled trash bins around the street. The hunter nods and responds to the man, his rifle case zippers jingling in Appleseed's ears as he explains something to him. The man then reaches into a small pouch and pulls out small, rectangular leaflike sheets and hands them to the hunter. The hunter acknowledges this transaction, taking the offering, and then walks over to a car parked right by the trash can Appleseed is hiding in.

As she hears the car door close, Appleseed prepares to run out with the rabbit.

Suddenly, she feels the trash bin shake as it turns upright.

As the opening turns upward, she comes face to face with the hunter, whose eyes widen at her presence.

Before he can take any action, Appleseed takes his stunned reaction as a chance to leap out of the inclined bin and onto the sidewalk, rabbit still in her jaws. Her

heart pounds as she hears the hunter yelling behind her, but she does not turn back as she races for the woodland. She disappears into the safety of the vegetation, not stopping until she reaches the wastes of stumps and shrubs once more.

Amber and Sedge have woken up, though they lie down curled around each other, still shaken from the previous night. Appleseed brings the rabbit to them and urges them to eat, noting the weakness in their bodies. Sedge enthusiastically begins to eat, but Amber takes a moment to groom the top of Appleseed's head with trilling gratitude. Amber has to crane her head up to reach the cub, as she is no longer as small as she was when they first met.

In their close proximity, Appleseed realizes that her fur is just as fiery as Amber's now.



Over the next week, the foxes do not return to the neighborhood.

Sedge takes time to recover from his injuries in the area of cut trees, while Amber and Appleseed search the remaining woodland for prey. Adjusting to their

old yet unfamiliar home proves to be a challenge for Appleseed, for the prey has become scarce with the depletion of the forest.

While Amber remains exclusively within the safety of the forest terrain, Appleseed finds herself approaching the borders of the forest to watch for humans, occasionally investigating when the surroundings seem safe.

She sees foxes walking by at night to their regular fence, but she notices that the fence gap has been recently blocked off from the outside. The foxes then step away from the fence to rummage through the trash bins for food or hunt prey elsewhere.

Sometimes, she watches them suddenly sniff the air and track the scent towards the neighboring house, wriggling under the gap in the brick wall to investigate. Some of them stiffen and back out of the gap, leaving the house alone.

Others wriggle through the gap without hesitation. Appleseed never sees those foxes come out.



After the next few days, Sedge and Amber regain their strength. Appleseed meets them at the edge of the forest as they approach the neighborhood with renewed interest. Inspecting the surroundings for danger, Amber steps out of the vegetation and sniffs around the street. Sedge emerges from the woodland after her, followed by Appleseed.

Amber and Sedge take notice of their blocked-off fence and huff at the inconvenience. Joined by Appleseed, they walk forward to the neighboring house and pause when they are within a few feet of their old den. Amber sniffs at the inside and squeezes through the burrow's opening to look for scraps left behind in the food cache.

Appleseed suddenly sees Sedge start sniffing the ground. He follows the scent to the gap in the brick wall, and Appleseed joins him to look through the ivy tendrils.

On the dark lawn, there are pink, diced pieces of raw meat.

Appleseed tries to pull Sedge back by his tail, but the hungry cub forces his way through the ivy curtain, licking his lips at the easy meal. Appleseed follows him

through the gap, feeling the plant's tendrils drag the loose bricks above.

She barks in a stern staccato to Sedge, trying to call him away, but Sedge's attention is fixed solely on the raw meat on the lawn. Before he reaches the meat, Sedge turns his head to the humans' door with caution.

Appleseed is out of view from the door, but from Sedge's relaxing shoulders, she assumes there are no human silhouettes behind the door.

Sedge reaches down to eat the meat.

Appleseed tenses.

Meat in his jaws, Sedge chews quietly, glancing to the door occasionally.

He gulps down the piece of meat he is eating.

Nothing happens.

Sedge enthusiastically takes another piece of meat, and Appleseed exhales as she watches him eat without disturbance.

She hears shifting by the gap in the wall, and turns to see Amber wriggling her way through the opening, the ivy catching on her fur. Her pupils are wide as she sees Sedge eating, but relaxes as she notes the lack of human activity in the yard.

Before Amber can carefully untangle herself from the ivy, a muffled sound cuts through the dusk air from above.

Soundlessly, Sedge falls to his side right where he stood on the lawn. In the moonlight, the wet glistening of blood trickles from the side of his head.

Amber sharply forces her way into the yard, shrieking at her motionless cub.

As she pulls on the ivy, the brick from above falls to the ground right in front of the small gap, blocking off the exit.

Appleseed looks up to the higher levels of the house to see the hunter from the previous week watching from a window, his rifle perched and aimed downward at where Sedge once stood. He stares upon Sedge's body and hurries away from the window.

Appleseed runs for the gap, trying to shove the brick out of the way, but the brick is too heavy for her to move. Amber joins her, using her snout to shift the brick to the side. She makes a strained grunt as the brick resists her efforts, lodged in the muddy soil.

The squeak of the sliding door rings through the night.

The hunter steps out of the house, rifle in hand, and he observes Sedge's body. He sets his rifle down and picks up the dead cub by the tail.

As he drags Sedge along the lawn, his gaze shifts to Amber and Appleseed by the wall, their exit blocked off.

He drops Sedge and makes his way for the rifle.

Amber's strength falters as she finally loosens the brick from the mud.

The grass rustles behind them as the hunter lifts the rifle off the lawn.

With all of her might, Appleseed shoves the brick aside, just enough to create a small opening.

Before Appleseed can take any action, she feels Amber shove her forward through the gap, the rough bricks and ivy poking at her as she gets jostled through the exit.

Appleseed sharply inhales as she feels the familiar outside air on her nose. She runs forward and turns her head in wait for Amber, so that they can run back to the safety of the woodland as they always do.

When she looks back, Amber's face is still behind the too-small gap, her wide pupils narrowing in relief

as she gazes back at her cub, on the safer side of the fence.

Through the hole created by the fallen brick in the wall above, she sees the hunter's face as he shifts his attention to her caretaker, shoulders positioned as he holds the rifle.

When the muffled shot rings out, Amber twists her face away from the exit, leaving Appleseed to gaze upon the dying fire of her fur blocking the gap forevermore.

Appleseed bounds down the sidewalk and into the woodland, zigzagging between trees and stumps through forest and wasteland alike. She sprints aimlessly, for she has no longer has a home to return to.

Her legs ache, her heart pounds, and her ears ring as she finally collapses between two tree stumps, far away from the danger. She heaves as the lonely, cold night air rustles her fur, phantoms of firey warmth and playful tumbling brushing past her.

In her fading vision, she notices the stumps lean slightly crooked, with bark littered with scratches of three tiny cubs and an adult fox long gone.

SEPTEMBER

One week later, during the early days of September, Appleseed still returns to the alder tree stumps each night.

She marks the stumps with her scent and digs a small food cache underneath one. She leaves prey within them, just in case Amber and Sedge might miraculously return.

Each night, she ends up eating the untouched prey.

During the day, she evades the humans' logging activities and hunts in the forest. When the occasional shrew runs off into the neighborhood, she darts out just far enough to catch it and flees the suburban landscape back into the scant vegetation.

She always looks back as she leaves, waiting for

blazing orange pelts to come rounding the corners of paint-chipped fences and loose-bricked walls.

No one runs to greet her, save for the vagabond leaves in the passing breeze.



The next week, Appleseed stops hearing the crashing of the trees.

The humans leave a strip of woodland untouched, just before where the neighborhood begins. The rest of the stump-littered, empty land meets the adjacent road in a sharp line of mulch and asphalt.

Appleseed gazes at the neighborhood through the remnants of the forest, the vegetation of which has become sparse as dry, ochre leaves flutter to the ground from above. Two worlds, wild and urban, once seemed so far away from one another. Now, they huddle together, inseparable like a mother and her cubs.

As the autumn leaves tumble over her paws, Appleseed flexes her claws, observing the way they have grown with the rest of her body over a summer of hunting, play-fighting, and sprinting into the shadows with a fox-trotting heart.

She accepts that Amber, Sedge, and Fog will never return to the two alder stumps. But she is no longer a helpless cub and knows that she can forge her way through a universe of toppling forests, tumultuous cars, and the humans who feed and deceive behind weathered gaps.

Appleseed returns to the two crooked stumps. Her scent around them has gone stale, but she does not remark it. She finishes the last morsels of the prey left in the food cache.

Then, she ventures southward, far away from the old neighborhood and through the leveled stumps of what was once woodland. She focuses her gaze ahead into the unknown lands she will come to settle in and perhaps abandon once more.

She sprints forward into her future, brushing past a single-standing crabapple tree as she journeys on.

ANOTHER JUNE

The autumn passes.

Then the winter.

And then the spring.

Finally, the June summer evening bestows its golden splendor once more, this time upon a bustling suburban construction site where the woodland once stood. Beams of light illuminate fluorescent tools and machines as the humans' work day comes to an end. The humans file toward the chain link entrance of the site, removing their helmets and wiping away sweat from their faces in the warm glow.

The skeletal structures of the unfinished houses are all that is left on the empty construction site, metal supports cooling as dusk eventually falls upon the sky.

In the darkening blue ambiance, a striking auburn

hue weaves its way through an opening in the chain link fence. A fully grown fox now stands alone in the twilight, shaking off her fur and glancing around for any lingering humans in the vicinity.

Despite her growth over the past year, her name is still Appleseed.

She trots over to a damp, heaped pile of earth a few meters away, and she starts to dig through it. She soon creates a small burrow in the mound of dirt and turns back to the fence opening.

She chirps in a coaxing staccato.

A chorus of excited chattering starts as four fox cubs come bursting through the fence opening. They make their way to Appleseed, sniffing the new burrow and rolling in the sawdust on the ground. Appleseed watches each of them play together on the construction site, keeping track of their dark silver pelts in the fading light.

Appleseed found the cubs just after their parent had been killed on the road. The little ones had been emaciated and wailing with no one left to care for them, and Appleseed took them under her care immediately.

She remembers a fiery-pelted fox who would have done the same.

As Appleseed watches her cubs dart around the unfinished houses and snatch up remnants of humans' lunches, a nearby streetlight flickers on, illuminating a tree near the edge of the fence.

On it, there is a crabapple, a small area of scarlet on its mostly-green skin.

Appleseed trots to the tree and stands upon her hind legs to grasp the fruit in her jaws.

Tomorrow morning, when the humans return to their place of work, the foxes must leave their shelter and find another in the ever-expanding mazes of suburbia. But right now, there are no humans to snatch away their lives, and they are free to exist in their quiet sanctuary without the stains of scarlet.

Tonight, Appleseed will feed all of her cubs, especially the littlest of them all.

She plucks the crabapple, and the world remains calm.

THE END

Appleseed, a meek red fox cub, wants nothing to do with the human neighborhood beyond her woodland home. However, she and her family are forced to live in suburbia after construction workers clear the remaining woods.

As Appleseed discovers the ways in which humans both benefit and harm her fellow urban creatures, she is determined to become self-reliant, adaptable, and cautious to survive the summer in her new home.

“Wrong Side of the Fence” is a series of vignettes celebrating the resilience of the urban red fox, as well as a cautionary tale about irresponsible interaction with wildlife.



Vibhu Venkatesh is an illustrator, writer, and fox enthusiast with an interest in ecology and education. Through his work, he aims to teach us how to appreciate and care for our planet, as well as one another. You can see more of his work at the QR code below!



VIBHU VENKATESH!
Illustrator, Ecologist, & Educator

