

## The Autistic Fox

'I thought foxes were meant to be cunning.' Perhaps this was rude.

'I mean, I'm not saying you're not, I've only just met you. But I would have expected you to slip off into the night with one of the guinea pigs or something.'

He blinked at the floor again. I had one of those thoughts that a character in a book might get. I liked pretending I was a character in a book. The protagonist version me would notice at this point that I didn't yet know the colour of his eyes, downcast as they were.

Then I thought, foxes probably all have the same coloured eyes. It's likely to be only humans who have options.

'When I think of foxes I think of them being quite clever. Sorry... What I mean is... Have you read *Fantastic Mr Fox*?'

He twitched an ear, lifted his left paw, placed it down again, and made the shadow of a movement with his eyes. Like he wanted to look up.

'It's about this fox who steals all this food from some farmers. And he's really cheeky and sneaky and, everyone says he's fantastic. I read it over and over when I was younger. I remember taking it to dad so he could tape up the spine. He had to put some cellotape inside the book too, because one of the pages was starting to hang out.'

*'I don't read'*

'I like your voice. It's much quieter than I imagined it would be.' I paused in an encouraging way. I didn't want to move closer for better hearing, because I was aware that the way I was sat sort of cornered him in the spot I'd found him, just between the shed and the greenhouse. I didn't want him to feel like he *had* to talk to me.

'Why don't you read? Do you not know how?'

*'Yes I know how to read, I'm not stupid.'*

I was quite taken aback by the sudden aggression. I hoped I hadn't really offended him. I tried to remember if I'd ever read a news story about a fox attacking a person.

I couldn't think of one, so there can't have been anything too gruesome. I always remembered the gruesome ones.

'So... Only if you don't mind me asking... Why don't you?'

*'They're not the books I want to read.'*

'What aren't?' He lifted his head, and I saw his eyes. Sort of a bright yellowy mossy colour. But he still looked away; at one of the screws in the wood panels on the tool shed.

*'The only books I ever get given are ones about foxes. And the foxes are never like me. They're never the way I am they're always brave and clever and like stealing things and doing other stuff like that but they're not like me because I'm not very fantastic and foxes are meant to be.'*

'Meant to be fantastic?'

'Yeah.'

'But it's only the ones in books that I was going on. I'd never met a real fox before. But I'm glad I met you because I think you're actually...'

It dawned on me that I didn't really know how old this fox was. Or even if age worked the same way for foxes. I tried to remember if anyone had ever told me what a fox's life span was. I couldn't.

'I think you're actually like me. Or like me a few years ago. I found it easier when they told me why I wasn't fantastic. I mean that's not how they put it. But I found it easier to be different when I had a reason.'

*'If you're gonna give me a sappy lecture about how 'learning difficulties' don't mean you're broken they just mean you're 'special' you can shut up. I know I'm autistic. You don't need to tell me or 'discover' me or be clever or something. And I don't read because I don't really like reading and because none of the people who write these fucking books seem to realise that it's just shit to stereotype a whole species into these tiny little boxes. It's stupid.'*

I lifted the hand I'd been resting my weight on. A few bits of gravel were stuck to my indented palm. I decided I would probably try to write about this fox.