

Fox, Rabbit & Cricket

by

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CHAPTER 1

It was early morning when Fox and Rabbit reached the top of the hill. They looked down at the sun creeping across the silent valley.

“I fancy rabbit for dinner tonight,” said Fox.

“You really are an asshole, Fox,” said Rabbit.

Fox laughed his high-pitched laugh.

“Why?” said Fox, still laughing. “I’m a fox - I eat rabbits. It’s what I do!”

“You know why,” said Rabbit, refusing to look at him.

“No. Explain, my bunny pal. Foxes eat rabbits, rabbits eat carrots - it’s the way the world is.”

“The problem,” said rabbit, “isn’t so much that you eat rabbits, but that you think it’s okay to talk to me about it, knowing full well that your dinner is likely to be one of my relatives.”

“Huh,” grunted Fox. “Perhaps you need a thicker skin, Rabbit.”

“Perhaps so,” said Rabbit. “Or perhaps you could just cut down on being a dickhead.”

Fox tilted his head. “Bit harsh, Rabbit old pal.”

“Why haven’t you eaten me?” asked Rabbit. Fox looked confused.

“You want me to eat you?”

“No, I was wondering why you haven’t eaten me. I’m just a rabbit, after all.”

Fox shifted uncomfortably on his haunches. The cool morning breeze blew his tail. “Well. We’re friends aren’t we? I guess it’s just not cricket to eat your friends.”

“Right,” said Rabbit slowly. So, if you became friends with my Aunt Sarah, you wouldn’t eat her either?”

“Erm, well - probably not, no.”

“So, theoretically, if you became friends with all rabbits, you’d starve to death?”

“I’d eat chickens instead.”

“You know what I mean, answer the question.”

“Bloody hell, Rabbit. It’s not like there’s any shortage of you little bastards. You breed, as they say, like rabbits. I don’t think it’s realistically going to be an issue.”

Rabbit smiled broadly. “Ah ha! So you really DO care about rabbits, if you won’t eat one you have an emotional connection with. You’re conflicted!”

“I fucking am not.”

“You are! If I was the last rabbit left on earth - and there was nothing else for you to eat - you’d have to eat me and you’d feel terrible about it wouldn’t you?”

“I think I might just eat you right now, you’re being very irritating.”

“True though isn’t it? So you must on some level realise that eating rabbits is wrong. Right?”

“Wrong, my furry pal. As I said before, I am a fox. It is in my foxy nature to devour rabbits. There’s no moral component whatsoever.”

“There is a moral component, you just don’t care about it,” said Rabbit.

“Nope,” said Fox. “there really isn’t. Unless you count the fact that it would be morally wrong for me to let my family starve death because my conscience wouldn’t allow me to provide them with food.”

“Rabbits aren’t the only food.”

“Oh! So eating chickens would be OK in your book, then? Charming. I must relay that to the coop.”

“You know that’s not what I meant, you prick.”

Fox laughed again.

“You could eat carrots, like me. No suffering or death involved.”

“You see these?” asked Fox, curling his lip to reveal shining teeth. “These are called canines. I evolved them specifically for eating meat. Meat is what I eat. It affords me the strength and power to hunt rabbits. I haven’t tried it, but I daresay if I tried to survive on carrots, I would die rather quickly.”

“So you’ve never tried eating solely carrots, then?” asked Rabbit.

“No. Why would I?”

“Then how do you know you’d die?”

“It’s a fair assumption, I think it’s fair to say.”

“Oh, we’re working on assumptions now are we?” said Rabbit, grinning.

“Shut the fuck up,” said Fox. “This conversation is stupid.”

“I’m just saying, you’re a terrible person Fox. You’re a real shit.”

“Thanks. I don’t really care what my food thinks of me. Look - you’re trying to judge me by a set of criteria I don’t agree with. You’re imposing your definition of good and bad onto me, and I think it’s actually rather unfair. Let’s say I was a big fan of carrots, and I see you mercilessly ripping them out of the ground and chomping them up, all bloody day long. Could I call you a terrible person for that?”

“Hardly,” said Rabbit. “Carrots don’t have feelings, or nephews.”

“You’re assuming they don’t, because it allows you to assuage yourself of guilt.”

“I’m assuming they don’t,” said Rabbit, “because they don’t.”

“Ha ha! Bullshit. Let me tell you something Rabbit - within the Fox framework of good and

bad, I'm good. I'm a damn good fox. I hunt effectively, I feed my family, I look after my cubs, I'm shit hot. Now I admit I'm a pretty bad rabbit, but I'm not a rabbit."

"You might well be a good fox, Fox," said Rabbit, "but you're assuming you exist in a vacuum, and that your actions don't have consequences or affect others. This plainly isn't true."

"What do you mean?" said Fox.

"Well, you being a good fox directly makes a lot of my relatives dead."

Fox shrugged. "So? Aren't we going around in circles here?"

"So your fox-based idea of good and bad can't be the be-all and end-all, can it?"

Fox was silent for a moment. He stood and stretched. "Come on," he said. The fox and the rabbit started walking down the hill, through the long grass.

"I still don't think it's fair," said Fox after a short while. "How can I be a good person, and a bad person, all at the same time? Surely if I was to keep everyone happy, I'd be nothing at all?"

"It's a good point, Fox old chum," said Rabbit. "I've thought about it myself. As a good rabbit, I'm expected to breed continually. But the more little bunnies there are, the more scarce the food. The higher the incidence of disease, and whatnot. The food I take from the ground is denied to other animals. I have an impact wider than myself, also."

"But your point was specifically about killing," said Fox.

"It's pertinent to you, that's why. It's an extreme example, but it serves to illustrate that we can't judge ourselves purely by our own measure of goodness."

"But," said Fox, then he was quiet again.

"I don't really think you're a shit, Fox," said Rabbit quietly.

"I kind of am, though," said Fox. "You're right, I never really thought about it before, but

I've basically committed murder every meal. And really, biologically, there was no difference between those rabbits I ate, and my own cubs."

"You're right," said Rabbit. "I was being facetious when I suggested you become a vegetarian, by the way. You're kind of committed to being a fox and doing fox things, so really you're trapped. You have to make peace with your own guilt, if you have any."

"Maybe that's the key, then," said Fox, brightening. "Not give a fuck. If I'm a fox, and I have no choice but to do fox things, then really my destiny is set and feeling bad about killing to eat serves no purpose. I am right to judge myself by my own measures of goodness, aren't I?"

"To an extent," said Rabbit, warily. "If you define your own personal measure of goodness, that's dangerous. You could decide killing for fun was an acceptable foxy behaviour. You need a consensus. In our case, that consensus is set by species. Rabbits, sadly enough, are prey animals. We've evolved to run away from predators like you. It's why our eyes are on the sides of our heads and so on. It sucks to be honest, but what can you do. Like you, I've accepted my role in life."

"Alright, I get that," said Fox. "So, I can be a bad fox by breaking the rules of being a fox, but a good fox by breaking your rules. Even though by your rules, I'm being bad?"

Rabbit looked confused. "You've lost me there to be honest."

Fox tried again. "I can be a bad fox by - for example - killing my next door neighbour's cubs. And you wouldn't give a shit about that particularly, right? Because it doesn't affect you or rabbits in general. But I can be a good fox - by the fox rules - by eating your family because I'm hungry. Yes?"

Rabbit stopped walking and blinked at Fox. "I... guess?"

"Huh. Interesting." Fox smiled to himself and kept walking.

"You're not going to eat my family though, are you?" asked Rabbit, running to catch up.

“Probably not. Although to be honest all rabbits look the same to me - I might do by accident one day.”

“Arschhole,” said Rabbit.

CHAPTER 2

The fox and the rabbit had made their way to the riverbank. The water bubbled by as they sat on the bank and watched the midges swirl.

“So, what does it mean to be a good person?” asked Fox.

Rabbit thought for a moment. “I think, being as kind as possible.”

Fox laughed. “What a load of shit! Where do you get this stuff Rabbit? Being as kind as possible?”

“Alright then,” said Rabbit crossly. “You have a go.”

“I would say, being true to yourself.”

Rabbit stared at Fox. “Really. Do you think that’s better than what I came up with?”

“Yes. Let me explain. We just discussed the difference between a personal measure of good, and that of our peers - in my case foxes, in your case rabbits. We kind of agreed that a personal measure is too subjective to be useful because a bad person might well think they’re good even if society in general disagrees. So we look to society to define what good and bad looks like, don’t we?”

“Yes, I’ll give you that. But what has this got to do with ‘being true to yourself’ or whatever shit you came out with?”

“It depends on your definition of ‘yourself’ doesn’t it,” said Fox.

“Oh so we’ve got to the part where we argue semantics, have we?” laughed Rabbit.

Fox looked displeased. “It’s not semantic. If you personally define yourself as a member of society - and we both have already, you’re a rabbit, I’m a fox - you can’t separate yourself from that society. So I contend that your measure of goodness comes from society. Fox rules.”

“So you’re totally discounting personal agency?” asked Rabbit.

“Ah no - you see, that’s the wrinkle. We can’t assume that all individuals will subscribe to all society’s mores. Unless you’re talking about hard and fast laws, which we’re not, because murder is wrong plain and simple. But holding specific views or having opinions about topics is a good example. I can disagree wildly with another fox about the best way of lining a den, but neither of us is right or wrong. So by lining my den my way, and not murdering anyone, I’m being true to myself.”

Rabbit nodded. “Okay, that kind of makes sense. Society - or species - is defined by a collection of differentiators. Carrots, meat. Eyes on the side, eyes at the front. Two legs, four legs. Any deviation from this could be seen as ‘bad’, in varying degrees.”

“Exactly Rabbit old pal!” said Fox, triumphantly.

“Hmmm...” said Rabbit. “But you’re still missing something. When societies overlap, what then? You haven’t answered the point around me thinking you’re an asshole for eating my relatives.”

“Well, we’re never going to agree on that, are we,” said Fox.

Rabbit rolled his eyes. “So it’s purely a matter of opinion then?”

“Yes.”

“Sooo... the two-legs. Their hunts.”

“No, no no - we are not talking about that.”

“Yes, we are Fox. Let’s go the other way, let’s talk about the two-legs with their horses and horns and dogs and whatnot. I’m guessing you just have a difference of opinion with them about fox hunting?”

“Fuck no,” said Fox, jumping to his feet and scattering midges. “The two-legs kill my friends for fun - there’s absolutely no evolutionary benefit for them. You’d never see a fox kill a rabbit for the sport!”

“But Fox, according to their society, that’s an acceptable thing to do - we have to assume. By the rules of their society, they’re being good. Right?”

“I have no idea. I don’t think so. I’ve seen other two-legs trying to stop them, so there’s obviously not a consensus among them. Who knows how two-legs think.”

“Oh dear Fox. Caught out by your own logic! If I have to accept your foxy nature when you eat my friends, you have to accept the two-legs nature when they hunt yours.”

“I may have to accept it, Rabbit, but I don’t have to like it.”

“Now you know how I feel.”

“And I don’t have to like them. I feel very strongly that they should have their throats ripped out.”

“Of course, that’s your prerogative - but you see how you can’t impose your set of morals onto them. Makes you feel pretty powerless, right?”

Fox grunted.

“From predator to prey...” said Rabbit under his breath.

“Shut it, you big-eared bastard,” hissed Fox.

The sun was getting higher in the sky and warming the damp earth. Fox and Rabbit breathed

in the scent of wild flowers.

“It’s impossible to be truly good,” said Fox.

“You think so?”

“I do. I think that there is always some perspective that will put you in a bad light.”

Rabbit shrugged. “Should you care?”

“That’s probably the bigger question,” said Fox. “Personally, I’d rather have control over other’s opinions of me if I could. If I’m doing something I believe to be good, but someone else insists otherwise... well, it’s just unfair.”

“That’s unrealistic,” said Rabbit. “You’re never going to be happy if you care so much about other’s opinions of you.”

“Well, I don’t really care that much. It would just be nice to know the rules of the game we’re playing.”

“Life doesn’t work like that, Fox - you know this.”

Fox brightened. “Perhaps that’s it! The only way to be truly happy is to completely disregard other’s opinions of you!”

“But that means disregarding others feelings, also.”

“Oh. Yes. I suppose if you were the sort of person who didn’t care about other people’s feelings, that would make you a bad person. No doubt about it.”

“Yes, and you can’t separate opinions from feelings, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, sadly so,” said Fox. “Because people take their opinions as part of their personalities.”

“Indeed. They take any attack on their opinion as an attack on them, more often than not.”

“This is all so depressing,” said Fox, squinting into the sunlight. “If you want to be a good

person, you basically can't, and if you don't care about being a good person, you're a bad person by default. What's the point?"

"You're overthinking it, Fox," said Rabbit. "The purpose of life is to be happy and cause as little pain to others as you can. That's it."

CHAPTER 3

The fox and the rabbit walked along the river for a while. It wound through the valley and into a wood. The cool shade from the trees was a welcome respite from the midday sun.

They stopped for a while in a dappled clearing. A cricket hopped onto a nearby log.

"Oh, hello Cricket," said Rabbit.

"Hi guys," said Cricket. "What are you two talking about?"

"The nature of goodness," replied Fox. "We determined that pursuing goodness is an inherently depressing and pointless endeavour."

"So he's going to keep on being a dick," said Rabbit.

"Basically," said Fox.

"Huh," said Cricket. "Most endeavours are depressing, in my experience."

"Still a cheery soul, I see," said Fox.

"Don't give me a hard time, you smug ginger twat," spat Cricket.

Fox gasped in mock dismay. "But sir! You smite me with your words!"

"What's the problem, Cricket?" asked Rabbit.

"Oh you know," said Cricket, "the usual grey grind of life, wearing me down."

"What specifically is the matter?" asked Fox.

Cricket sighed. He rubbed his hind legs together mournfully. "I don't know guys, I mean - I've got a good life really. Nice family, boundless food, nice place to live. But I feel like something is missing from my life. Like there's a big black hole in the middle that everything kind of falls into."

"That doesn't sound good," said Rabbit, "have you spoken to your wife about it?"

"Not really - how can I? She assumes I'm as happy as her. I don't want to make her miserable as well."

"How do you know she's happy?" interjected Fox.

"What?"

"Well, how happy is your wife, exactly?"

"I... well, she must be," stammered Cricket, "she seems happy and she hasn't said anything to the contrary?"

"But neither have you," said Fox, "to her, I mean."

Cricket looked pensive. "Ummm, yes I suppose you're right."

"So you could both be utterly miserable and she might be better at hiding it," said Rabbit.

"This isn't making me feel less unhappy to be honest," said Cricket.

Fox approached the log, upon which Cricket sat. "How happy do you expect to be? Where are you getting your expectations from, may I ask?"

"I don't know," said Cricket. "I just assume everyone else is happier than I am, and I aspire to that."

"You assume?" said Fox, "Why on earth would you do that? Why don't you assume everyone is thoroughly depressed, then in contrast you'll be actually quite chipper?"

"It doesn't work like that," said Cricket.

“Your problem,” said Rabbit, “and I say this with the greatest respect, is that you’ve made your misery something that defines you.”

“No I fucking haven’t!” blustered Cricket.

“Are you sure?” said Fox. “I mean, I’m not saying happiness is a choice per se - but being miserable with no discernable reason surely has to be.”

“It’s my brain chemistry,” said Cricket.

“Is it?” asked Fox. “Have you been diagnosed with anything?”

“No, well - no,” conceded Cricket.

“Would being diagnosed with a chemical imbalance make you feel better?” asked Rabbit.

“I think so, yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I would know what was wrong.”

“Then what?”

“I don’t know, maybe I’d just accept it. Or get treatment of some kind.”

“And if the treatment made no difference?”

Cricket narrowed his tiny eyes. “This sounds like a trick.”

“It’s not,” reassured Rabbit, “just answer the question. If I told you that you would definitely never get any happier, would you get more miserable?”

“I don’t think I could get more miserable.”

“Good then. Doctor Rabbit, MD diagnoses you with permanent clinical depression. There is no cure.”

“Hang on,” said Fox. “Cricket, your whole family has been chopped up by a combine

harvester.”

“WHAT?!” exclaimed Cricket.

“Not really, obviously - but if they had, surely you would be even more miserable than you are currently?”

“Well, yes of course I fucking would be, what would you expect?”

“Ah, I see Fox’s point!” said Rabbit, “If you could be more miserable, then by definition you’re not as miserable as you could be, therefore you’re actually happier than if your entire family was killed. Congratulations!”

“You two are absolute idiots,” said Cricket as he turned to leave.

“No, wait!” said Rabbit, “We’re trying to help you, honestly!”

“Did this come up in your discussion about goodness?” asked Cricket, “Did you determine if it was a good thing to pick on a poor, depressed insect?”

“We never really got to the bottom of it, to be honest,” said Fox.

“Come on, we’d better keep going,” said Rabbit.

The fox, the rabbit and the cricket left the clearing and made their way through the woods. Birds sang in the trees and shafts of sunlight stretched all the way to the leafy floor.

CHAPTER 4

“I just feel like everyone else is having a better time than me,” said Cricket. The three had emerged from the wood and were walking through the long grass, which swished in the gentle breeze.

“Where are you getting your expectations from?” asked Fox, a little annoyed. “What is your

benchmark for happiness, and what does happiness even mean to you? You're in danger of sounding ungrateful."

"I don't know. I just see other crickets having a great time working, gathering food, all that kind of thing. Laughing and joking, and I just don't feel that way."

Rabbit turned to Cricket. "Your problem is - you don't know how good you've got it. There are crickets out there getting eaten by birds, squashed by two-legs trampling through fields and so on. You're alright, count your blessings and stop whining."

"I can't accept that, though," continued Cricket. "My only point of reference is my own feelings. So if I feel sad, then I'm sad and that's it. Just because other people are more miserable than I, that doesn't make me happier."

"I'm not saying it should," said Rabbit, "and to an extent you're right. Your own perception of life is, I suppose, the only one that matters."

"No it isn't," said Fox, "we already discussed this. According to you, we each have a duty to minimise the suffering we cause others. We can't do that while disregarding other's perceptions or feelings, surely?"

"Okay, I mis-spoke," said Rabbit, shaking his head. "Your own perception of life matters the most to you, and that can't be helped."

"Still very wishy-washy, Rabbit. Get off the fence," said Fox. "Cricket is a whiner and a miserabilist, he might never change but ultimately it's his choice."

"It's not a choice, you arse!" shouted Cricket.

"Well, it must be," said Fox, "we've already established you have little to be miserable about - it's just a general 'feeling' you say you have, based on your assumptions of other people's feelings.

It's all coming out of your own head. You could choose to focus on your blessings, and be more compassionate to others, if you wanted."

"I'm compassionate!" said Cricket.

"How can you claim that?" said Fox, "You're so obsessed with your own happiness, or lack thereof, that you're completely blind to the suffering of others. Your poor wife, for example, has to put up with you moping about all day. You just ASSUME she's happy because she might be better at hiding her misery, or accepting her lot in life, than you."

"Get fucked, Fox," spat Cricket.

"Fox is being a dick, as usual," said Rabbit, "but he has a point. A good way of getting out of your funk would be to gain some perspective. Spend some time with those less fortunate, help the needy and whatnot. Your life would seem better by comparison, and you might find gratitude to be a way out of your dark mood."

"You two gonks just don't get it, do you?" said Cricket. "It's my inability to experience joy that's the problem - in a comparable scenario, I feel no joy where others plainly do. Yes, they could be lying, or faking it, but that seems a lot less likely than the fact I might have a neurological or mental condition!"

A few moments of silence passed as they pushed their way through a briar patch and under a fence. Beyond was a ploughed field, and they struggled to keep their footing in the furrows.

"I think Rabbit is saying if you were a better person, you'd be happier," said Fox, breaking the quiet.

Rabbit didn't say anything.

"You two are not in a position to judge whether I'm a good person or not," said Cricket.

“We’re not judging whether you’re a good person at the moment - we’re just saying if you did more good things, helped others, you might be happier as a result,” said Rabbit.

“Why not try swapping self-obsession with selflessness?” said Fox.

Cricket thought for a while. “Okay, well - that kind of makes sense. It couldn’t hurt, I suppose. The worst that might come out of it is I get no happier, but others benefit. That’s about the first sensible thing either of you have said all day. Or perhaps, ever.”

“Rabbit old chum!” exclaimed Fox, “You might have hit the nail on the head after all. Perhaps the definition of goodness is in good action! Perhaps our behaviour, at a base level, dictates our level of goodness!”

“Well, in very simple terms, yes. Would you say it’s easier to find a consensus on what comprises ‘good’ behaviour from ‘bad’?”

“Yes, it has to be. I think it’s a smaller array of behaviours that could be generally described as ‘good’. Helping others, being selfless, engaging in charity, acting in other’s best interests, and so on.”

“You wouldn’t get any argument from me on any of those,” said Rabbit.

“Nor me,” chirped Cricket.

“So to be good, we must do good,” said Fox with an air of finality.

“Yes,” said Rabbit.

“Yes,” said Cricket.

“Come on, we’re nearly there. It’s getting late and I haven’t eaten all day,” said Fox.

CHAPTER 5

The sun had begun to get low in the sky, and it was getting colder. Rabbit's legs ached.

"So Fox," he said, "are you going to keep on eating rabbits?"

"I think so, yes," said Fox. "It isn't wrong for me to eat rabbits, because I'm a fox. I eat rabbits out of necessity, rather than choice - which separates me from the two-legs and their fox hunts. By the consensus of fox society, my actions are of a good fox."

"So we're really all just going to agree that Fox is a good person?" asked Cricket.

"It looks like we're going to have to," said Rabbit.

"Even if he eats your Aunt Susan?" asked Cricket.

"Sarah," corrected Rabbit, "and yes - he's right. If she gets eaten by this fox or any other fox, I won't be happy about it, but I can't make a moral judgement on the goodness of the fox in question."

"I think we're going to be late," said Fox.

"My legs are shorter than yours, Fox," said Rabbit, "I'm going as fast as I can."

"How do you think I feel?" complained Cricket, "And where does this leave Rabbit? Is he a good person too?"

"Unless he's raping and murdering people in his spare time, yes," said Fox. "He's a typical rabbit, doing rabbit things. He might make some poor decisions here and there, but they're not deliberately detrimental to others."

"Thanks Fox," said Rabbit, rather sarcastically.

"What about if he does mostly good things, but occasionally does something bad - what's the tipping point between being 'good' and 'bad'?" asked Cricket.

"It's not an either/or kind of deal, Cricket," said Fox. "You can assume everyone will do

something bad in their life. But it's their recognition that the act was bad, and what they do to make amends, that reflects their character."

"And me?" asked Cricket, "Am I good?"

"You have the capacity for goodness," said Fox. "There is every possibility that your unhappiness stems from an innate sense that you're not acting as a good person - or certainly not as much as you could."

"So I'm being punished for not being as nice as I could be?"

"You're punishing yourself," said Fox, smiling kindly. "That's my opinion, of course."

"Of course," said Cricket.

"We're here," said Rabbit.

The sun was setting on the silent valley as they looked down the hill. Long shadows stretched across the fields and the river below.

"Just in time," said Rabbit.

"Same again tomorrow?" asked Fox.

"Yes," said Rabbit.

"Yes," said Cricket.

"I fancy rabbit for dinner tonight," said Fox.

THE END