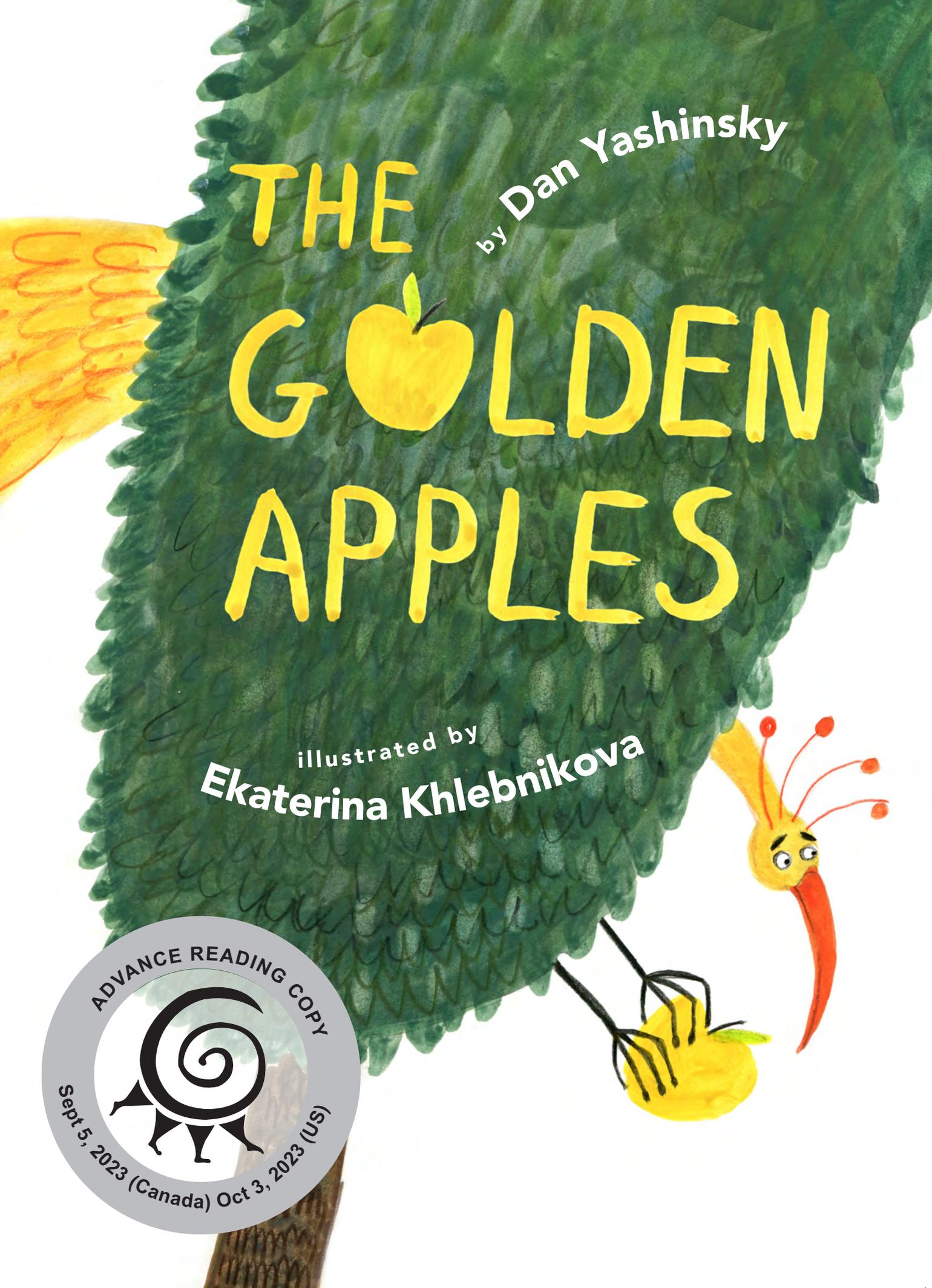


by Dan Yashinsky

THE GOLDEN APPLES

illustrated by
Ekaterina Khlebnikova





The Golden Apples

by DAN YASHINSKY
illustrated by EKATERINA KHLEBNIKOVA

Jack may be good at following recipes, but he's not very good at following directions. When his two older brothers fail to find the golden bird that made off with their father's prized golden apples, Jack steps up for the job. But there are many challenges to be faced along the way; without the help of a fast and friendly fox, Jack just might not make it.

With a smart princess who loves grunge rock, angry kings, magic animals, conniving siblings, and tempting casinos, this delightful re-mix of an old Cape Breton Jack tale seamlessly blends modern and ancient. Acclaimed Canadian storyteller **DAN YASHINSKY** brings wit and whimsy to this wondertale. **EKATERINA KHLEBNIKOVA**'s brilliant illustrations blend old and new creating a gorgeous visual world; a perfect complement to Yashinsky's re-telling. Together they serve up a book that will delight readers and listeners of all ages.

DAN YASHINSKY has been telling stories for more than forty years. The founder of the Toronto Storytelling Festival and the co-founder of Storytelling Toronto, he has shared his stories across the world—at festivals, in schools and hospitals, in theatres and community spaces. His work in schools includes creating the Telling Bee, a story-based curriculum project that has taken place in more than forty Ontario schools. He is the editor of four acclaimed folk tale collections, and the author of several books including *Tales for an Unknown City*, which received the Toronto Book Award, and *Suddenly They Heard Footsteps: Storytelling for the Twenty-first Century*. He lives in Toronto.

Raised in a family of book lovers, **EKATERINA KHLEBNIKOVA** dreamt of being an illustrator or artist from a very young age. A graduate of the Moscow State University Ivan Fedorov, Faculty of Graphic Arts, she is a member of the Moscow Union of Artists (Department of Prints). She has participated in numerous exhibitions, both in Russia and elsewhere, and is a winner at Moscow's International Festival of Book Illustration and Visual Literature (MORS). She has created artwork for books published in Russia, China, Serbia, and now Canada.

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KEY SELLING POINTS

- The author is an acclaimed storyteller, author, and community organizer, who received the first Jane Jacobs Prize in acknowledgement of his contributions as a storyteller to enhance the cultural life of Toronto.
- The author has performed around the world; he founded the Toronto Storytelling Festival and co-founded Storytelling Toronto (formerly known as the Storytelling School of Toronto).
- The author has edited four acclaimed collections of folktales, and written several books, including *The Storyteller at Fault*, which was also presented as a theatre piece. His book *Tales for an Unknown City* received the Toronto Book Award.
- The artist is an award-winning illustrator whose work is attracting international attention.
- The story playfully combines traditional and modern in a delightful re-imagining of an old tale.

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The Golden Apples





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A long time ago, when the king and queen still loved each other, the queen walked in the garden late one evening. She sat under a young apple tree she herself had planted, and she touched the tree, and she listened. Then she returned to their royal bedchamber and embraced the king. Nine months later they had a son. A second prince came along, and then a third, and him they named Jack. The princes grew up. The first two were impressive-looking lads who got good grades. Jack wasn't much to look at but the palace cats loved him. He and his mother loved to cook together, and Jack became a fine chef, though he wasn't very good at school.



One day the king walked in the garden. The apple tree was full grown by now, and the king noticed that at the very top there was an apple—not red or green, but shining gold. It was almost ripe. The king came home and planned to return the next day to pick the apple. But when he came to the garden early in the morning, the apple was gone. Luckily, on the same branch was a second apple—also gold, almost ripe.



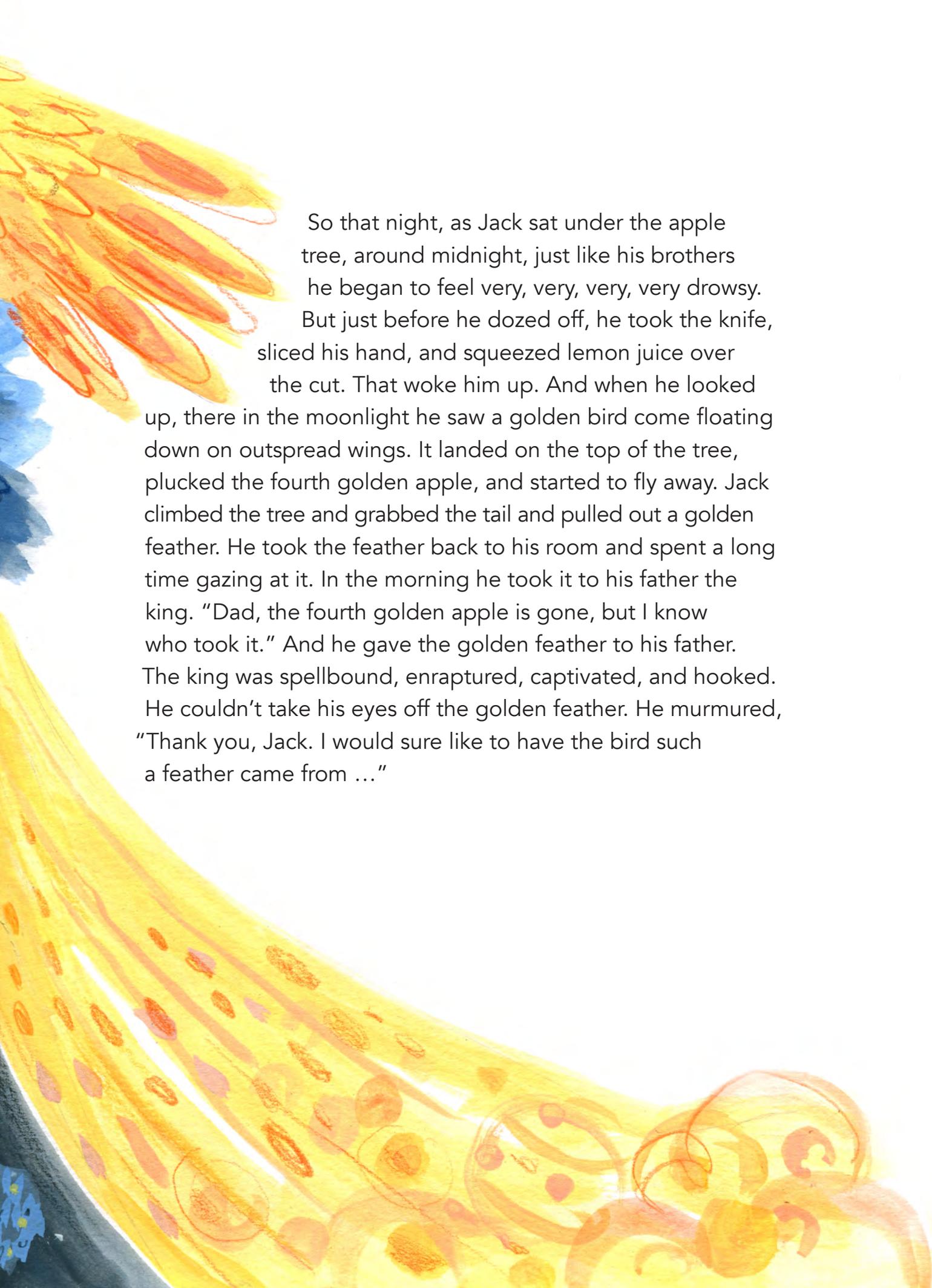
He called his eldest son and said, "I want you to stand guard tonight and be sure nobody steals the second apple." "Yes, Father," the prince replied. But that night, as he rested at the bottom of the apple tree, around midnight he became very, very, very sleepy. When he woke up in the chill of dawn, the second golden apple was gone.

Luckily, on the same branch, there was a third apple—gold, almost ripe. So the king told his second son to stand guard. But around midnight that prince, too, dozed off; and in the morning the apple was gone.

Luckily ... yes, on the same branch, a fourth apple: gold, not quite ripe. So the king called Jack, the youngest prince. "I doubt you can do what your two older brothers failed to do, my son, but you may as well try." And Jack promised he'd do his best.

That afternoon he and the queen were cooking together. They made pan-roasted chicken with fresh sage, garlic, onion, dried rosemary, white wine, and lemon juice. He told his mother what he was doing that night, and the queen said, "Take this knife and this lemon. You'll know what to do with them when the time comes."





So that night, as Jack sat under the apple tree, around midnight, just like his brothers he began to feel very, very, very, very drowsy. But just before he dozed off, he took the knife, sliced his hand, and squeezed lemon juice over the cut. That woke him up. And when he looked up, there in the moonlight he saw a golden bird come floating down on outspread wings. It landed on the top of the tree, plucked the fourth golden apple, and started to fly away. Jack climbed the tree and grabbed the tail and pulled out a golden feather. He took the feather back to his room and spent a long time gazing at it. In the morning he took it to his father the king. "Dad, the fourth golden apple is gone, but I know who took it." And he gave the golden feather to his father. The king was spellbound, enraptured, captivated, and hooked. He couldn't take his eyes off the golden feather. He murmured, "Thank you, Jack. I would sure like to have the bird such a feather came from ..."

That day he called his eldest son and said, "My boy, I want you to go on a quest to bring me the golden bird this feather came from."

The prince was in such a hurry to get started he didn't have time to say good-bye to his mother. He armed himself well: a bulletproof vest, two knives, a long sword, a short sword, a cutlass, a machete, a rifle, a shotgun, a pistol, and a semi-automatic. You just never know. He started marching down the road and hadn't gotten too far when a little red fox stepped out of the forest right in his path. The fox tilted its head to one side and said, "Hello, Prince. Please don't shoot me. I have some advice."

But the prince was so scared to hear a talking fox that he blasted it with his shotgun and began to run away. He wasn't a very good shot. The fox dodged the bullets and called out, "I just wanted to tell you not to stay in the fancy hotel with the bright lights and loud music ... there's a quiet place at the edge of town. Stay there!" I doubt that the prince heard a single word as he clanked away. When he got to the town at the end of the road, he headed straight for that fancy hotel with the bright lights, and he set in to gambling and carousing and soon forgot why he'd left home in the first place.





When the oldest brother didn't return, the king called his second son. "Go on a quest," he said, "and bring back the golden bird this feather comes from."

The second son was in such a hurry to start that he never went to say goodbye to his mother. He put on his headphones and started down the road. He was listening to a podcast called "How to Succeed on Your Quest." He hadn't gone too far when the same fox stepped out on the road and said, "Please don't shoot me, Prince. I have some advice." But the prince was so scared by the idea of a talking fox—he couldn't hear it but he saw the mouth moving—he just threw a stone at it and ran away, cranking up the volume as he ran. Even so, the fox called after him, "Don't stay at the fancy inn ..."—but the prince didn't hear a thing. He went straight to that bright, loud place in the town at the end of the road and commenced to gambling and carousing with his elder brother. And he, too, forgot why he'd left home in the first place.





When he didn't return, the king called his youngest son. "Jack," says the king, "it's up to you. Your brothers haven't brought me the golden bird, so you'll have to try. Do you think you can do what your older brothers failed to accomplish?"

Jack said, "Father, I'm going to try. As the King of Hockeyland once said, 'You miss 100% of the shots you don't take.'" Before he left on his quest he went to the kitchen to talk to his mother. He also made her a cheesecake—her favourite dessert. She was delighted and said—because she and the king still loved each other—"I'll share it with your father." And she gave him a pack she'd prepared for the road.



He hadn't gone too far when the little red fox stepped out of the forest and said, "Hello, Prince, please don't shoot me!" Jack laughed when he heard a talking fox. "Now why," he said, "would I shoot such a fine-looking creature as yourself? And besides, I don't have a gun. But I do have some food, if you'd care to join me for a bite." The fox was happy to do so. Jack opened the pack his mother had given him and found, to his surprise, a box labelled "fox food." He also found a cheesecake. She must have made it without him noticing.

"I believe," said the fox, "that you are on a quest."

"Yes," said Jack. "I'm off to find the golden bird that stole my father's golden apples."

The fox looked worried. "This is no easy task you're after undertaking. There will be many dangers. I will try to help. Listen carefully. At the end of the road is a town, and in that town is a brightly lit, loud hotel. Walk by it. It's a fun place to visit but a hard place to leave. Go to the quiet little place at the edge of town. Then meet me in the morning. It's dangerous for me to get too close to humans. Now hop on my tail and I'll take you there."

Jack was surprised by this. How could he fit on a fox's tail? But he jumped on to the tail and the fox took off.

Jack gave a whoop and a holler. It was just like what the snail said when it rode on the turtle's back: WHEEEEEEEEE!!!!!!!



Over and under, around and through,
how can I tell you how fast they flew?



They got to the town, the fox left him at the outskirts, and Jack walked right by the fancy hotel with the bright lights and loud music, and kept walking until he reached a modest little place at the edge of town. It was cheap and cheerful, and the landlady brought him soup and they told stories until it was bedtime. The very next morning, Jack thanked her, paid her, and set out for the forest and there was the fox.



"Now comes the hard part," said the fox. "The golden bird belongs to the king of the next kingdom over. It is well guarded, and the penalty for trying to steal it is certain death. Are you sure you want to try?"

"Oh yes," said Jack. "I promised my father I'd bring it back."

"Well, here's what you have to do. Go in and offer your services in the royal aviary. After a while, the golden bird will learn to trust you. At the right moment, take it, put in the wooden cage near its perch, and hightail it out of there. Do not take the golden cage. Do. Not. Take. The. Golden. Cage. If you do, you'll die. I will wait for you here in the forest."

He hopped on the fox's tail and they flew like the wind.



Over and under, around and through,





how can I tell you how fast they flew?



Jack presented himself at the palace employment office as an aviary assistant. He was hired on right away. He liked to play his flute for the birds, and listen as they sang to him. All the birds liked him, even the golden bird. One day when he was working there alone, he picked up the golden bird and was about to put it in the wooden cage next to its roost. But then he noticed a golden cage, and he thought: gold goes with gold. So he reached for the golden cage and the moment he touched it, the bird gave a great screechy squawk of joy.



The guards hurried in, arrested Jack, and brought him to the king. "You will die in the morning, you bird thief!" said the king. Jack spent the night in the dungeon and in the morning he was brought out to be killed. Three. Two. One. Ready. Aim. "Wait," said the queen. "My husband, why not spare the life of this young man on condition he bring you the black mare with the golden mane, fastest horse in the world? It belongs to the next king over, and you've always wanted it."

The king agreed, and Jack was freed. He ran out to the forest and met the fox.

"You don't seem to have a golden bird," said the fox.

"Indeed I don't," said Jack. "I got caught when I tried to take the golden cage. And now I have to steal the black mare with the golden mane, swiftest horse in the world, and if I don't, I'll die."





The fox shook its head. "Well, I'll help you one more time, but only if you promise to do exactly what I tell you." Jack promised and got on the fox's tail.

A child's legs, wearing black pants and white sneakers with red socks, stick out from a large, textured red bag. The bag is floating in a bright blue sky filled with white birds that have red beaks. The scene is depicted in a childlike, expressive painting style.

Over and under, around and through,
how can I tell you how fast they flew?



When they got to the next kingdom over, the fox said, "This is as far as I can go. Go there and get a job as a stablehand. When you have a chance, take the black mare with the golden mane. Take the old halter next to her stall. If you take the shining, exquisite, golden halter, you'll die."





Jack promised to do everything the fox advised. He walked to the palace, got a job as a stablehand, and all the horses just loved him. He always brought apples for them, and even the black mare with the golden mane grew to trust him. One day, when he was there alone, he began to lead her out of her stall. He was about to take the old halter hanging there, when he saw a golden halter. "Gold goes with gold," he thought to himself, and he forgot his promise to the fox. The moment he touched the golden halter, the black mare with the golden mane gave a loud whinny of delight. The guards rushed in, arrested Jack, and dragged him before the king. "You no-good horse thief," screamed the king. "Tomorrow you'll die."



Jack was thrown into the dungeon. In the morning, he was brought out to be executed. Three. Two. One. Ready. Aim. "Wait," called the king's sister. "I say we let him live if he promises to go bring you the Princess Lucient, with the shining eyes, kindest eyes in the world. She lives in the next kingdom over, and you've always wanted to look into her golden eyes." The king agreed, and Jack was freed.



He ran out to meet the fox. "I don't believe I see a horse with you," said the fox. "No," admitted Jack. "I got caught when I took the golden halter. And now I have to go steal a girl—the Princess Lucient—or this king will kill me."

"Jack," said the fox. "You're not very good at following directions."

"No," said Jack. "Though I can follow recipes pretty well."

"Well, I'll help you one more time. One. More. Time. But this next task is the hardest of all. Hop on my tail."

Jack got on the fox's tail.

Over and under, around and through,



how can I tell you how fast they flew?



When they reached the outskirts of the next kingdom over, the fox said: "You have to get a job in the palace, maybe as a cook. When you're alone with the Princess Lucient, you have to kiss her. If you do, she'll have to do anything you want. Bring her straight to me, and don't let her say good-bye to her parents or that will be the end of your life and the end of this story."



Jack came to the palace and got a job in the kitchen. He was such an excellent cook, everybody in the palace noticed how good the food was. The Princess Lucient sometimes asked him to serve her himself, and whenever that happened Jack was full of joy. He loved to look at her shining eyes, kindest eyes in the world. They were green with gold flecks. And one day he summoned up all of his courage and came up to her room. She had a sign on the door that said: **KNOCK RESOLUTELY.** So he took a deep breath and knocked as resolutely as he could with his heart hammering away in his chest. She opened the door. He said, "I made you some cheesecake." She took it. "Thanks," she said, and began to close the door. Then he said, "Can we talk?"

"If you have something to say," she said, "say it." But it came out friendlier than it sounds.

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“Princess Lucient, I’m Jack,” he said, “and I’m really a prince and not a cook, I mean, I’m a cook, too, and I cook stuff with my mother, she taught me how to make this cheesecake, and I have a friend who’s a fox, and I steal gold things for old kings, and the fox told me I have to kiss you and that will make you follow me, and you’re not supposed to say goodbye to your parents because if you do I’ll get arrested and they’ll chop off my head, and I may be a bird thief and I may be a horse thief but I’m not a girl thief, so I’ve come to say I love you but I have to go get killed by the king from the next kingdom over because I just can’t kiss you the way the fox said I needed to so I hope you enjoy the cheesecake and I wish we could be together but anyway I’d rather be dead if we can’t.”

He said it all in one breath, then he dropped his eyes and just looked at the floor.



She reached out her hands and pulled him into her room. She closed the door. Then she kissed him, so now he had to do whatever she said. And they had a lovely evening together. Very early the next morning, she said, "There's no need for me to say goodbye to my parents. I'll just leave a note. And call me Lucy." And so the two of them left the palace early in the morning, and came to the forest, and there was the fox waiting for them, and they were full of joy. The fox kept leaping around Princess Lucy, and then Lucy and Jack got on the fox's tail.





Over and under, around and through,
how can I tell you how fast they flew?



They travelled back to the next kingdom over, and the fox said, "Here's what you need to do. Lucy, ask the king if you can canter the black mare with the golden mane. Jack, you wait by the gate. After riding once around the courtyard, gallop by, grab Jack, and meet us by the forest."

They got to the palace, and the king was dazzled by Princess Lucient's green eyes flecked with gold, kindest eyes in the world. The black mare with the golden mane was led out with her golden halter, and Lucy asked to go for a ride. Halfway around the palace courtyard, she and the mare began to race towards the gate, Jack leapt on and held her from behind, and the king just watched them go.







Now they rode together, Lucy in front, Jack behind, and the fox scampered ahead and around them as they went. They came to the next kingdom over and the fox explained what to do. "Hand over the black mare with the golden mane, but when you get the golden bird in the golden cage, jump back on the horse and make for the gate. No one can catch you on that horse."

So it was said and so it was done, and now they all made for home: the fox, the princess, the prince, the horse, and the bird. They came to the town that was just down the road from Jack's parents' kingdom, and the fox said, "I have to leave you soon. I have two more pieces of advice. In the town, avoid crowds and keep to yourselves. And stay awake in the forest." The fox left them. As they came to the town Lucy wasn't smiling as much, the bird didn't sing, and the black mare with the golden mane lowered her head as she walked.



They came to the little inn where Jack had stayed before, and had a nice supper with the old woman who ran the place. Jack wanted to take a little walk, so he left them there. He heard sounds and shouts and came to a crowd of people in the town square. Instead of going back to Lucy, he turned to see what was going on. The crowd had gathered around two men, and were about to drive them out of town. He asked why, and the people said that the two men were terrible thieves and bullies and had done violence to many of the townspeople.



He stepped closer.

Then he saw that the men were his own two brothers. Jack came to the people and asked what would happen if he paid back all the money his brothers had stolen, and the townspeople said they'd be allowed to go free if he did. So Jack paid the debts and freed his brothers from the mob. He was so happy to see his brothers again, and he led them back to the little inn so they could meet Lucy.





The next day they all travelled together. They came to the forest, but the fox was nowhere to be found. They were one day away from their mother and father when they decided to make camp. Lucy and Jack shared a tent, and they were so tired that they forgot the fox's advice. They couldn't stay awake, and so they fell asleep in each other's arms. The horse and the bird also slept a very deep sleep. Meanwhile, the two brothers found a pit not far away. It was so deep you could throw a stone into it and not hear when the stone landed. They came into the tent where Jack and Lucy were sleeping, lifted Jack up without waking Lucy or Jack, and carried him to the pit. Then they threw him in. They never even heard him hit the ground at the bottom. So that was the end of Jack. But it's not the end of my story.

In the morning Lucy turned to kiss him but he wasn't there. The brothers came running over and said that in the middle of the night they'd heard a beast howl and they'd seen Jack run into the forest, and he never came back. Lucy, the bird, and the horse became very quiet. They searched for Jack but couldn't find him, so they left that sad place and came to the palace. The brothers were given heroes' welcomes. But the golden bird looked drab and faded and wouldn't sing. The black mare with the golden mane just stared at the ground and wouldn't eat. And when the queen asked Lucy to tell her story she just shook her head silently.

The background is a dark, textured illustration of a deep pit. The walls of the pit are dark brown and black, with some lighter patches. At the top of the pit, a pair of pointy ears and the face of a fox are visible. The fox's face is small and red. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, circular pond with blue water and green foliage around it. The overall style is painterly and somewhat abstract.

Back in the pit, Jack woke up. He had fallen into deep mud, and hadn't broken any bones. But when he tried to crawl out, the sides of the pit kept crumbling so he couldn't climb. Way up at the top, he saw a pair of pointy ears, then the face of the little red fox. "Hey, Jack," called the fox. "Hey, Fox!" called Jack. "I don't think I can get out." "No," said the fox, "that's a deep pit you're in." "Would you help me?" "I will, but you must promise to do what I ask one day, even if it's the hardest thing you've ever done." Jack promised. The fox came down easily, Jack grabbed its tail, and up and up and up they went until they came out of the pit to the ground above.



And at that moment, the golden bird began to sing again, and the horse lifted its head and shook its golden mane, and Lucy's eyes—kindest eyes in the world—began to shine again, and she told the queen everything.

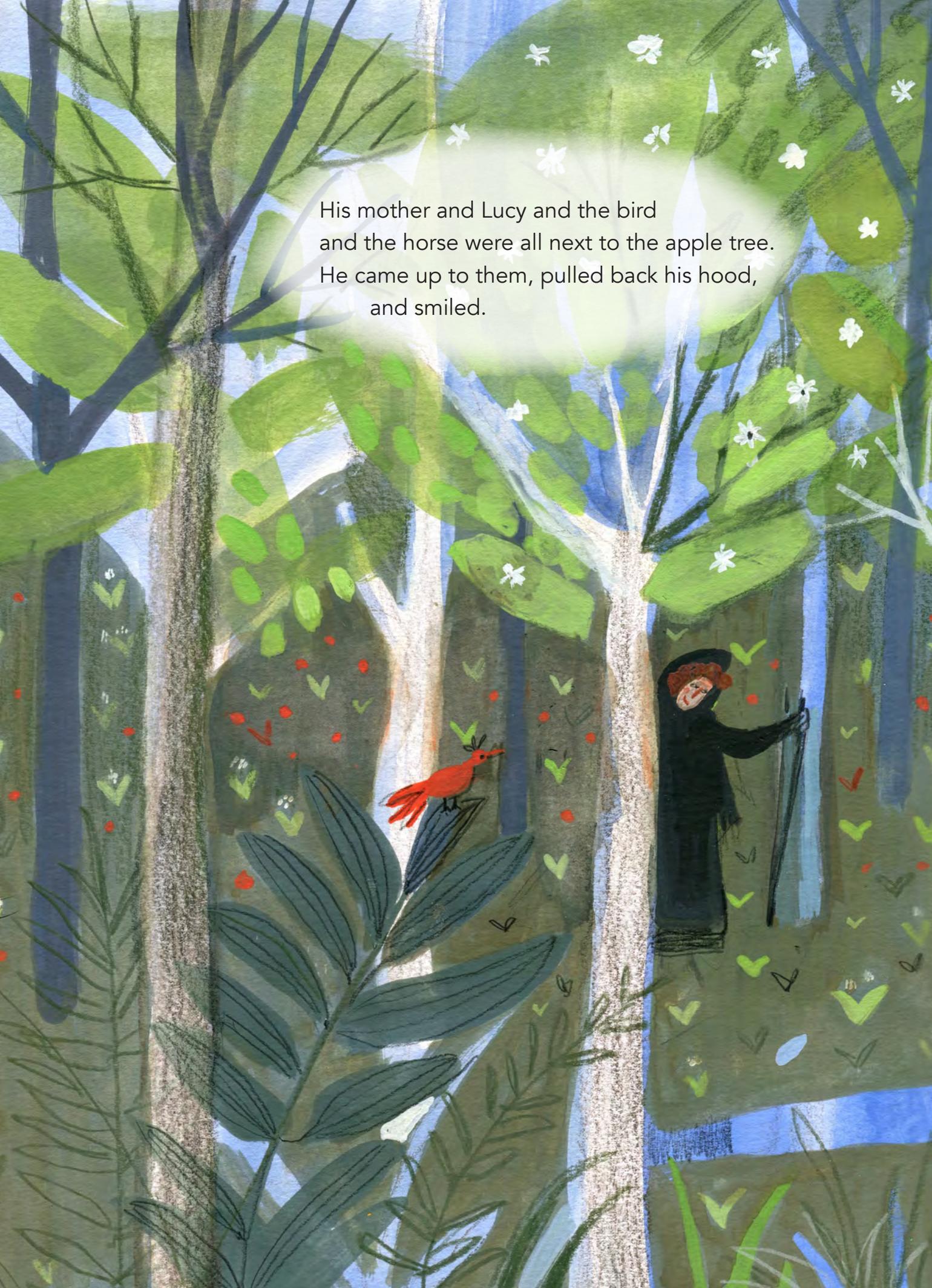
Jack was covered in mud, so the fox led him to a stream and he washed himself and his clothes. When he turned to thank it, the fox had disappeared. Jack started walking back towards home. He met an old beggarman in the forest and asked if he'd trade clothes with him. At first, the poor traveller thought he was being made fun of, but Jack said, no, he just needed a good disguise. "When you're dressed as me, be sure to leave this country quickly to stay out of danger," he told the beggarman. So the trade was made, and you can be sure Jack gave him a good amount of money as well. The poor man ran off and Jack, dressed as a wandering beggar, continued on his way to the palace.



His brothers had posted guards everywhere on the slim chance Jack had survived, but no one could recognize this drab fellow shuffling along in shabby pants and a torn shirt.

He came to the palace, slipped through the gate, and went straight to the garden.





His mother and Lucy and the bird
and the horse were all next to the apple tree.
He came up to them, pulled back his hood,
and smiled.



They recognized Jack in the beggarman's rags. Lucy threw her arms around him, then the queen did the same. The bird flew to the top of the tree. The black mare with the golden mane galloped around them. They all went to see the king and Jack told his story. The brothers tried to slink away but they were caught. Some people said they should be tossed into that pit in the forest, but Jack said there was no need to kill them though it would be nice if they left for a while. So the brothers ran away so fast they ran right out of my story. As for Jack and Lucy, their days were filled with delight and joy.

One day Jack was walking by himself and who should he meet but the little red fox. "Hey, Fox," he said. "Thank you for all you did." "I've come back so you can do me a favour," said the fox. "I'll do anything you ask," said Jack. "Then please kill me." "That is something I can never do. I love you!" "You promised to do whatever I ask, even if it's the hardest thing in the world. And after you kill me, cut off my paws and put them on top of me. Jack, you promised." And so Jack did as the fox asked, but he was weeping as he did it. He was crying so much he barely noticed when someone put a hand on his shoulder. Finally, he looked up and saw a young man standing next to him. "Thank you, Jack," said the young man. "I'm the fox. I'm Lucy's brother. I like to become animals but I always need help changing back to human. I'm glad we'll be brothers. Give my love to Lucy." And the young man walked away smiling. He was already dreaming of what he'd turn into next. It might be nice to be a hawk. Or a mouse. Or a salmon.



As for the king and queen, they still loved each other. So one night the queen came to the king with a small chest. He opened it. Inside were the four golden apples, and they were still shining.



AFTERWORD

My telling of this wondertale is adapted from a telling by Joe Neil MacNeil in Gaelic, translated by John Shaw, and published in a wonderful book about Cape Breton storytelling titled *Tales Until Dawn*. Joe Neil and John came from Big Pond, Nova Scotia, to the Toronto Storytelling Festival many years ago, and I had the privilege of listening to Joe Neil tell his beloved folktales. He called this one "The Golden Bird." He used to say, "What the ear does not hear cannot move the heart." He believed strongly, as I do, in the need to tell these stories by word-of-mouth so they can then become words-of-heart.

If you enjoy the 398.2 section of the library—Folk and Fairytales—as much as I do, you'll recognize this story as part of a long tradition of quest stories told around the world. There are versions of the golden apples story—sometimes known as the "Search for the Golden Bird"—stretching back to Greek mythology, and almost every storytelling tradition on earth has stories that speak of the search for an impossible (almost) treasure, and for the love and justice that such a search can yield. There are always extremely high stakes in folktales, and this one is no different. As a storyteller who loves animals (I have a lovely dog named Jewelz), it is hard to accept the fact that the wonderful, ever-helpful, shape-shifting fox in my story asks Jack to kill it near the end of the tale. Jack, heartbroken but obedient (for once), fulfills the fox's wish and so enables it to regain human form. The deeper truth of this death is that it enables transformation. The fox becomes Jack's brother-in-law and strolls off to his next animal incarnation. Please remember, dear reader, that folktales use drastic means to communicate the intense drama of human life. If you make them too nicey-nicey, they lose some of their startling power.

Joe Neil was careful to attribute his stories to the tellers he heard them from, and in the case of "The Golden Bird," John Shaw notes that Joe Neil heard it from a Gaelic-speaking teller named Hector MacMullin. It was undoubtedly one of the long, intricate wondertales that people enjoyed hearing on long winter nights: "Generally the long tales were the ones that most pleased people. It did not matter whether it was a man or a woman who was a good storyteller. When she or he began, the tale was so enjoyable and would please you so well as it progressed that you would find yourself hoping that it would not end for a long time, that there would be a great amount of working around it so that

the storyteller could make it very, very long become he arrived at the end of the tale.” (from *Tales Until Dawn: The World of a Cape Breton Gaelic Story-Teller*, Joe Neil MacNeil, translated and edited by John Shaw, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 1987). You can tell this kind of storytelling and story-listening happened in the days before instant downloads, rush hours, and social media!

I appreciate you reading this story and would also encourage you to try reading it aloud—or telling it—to someone you love, teach, work with; or someone who just really needs to hear a tale of quests, romance, magic, danger, and triumph. If you are bringing folktales into your classroom, may I suggest that you introduce the time-honoured custom of the “talking stick.” It can be anything at all; I once knew a teacher who tied a ribbon on a hockey stick and that was their storytelling stick. The idea is that the person who holds the talking stick has the power to share their stories. It’s a symbol of community, and reminds both teller and listeners that a story can only live when people are ready to hear and remember it.

And may you find your own golden apples when the time comes for your own quests!

DAN YASHINSKY, Toronto, January 2023





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