



IV

OUR Teacher FINDS THE RIDDLING FOX

The school bus arrived at the school in time. The children leaped off the bus and tramped into the small wooden school building.

Before Our Teacher left, he asked the driver about the Riddling Fox.

The bus driver looked surprised. “The Riddling Fox?” he said. “Now there’s a cagey creature. She often sneaks into town to steal food. She has very refined tastes. She doesn’t rob hen eggs like a normal fox. No, she takes the tastiest sausages from the butcher, the finest cheeses from the deli, and the best pastries from the bakery. None of the villagers have been able to catch her.”

“Do you know where I could find this crafty fox?” Our Teacher asked.

The bus driver pointed to a nearby hill. “Look up there. People say she has a fine, fancy den near the summit. You seem like a smart boy. If you find the Riddling Fox, don’t let her outfox you.”

Our Teacher and MD set off across the tundra. They were halfway up the moss-covered hill when a voice called out, “You must be the boy who wants to put on the Thinking Cap.”

Our Teacher turned to see a small white fox sitting on a boulder. Its inky black eyes were fixed on him. A bushy white tail curled around its short furry legs.

MD barked and sniffed the boulder.

"Yes, I am," Our Teacher answered. "I'm searching for the Riddling Fox."

Here is the Riddling Fox Our Teacher saw:



"That's what the Sámi people call me," the fox said. "Among other unpleasant things. I was just sitting here thinking about lunch. Should I sneak into the greengrocers for some delicious cloudberryes? Or should I slip into the cafe and swipe some yummy meatballs? Oh, the choices. The choices."

"A sea lion told me the Thinking Cap was in Finnish Lapland. A magnificent frigate bird told me you know where to find it."

The white fox stood and turned a full circle. "Indeed I do. But before I tell you, you must answer a riddle."

Our Teacher, who enjoyed riddles, quickly agreed. He listened carefully as the fox recited the lines.

*"North, east, west, and south are directions in almost every place,
But where on Earth is it always south, no matter which way you face?"*

"That's an easy one," Our Teacher said. "I'd be standing on the North Pole. On the top of the world, which is a big sphere. Any direction I stand would be southward."

The Riddling Fox turned another circle. "Clever boy. Now I will take you to the place where the Thinking Cap has sat since only time can remember."

"But where did the Thinking Cap come from?" asked Our Teacher, who was curious about such things. "How did it get its magical power?"

The white fox leaped off the boulder. "Follow me. As we walk, I will tell you the Thinking Cap story."

Our Teacher and MD followed the fox up the hill.

"Lapland legends tell of Beaivi, mother of humankind," the Riddling Fox began. "One day Beaivi stood on this very hill, watching a group of early people. To her dismay, they sat on the tundra, doing very little. The early people lacked purpose."

"That's what I do," said Our Teacher. "I sit on the beach and think about my future."

"Ruff! Ruff!" went MD.

"To solve the problem, Beaivi gave each early person in Lapland a skill," said the fox. "She handed some the ability to cook and others the skill to build things. Some people received the skill to grow plants and others to hunt."

"I wish Beaivi would give me a skill," Our Teacher said.

The Riddling Fox stopped to let Our Teacher catch his breath. *"Unfortunately, the early people still did very little," she said. "No one had an interest in using the skills Beaivi gave them."* The fox resumed climbing. *"So, the goddess went to work again. This time, she took a giant iron kettle and brewed a batch of the two C's, creativity and curiosity. She gave a large dose to each early person."*

"What about the Thinking Cap?" Our Teacher asked.

"An early person named Sampsa had the skill of sewing," the white fox went on. "Soon after receiving creativity and curiosity, Sampsa invented the hat, a colorful wool one to keep out the cold. This gave Beaivi an idea. She asked Sampsa to sew her a special hat, the Thinking Cap. Then, to encourage the early people to use the two C's, she gave the hat a power, the ability to tell them how to use their skills, whether to become a cook, a carpenter, a farmer, or a hunter."

Our Teacher, MD, and the Riddling Fox reached the summit of the hill. There stood a gray stone pedestal about three feet high. The base, which MD sniffed, was carved with ancient markings and symbols. The top was flat and round.

"It looks like a bird bath," Our Teacher said.

"This is the *Jalka*," said the white fox. "Beaivi placed the Thinking Cap here, and

since early times, people have made pilgrimages to this spot to put it on."

Our Teacher inspected the pedestal. "But there's nothing here," he said. "The *Jalka* is bare."

"Curious thing," said the fox. "Only this morning, a great gray owl swooped down and whisked the hat away,"



"But why? Why would an owl want the Thinking Cap?"

"The owl was jealous of the cap. The great gray owl was wise, but the Sámi people believed the hat was wiser."

The Riddling Fox must have noticed the look of disappointment on Our Teacher's face, for she added, "But don't worry, my friend. I know where the owl took the cap."

Our Teacher brightened. "Please tell me," he said. "I've come all this way to put it on."

"I will tell you if you can answer another riddle."

Our Teacher nodded and sat on the mossy ground.

The fox recited,

"It is today on earth where you choose to stay.

But where can it be both today and yesterday?

MD barked and sniffed a white flower.

Our Teacher had to think longer about this one. He stared out over the tundra. He checked the sun, now higher overhead.

Finally, he looked at the Riddling Fox and said, "I got it. The International Date Line. East of the line it's Tuesday and west of the line it's yesterday, Monday. Of course, to go there you must be in a boat, because the International Date Line is in the middle of the

Pacific Ocean."

The white fox's black lips spread into a smile. "Now to answer your question. The great gray owl took the Thinking Cap to Cairo, Egypt."

"Cairo? That's far off in North Africa. I could never go to Egypt."

"But you can," said the fox. "And I can tell you how."

"If I answer another riddle. Right?" Our Teacher stood. "I'm ready for riddle number three."

The white fox turned another circle. Then she said,

"This place on Earth is both here or there.

Where in the world are you if you're closest to everywhere?"

While MD sniffed a gopher hole, Our Teacher paced around the pedestal. He thought of all the continents and oceans. He thought about the longitude and latitude lines on his globe back home. Finally, he snapped his fingers and said, "A tricky riddle, fox, because the place is not on the earth. It's *inside* the earth. The spot closest to everywhere in a sphere is at its exact center."

"You are wise, my friend," said the fox. "Follow me."

The fox led Our Teacher and MD down the hill to the village. At the edge of town stood a small train station.

"Wait on the platform," the Riddling Fox said. "The Pole-to-Pole Express will arrive shortly. It will take you to Cairo, Egypt in minutes."

"But that's impossible," said Our Teacher. "There couldn't be such a train."

"Just wait on the platform," said the fox. "Now I'm off to lunch. Should I raid the fishmongers for pickled herring, or should I strike the hotel restaurant for some creamy mushroom soup? Oh, the choices. The choices."