

The Tortoise & The Hare



Thomas Foster

The Tortoise & The Hare ii
Even racier than before

As Told By Thomas Foster

Illustrated By Chris Walker



The Tortoise & The Hare

Chapter 1



*A*nd so you see, to begin you must understand that all animals are friends or at least frienemies and that, though many compete for food, and some are food for others, it's all in general good fun and healthy competition.

Such interactions and good natured ribbing are at the heart of our story today as we come upon a lovely little forest glade and a chance meeting between old friends hare and tortoise.

It was early on a fine clear morning when Bixby, our hare in this story, who had already been up and busy for hours, noticed Oswald tortoise slowly climbing from his burrow. Bixby the hare who like all his kind, loved pulling the leg of any and all good creatures here on God's green earth nearly as much as running and eating, paused in his breakfast of sweet clover and addressed his slow moving "and slow witted" Hare added laughing to himself, neighbor

"Hey ho what'ya know?" Called Bixby fast & snappy which was his way. "Yer finally up and moving eh?"

Oswald the tortoise rolled his eyes to the bright blue above. He had heard all the jokes endured the taunts of the faster moving creatures, which of course were nearly all and did so with a good natured gruffness.



After all, Oswald had seen at least three generations of other animals come and go, why with hares...“Maybe more” Oswald grumbled to himself stretched out his rear left leg working out the early morning kinks. “hard to keep track.”

As thinking the thought brought more hares, one of Bixby’s little siblings or cousins or near cousins went zipping underneath his lifted leg. As lowered his leg he felt the soft fuzz of a second little hare on his underside as it gave chase.

“Hmphh! Too many fer one little glade” Oswald thought, ignored the giggles and sniffed the air to get a direction on any nearby worms or grubs.

“Have a bite of clover Gramps!” Bixby called.

He knew for a fact that young Bixby here was the fourth male of his family lineage since they had settled in the hollow.

“Yea Grandpa!” the two little ones echoed

“Might put some pep in your step.”

“Pep!” said one little hare.

“Step!” giggled the other.

Oswald had called this tiny meadow home through forty springs. Bixby’s grandpa, no, Oswald reminded himself great grandpa, had moved here twelve blossoming’s ago.

Oswald himself had just been coming into middle age when Basil, that had been Bixby’s great granddads name, moved his young family into the dale.

It had been a while since he thought of that boisterous hare

Oswald started forward. He tasted breakfast just ahead.

Old Basil, well young Basil then, had been quite a brash and bold little fella. Oswald still remembered him with something close to friendship. Or maybe it was just the distance between the springs since his passing.

“Where ya goin Chuckles!” Bixby called from behind.

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By now the glade's inhabitants were all buzzing, swooping, slithering, and busying themselves with their specific mornings needs.

He nodded morning to the toads, watched Mr. Beaver come waddling up from the pond and begin his morning calisthenics. Poor old fella hadn't been the same since losing the Mrs.

Oswald could smell Mother Deer and her fawns, rare visitors and delightful guests, on the edge of the meadow. He let none of it affect or deter him.

There are lessons every tortoise learns from the day he's born, they become the foundation of tortoise life. "Slow and steady wins the race." Companion to that other Tortoise favorite "Keep your nose on the path and you will get to your place." Oh there were more, "Rain off my shell.", "Hard rain easy eats." "Better in the shell than in the belly." "Oldest is wisest." Tortoises were great with sayings.

"C'mon Yakkity Yak won't ya talk back?" Bixby jibed jumping circles around Oswald as he plodded along. "Yak back!" called the moppets trailing from behind.

Oswald decided that Bixby was a lot like his great grandfather, and becoming enough of an annoyance that he was contemplating shelling up. "Just till they go" he thought to himself.

It was Basil who had ended up challenging him to that race all those years ago. Oswald had won that race amazingly enough, sticking by the basic tortoise principles.

Many of the other Glade's inhabitants. Mr. & Mrs. Beaver, The Muskrat twins, the whole of the Gopher clan, the crazy Squirrels who live in the trees but somehow get a say in what happens in the glade, well they were all distant relatives so their support of the newcomer hares was understandable.

All the worms, fat grubs, beetles and the like, well truth be told Oswald enjoyed a good fat grub or beetle for any meal so he could see why they backed ol Basil and his kin.

But there were plenty of other animals that were either to fast for him to eat, like say dragonflies, or too big like Ms. Deer's quite likely delicious darlings. No, they sided with the hares.

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Even most of the birds, crows, sparrows' swifts and robins all sided with Basil the Hare.

Hare's were just more social and vibrant creatures, flashy and full of good time humor.

Bixby stopped of sudden and reared on his hinds directly in front of Oswald who found himself unable to stop before he plowed head first into Bixby's fuzzy belly.



“Aren’t you the one who beat my Great Grandpa?”

Oswald had enough. He shelled up. Bixby leaned over peering into the shell. Oswald could feel the two little ones sniffing at his hinds.

“Sh-a-ure you are. Yer the one all right,”

“It’s him.” Agreed one little hare “I think it’s him too.” Giggled the other.

“Now let’s see what was yer name again?” Bixby queried

“Harrumph!” Oswald snorted. The young upstart knew full and well what his name was.

“No, no that’s not it.”

“It’s Grumpkins!” offered one little funny.

“It’s Snortagus” called out its twin.

“No, no, be serious you two. Don’t tease ol’ gramps here.” Bixby sat back and patted the top of Oswald’s shell. “Why when he was young he was a real champ, faster than great granda Basil.”

“Get outta town!”

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“Quit pullin’ our lucky foot!”

Oswald ignored their senseless banter. Hare’s could talk like this all day. His only hope was that they would get bored and move on to chasing butterflies or other such nonsense.

Of course what Bixby said was true, not that he’d been faster, but that he had indeed somehow won the race that day. He never thought about it much. To Oswald it was just natural that slow and steady would win the race. It did. He won. End of story.

He didn’t hold it against the hares lived lives of glib flashiness, that though they moved fast and talked a lot, they said nothing and did even less. It was just their way, the hare way. Oh sure they’d been in this meadow for over ten years now, but they would move on in due time. Unable to control their basest impulses they would over breed, over eat, their clan will collapse and those hares left will be forced to move on.

Oswald was a tortoise through and through. Be it hare or bear or flood or famine, it was all just rain off his shell, slow and steady, a tortoise survived it all.

“How bout it Gramps fancy a foot race to the trees and back?” Bixby made a quick double step with his hinds as if to beat feet toward the distant forest edge.

“Aww c’mon Bixby” called the young’uns “This is boring let’s do something else”

It was a grand moment when he won that race. He thought that at least maybe tortoises would get respect afterwards even if he didn’t. For a brief glimmer of a moment he thought that might happen. But nothing changed. It was considered a lucky fluke that’s all. Oswald didn’t argue.

“Yea yer right fluffbits lets leave the poor old thing alone. Might be he’s crawling off to die.”

“Eww do ya think so?”

“How old is he anyway?”

“Shows what you know Young’uns I’m not even middle age!” Oswald grumbled to himself as he heard them hopping away. Then couldn’t help add. “Dying indeed. Harrumph!”

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It wasn't long before blessed quiet returned to his corner of the glade. He poked his legs out first, then his head and finally, lifting himself off the ground, his stubby little tail.

"Now about that breakfast." He said to his tail. It wagged in agreement.



Chapter 2



Oswald had spent a good day munching his way through a rotting stump full of fat juicy squishies. He was in a good mood warm from the sun, now setting, and found himself humming a little tune as he strolled back to his burrow.

That quickly faded as he heard giggles coming from all around the shrubs and grasses by the hole to his home as he approached. Bixby sat by the hole saluting good naturedly as he saw Oswald approaching.

“Hey there Gramps, look at ya go! Why your moving right along at good ol clip.” A number of little hare’s hopped, scurried, bumped out of hiding giggling, pushing, shoving, little dust-ups starting here and there

“Oh great you brought the kids.” Oswald’s humming died with his good mood.

One little munchkin sniffed right up to Oswald’s neck. “Oooh he is really old look at those saggy wrinkles.” “Ewww.” Came the reply from all the flufflings gathered around his shell.

“Now kids give the old timer some room.” Bixby said all concern and compassion.

“Besides he may snap out and eat one of ya!” Came a sharp call from above.

“Snappers love little bunny bites,” A second voice added.

The liitle hares hesitated some took a step back.

“More friends come to call” Thought Oswald as he strained his neck to look skyward, though he had no need to, he knew those harsh caws. But yes a couple crows had come to join the fun. “Why not.” Thought Oswald “The more the merrier.”

“Don’t worry bout those crows’ kids” Bixby assured the little ones “Oswald could never catch ya.” He reached out a fore paw and patted Oswald on the head. “He may have been fast when he was a young tortoise but those days are long gone.”

Raucous caws of laughter rang out across the glade, answered from a far by Crows who joined the laughter without knowing why. “Flock brains! Thought Oswald.

“He warn’t no faster when he was young.” Laughed the first crow.

“Snapper is always that slow.” Added his friend. “Snappers...”

“I’m no more a snapper than you are an eagle” Oswald said to no one in particular. No one noticed anyway.

“I’m going to go in my burrow now if it’s all the same to you.” They paid no more attention to that than his first statement.

“...Is as slow as the grass grow.” The second crow finished in a cawfaw of laughter, joined by his friend. All the little hares started laughing. Bixby broke into snickers defying the gentle concern he had previously shown. Oswald himself slowly joined in the laughter thinking “Yea, that’s us tortoise’s. Painters, Muddies and Snappers too. Slower than the sun in the sky.”

From across the dale came the joined laughter of a flock of crows heading toward, not wanting to miss the commotion. Oswald could smell and hear other animals and bugs coming to investigate. “Darn flock brains.” Oswald grumbled to himself. Nothing to do now but shell up.

“What’s all this hullabaloo?” Mr. Beaver, as always all business, waddled up and demanded answers.

“This ain’t none o yer beeswax” from inside his shell Oswald could not see the speaker but knew another hare when he heard one. “Move along Slappy.”

“Yea I think yer damns done sprung a leak.” This from one of the crows.

“Now see here...” Mr. Beaver began in a bluster.

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“Cool yer scent glands meadow mate we’re jes goofing on old Oswald here.” This was Bixby whose rear paws stood between Oswald and the cool, quiet of his burrow.

“He beat our great great grandpa in a race?” “But he’s so slow now?” “How’d he do that Mr. Beaver?” the little hares were all talking at once hopping around kicking up dust causing Oswald to sneeze but in the excitement no one noticed. “Yea tell us Mr. Beaver” Yea how’d he do it? How’d he do it?”

“Kids, kids!” Bixby tried to calm everyone down.

“Everybody knows the Snapper cheated.” The first crow called from above.

“That ain’t what happened you feather brain the Hare hurt his leg.” His branch mate explained.

“In a hole dug by the turtle.” This from one of the new crows settling in the tree above his flock friends. An unruly boisterous argument ensued as each of the crows took a side. Mr. Beaver never one for time wasted waddled over to the tree and slapped the trunk firmly once with his sturdy tail. “Faa” he yelled and the crows insulted and acting as if they were leaving on their own took wing mocking their inability to fly and hurling insults that the young hares shouldn’t hear.

“Flock Brains!” Mr. Beaver said in good riddance.

Oswald contemplated coming out of his shell and pushing through Bixby but, while he and Mr. Beaver were almost close, Mr. Beaver thought of himself as the glades monitor and did not tolerate outright rudeness. “Or whatever he perceives as rudeness.” Oswald snorted to himself. “Furry fat bellied busybody.” That got Oswald laughing. To himself only. He could dish it out as good as anyone. But it wouldn’t do to say such things to his only near friend in the glade.

“C’mon Mr. Beaver!”

“Pleeeeeease!”

“Leave Mr. Beaver here alone kids and I’ll tell ya the whole story.”

“Harrumph!” Oswald snorted from inside his shell. “You weren’t even born yet, Skitters.”

“Whoa he speaks.” Laughed Bixby.

“Oh don’t mind him little ones he’s all snark and no snap.” Mr. Beaver assured the young hares.

“So what’s the story then Gramps?” Bixby asked poking his head and staring into the shadowed face of Oswald still tucked well inside his shell. “Let the Beaver tell it.” Oswald grunted, it was getting late and his regular renowned patience and good natured were fading as fast as the light.

“C’mon Mr. Beaver.” One little hare started the call, but Oswald was surprised to hear a variety of other animals take up the call, sparrows, jays, the field mice, insects and grubs. It seemed a whole crowd had gathered.

“Young Bixby if you wouldn’t mind lending me your paw” Oswald Heard Mr. Beaver ask.

He felt the full weight of Mr. Beaver as he clambered onto his shell. For Oswald that was the final straw. He believed he’d go inside now. He stuck out his feet, planted and started to lift before he’d even poked his head fully out of his shell.

“So you see everyone the story goes...uh...Oswald?”

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“You don’t need me for this part.” Craning his neck he saw indeed the clearing around his door was filled with a variety of God’s good creatures.

“Yea Gramps don’t rush off...” Bixby laughed putting a forepaw of Oswald’s shell. Oswald saw, hare’s of every age and size, chipmunks, the squirrels who lived in the trees but constantly stuck their noses in every medowbodies business. Sparrows, swifts and jays, birds he recognized and temporary drop ins. Insects, beetles and grubs of every description. “Or is it past yer bedtime?”

The gathered erupted in squawks and chirps, hoots, clicks and buzzes, the young hairs squealed rolled on the ground holding their furry bellies, or stood on one hind thumping the other in hilarity.

“Past yer bedtime he says” screamed one of the jays. Trust a jay to try and horn in on another creature’s good joke.

“Now now,” Scolded Mr. Beaver “Let’s all remember the Code of the Glade.”

“Code of the Glade my stubby tail” Thought Oswald. “It was code of the glade that got me in that last darn race!” The whole glade became momentarily silent and Oswald realized he had said all that aloud. Quite a loud. “Harrumph!”

“Race?” Said the same mouthy jay and his flock mates answered. “Race.” All the small animals joined the call, as competition is a big thing among animals. Even the grubs were raising the call for a big “race.”

“Ahh challengin’ me eh?” Bixby asked raising his forepaws. “Out to get our family again eh?” He swiped his right forepaw across his nose, danced away with a one two jab.

“Thinkin’ ya beat my great granddad and that you can beat me eh?”

“Everybody stay calm!” Worried Mr. Beaver. “I will facilitate this race!”

“Don’t be an idiot!” Oswald laughed

“Oh so now I’m an idiot eh?” Bixby danced forward.

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How dare you talk to me like that” Mr. Beaver, sure Oswald had been talking to him was certainly offended and now contemplating siding with Bixby and the hare’s in this whole sportafitastic event.

“Everyone heard him! I got witnesses’ he challenged me to a race.”

“Race! Race! Race!”

“Oh goodness I do believe Code of the Glade says we have a race.” Mr. Beaver felt this was a little of a sudden and such things needed to be done to accepted standards. “The race will commence at dawn tomorrow.”

“Race! Race! Race!”

Oswald retreated back into his shell. “I can’t believe this is happening again”

“Race! Race!”



Chapter 3



“*R*ace! Race!”

Deep inside his burrow, climbing from his nest the next morning Oswald could already hear the animals gathered above. He still struggled to understand how he had ended up back in this position after all these years.

Feeling a little perturbed, he went through his morning rituals anyway. It wouldn't do to let all this commotion put him off his routine.

He knew every glade neighbor would be waiting above, night timers like the raccoons, that skunk, and old “Prickly” was sure to be lingering. Oswald and that porcupine never did get along. Oswald believed it was because he was the one local who Prickly couldn't bully and push around. That got Oswald chuckling, remembering all the times that grumpily porcupine and he had crossed paths.

“Race! Race!”

He tottled over to the dew sink pulled the stop stone and fresh water ran into the shallow depression. Oswald stuck the stop stone back in place and gave it a good turn to make sure it was back in tight.

He plunged his sleep wrinkled face into the bracingly cold water. “Brrrb!” He splashed his leathery head back and forth. This was the best way for a tortoise to start his day. It kept the skin young and refreshed and woke up his senses. “Brrrbrrrbrrb!” the burbling noise he did just for fun.

He took a couple good drinks, waddled back over and straightened his nest.

“Race! Race!” It wouldn’t do to leave these things undone, simply because others wished him to hurry to meet their needs.

Most animals did things very rashly, haphazardly, rushing here and there, eating their way through all their favorite food stuffs before the season ends, mating without thought of consequences to the wider glade. Not all but most.

Though Mr. Beaver led an orderly life, kept a responsible and well-disciplined brood, even the careful and methodical beavers did things at what any tortoise would consider a rash pace. Like many animals they committed a lot of physical energy and resources that seemed unnecessary for survival.

“Race! Race!”

He stepped back and gave his nest a once over, smoothed a small wrinkle in an over leaf then satisfied gave over to the idea of heading up. “Race my stubby tail.” He grumbled.

There was some loose pebbling at his tunnel base so he paused to sweep it into a small pile on the side. “I’ll get to you later.” He told the little pile of pebbles and loose dirt. “Race! Race!” Oswald sighed looking up the tunnel.

“Hold on?” He suddenly wondered if he had put the stop stone back in place. “Wouldn’t do to...” He began to say to himself when Mr. Beaver’s voice came echoing down his entry tunnel.

“Oswald? Oswald we’re all waiting!”

Oswald replied, quietly though “Alright! Alright! Keep your fur n feathers on.” He could just strain his neck enough to see that he had put the stop stone back. But had he tightened it. He really should go back and check.

“Oswald the Tortoise!” Mr. Beaver bellowed. “We are all waiting!” dirt rained down from the tunnel ceiling and it sounded like, along with the chant, a thousand heavy feet began to stomp in time. “Race! Race!” Now dust began to drift down from the ceiling in his room. “Race! Race!”

“This is going to take me hours to clean.” Oswald thought. “But maybe that will give me a chance to redecorate.”

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“Do I need to send someone down there?”

“Harrumph!” Oswald snorted and started up the tunnel. At least the last race had started at a decent hour. Furbies didn’t need to warm up in the sun to really get going. Mr. Beaver knew that so Oswald couldn’t see what all the hurry was for.



Besides all that Oswald hadn’t even agreed to this nonsense yet. Did he really even want to race again? The first race had been his chance to show the Glade what a Tortoise could do. But he’d never really expected to win. However, when he saw how many of his fellow meadow mates had sided with the new upstart hares, the destructive over breeding party pests, he had felt insulted and determined to give it his best shot.

He had been younger then and had a lot of useless pride. He often times questioned whether he wouldn’t have been happier if he had just moved all those seasons ago.

“Race! Race!”

It had been pride alone that kept him going during that long day and night so long ago. Pride, his desire to show the other animals that his way, the tortoise way had its merits, and though they could mock him and his kind all they wanted slow, deliberate and steady application of will against all odds was really the best way to approach the difficulties of survival in a brutal unforgiving world.

Halfway up the tunnel he was having difficulty navigating the amount of rubble piling up. The noise was growing exponentially and Oswald was glad that even in the best of times a tortoise’s hearing was one of his weakest senses. Though the vibrations from the stomping

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were another story. Traveling through his footpads and being transmitted directly to his brain it was setting his nerves on edge.

Oswald could now see Mr. Beaver's fat head wedged into the opening of his tunnel. Mr. Beaver for his part saw Oswald coming and plopped his head out, further deteriorating the entrance to his home. "No respect." Oswald mumbled.

And that if he had to face it was the worst thing about the last race.

He had crossed the finish line first, but Basil the hare, in the end got all the glade's love.

Oswald huffing and puffing practically fell across the finish line the spectators simply stopped cheering and started asking about what might have happened to "poor" Basil.

Within seconds the crowd was galloping, flying, hopping off to find the missing hare. A bewildered and exhausted Oswald plopped down, alone except for the turtle, snail, slug contingent; his fan base still waving their "Go Tortoise" pennants.

With Mr. Beaver's head extracted from the entrance, light and noise poured through the opening at equally annoying levels. A clod of dirt fell on his head as he clambered out of the hole. "That's right home, maybe I'll let the skunks have you this time."



Chapter 4



“*R*AaaaAAaaaccceRaa”

The noise was a rolling, vibratory roar, unintelligible mass exhaltment. The morning sun peeking low through far forest branches speared Oswald’s eyes with on brilliant beam all together causing him quite a lot of discomfort.

Mr. Beaver was patting him on the shell, not so gently steering him in towards the light, the noise. Oswald dug his heels in. “Now don’t be afraid dear friend it’s all in good fun.”

“I’m not scared paddle tail.” Oswald snarked, but he doubted Mr. Beaver, let alone anyone else could hear him. “I’m incensed.”

Compared to many creatures tortoises had poor eyesight. Oswald was no exception. And the sun just made it worse. He could taste though, tortoises could taste the same way a fuzzhead could smell, and what he could taste was undulating waves of excitement and impatience.

He could taste hares and squirrels and chipmunks, raccoons and skunks, beavers, birds and bugs galore. He tasted something else, past the excitement, past the anxiety for the race to start, and Bixby’s hubris, he tasted prickly pears.

That got Oswald’s mouthwatering. He couldn’t help it. The fruit of the prickly pear was Mmm! Mmm good! He found his jaw working and he squinted trying to follow the taste to prickly pear heaven.

“Finally got up the noive to show huh Gramps?” Oswald heard Bixby say

“He thought you weren’t gonna show.” The voice of a little hare off to his left.

“Now now...” Said Mr. Beaver ever the conciliator. And then finally the sun lifted behind the trees and as the sun spots cleared Oswald got his first look at the madness this spectacle had become.

Bixby stood at the top of a small rise at the head of the run that spanned the full length of the glade. The same path he had run all those years ago. Lining not only the little clearing, but both sides of the run leading into the sun appeared to be every inhabitant of the glade as well. Every tree branch, every bush was over loaded with birds, butterflies, bugs.

There were pennants and banners, colorful and gay. Raccoons were hawkking “Go Hare” pennants in bright garish pink. Everybody seemed to be carrying one. In fact he did not see one Tortoise item anywhere.

He did see a pile of Prickly Pear fruit piled just to the right of Bixby though and started toward them. “Oh yes, Bixby gathered those earlier” Mr. Beaver explained.

“We helped.” Called some younglings.

”Didn’t want you to have any excuses Pops.” Bixby laughed forcefully. Oswald got a good look at his opponent and wondered if he’d gotten into bad mushrooms or something. He was jittery, even for a hare and that is saying something. There was a green stain all around his mouth, and he chewed something which caused a little green spittle to form at the corner of his lips. “Go ahead and chow down I’ll give a few.” Though He said take your time Oswald noticed his lucky foot started twitching. “I mean” Bixby continued “I’ve been up been ready since before sunrise, chomping at the bit n rarin’ to go.”

Looking at his wild eyes, his stained lips and busy mouth, Oswald snorted. “You’re chomping on something alright.” Bixby spat a wad of green spittle near Oswald’s fruit. “Ahh its jes clover don’t get yer flappy skin up in a bunch.”

Oswald turned to his own delicious breakfast and took a big bite from one ripe pear. It was hard though to relax and savor all the juices running off his beak as the noise continued at a deafening level.

It was near impossible to make sense to the racket, just a mass of sound, an undulating roar. It turned Oswald’s shell into a wave transmitter. Shaking him to the very core. “Harrumph!” Oswald snorted, snatching up the last of the half eaten prickly sweet.

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He had taken the next pear up whole and was working it round to get a good chomp when Bixby clapped him on the back causing Oswald to chomp down neatly slicing the pear. The half un-chewed chunk in his mouth squirted down his throat. "So ya' ready." Bixby asked.

This was no right way to eat breakfast, leisurely pace is what was called for during the morning meal. "Hurried in Hurried out" Oswald said to himself. It wasn't an old time tortoise motto, Oswald thought it up just now, but all tortoise sayings have to come from someplace.

Anxious ingestion did not facilitate either the enjoyment or the health of the meal.

"C'mon lets go" Bixby complained "Is this how ya beat great gramps Basil, bored him to death?"

There was a small ripple in the cheers as spectators in the front caught scent of action. Many laughed at the hares jest.

"C'mon already jeez louise Slappy!" Bixby turned his pleas to Mr. Beaver.

Mr. Beaver leaned in and watched as Oswald went for another Prickly Pear. "Excuse me." Oswald tried to ignore the nosy pond paddler. He couldn't ignore however a small group of grubs waving tiny Go Hare pennants padding into his view as he gulped down the next pear.



“We hope you lose.” Yelled out one big fat white grub, rising himself up on his back hinds so Oswald could hear. “Go Bixby!” the other three yelled in unison. Oswald paid them no mind. It was obvious who the grubs would side with. He didn’t care who won this fool’s errand, he didn’t even want to race, didn’t care to be mocked. He did want breakfast. Tortoises loved a good breakfast. He eyed the remaining four pears, the grubs waved their pennants, and the fat white one pointed his right forelegs directly at Oswald.

“We hope Bixby kicks your tai...”

Oswald couldn’t think of a good response with his mouth full of juicy grub. The other three slinked away. Oswald did not give chase. He gobbled the bottom bite of white grub left and followed it up with a bite of pear. Sweet and savory, Oswald always liked that combination.

“You bout done or do you need to eat more of my fans” Bixby kicked one of the three remaining prickly pears and it rolled off down the hill. “That *was* quite uncalled for Oswald.” Mr. Beaver added. “How bout kicking my breakfast?” Oswald thought, then grumphed aloud, “So is this whole show!”

But no one paid attention to him. He beaked another whole fruit into his mouth, snatching it as Bixby’s lucky foot surreptitiously brushed the last scuttling off and over the hill to follow the first. “Oh whoops! Shoot sorry Gramps.”

“The crowd goes crazy!” Bixby called spinning, little forelegs thrown in the air, he came to rest, on the start line and posed as if ready to begin.

The gathered animals did indeed go crazy for Bixby’s showmanship, hoots and grr’s, whistles and stomps, every animal somehow showed their approval. “1, 2, 3, Go!” Bixby Joked and made a move as if to spring down the hill.

Oswald finished chewing. “Are we ready?” Mr. Beaver nervously asked. Oswald swallowed wiped his beak on some grass. Bixby sighed dramatically. “I’m growin’ cobwebs over hee-ya!” Oswald Ignored the shenanigans of the Hare, the insults and jibes hurled his way by other so called meadow mates, and slowly made his way towards the start line.

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“Oh good, oh good, let’s get ready.’ Mr. Beaver waddled along next to Oswald patting his shell. “You’ll be fine you’ll see. My money’s on you old friend.”

Oswald guessed Mr. Beaver thought his eyesight was too poor to pick up the “Go Hare’s” Pennant he held behind his back. Point in fact held behind Beaver’s back he couldn’t read what it said, but that bright pink triangle couldn’t be anything else. “What you had left after you bought the pennant you mean?” Mr. Beaver too his credit was slightly abashed. “Well...uh yes...no one made Tortoise Merchan...that is, I mean...you see what happened was...”

Oswald interrupted with a harrumph. “S’okay old *friend* let’s just get on with this shall we.

“Oh my gawsh are you two old ladies ever gonna get done jawin’ let’s start this race!”

At least Oswald imagined that’s what he said. The swelling noise of the crowd drowned out the end. But Oswald couldn’t think of anything else he might have finished it with.

Bixby was dancing, hopping about making offhand remarks surely directed toward Oswald, or tortoises in general, which of course Oswald couldn’t hear. He shook his head. “What an ignoramous!” He chuckled. “What a Maroon!”

Mr. Beaver tottered over and raised his stubby little forepaws. It took a moment, but slowly the noise of the throng quieted save the squawk of jays and the Raccoon gang trying to catch any late comers who still needed “Go Hare” gear.

“Gentle Animals of the Glade” Beaver began in his most officious voice.

“And you too Foxy.” Bixby laughed pointing out one of the glades most avaricious residence Mrs. Fox.

The crowd near the start broke out in guffaws and the joke rippled outward through the throng. Mrs. Fox took the jibe good naturedly more interested this morning in the ensuing race than an easy meal.

“Are you quite finished?” Mr. Beaver asked. Bixby spun to face the start line with a little flourish of his tail. “Slappy I haven’t even started yet.” He winked at a group of young female hare’s who swooned and twitched their little pink noses.

“Gentle Animals of the Glade!” Mr. Beaver began again. “We are here to witness a momentous event!”

“Ahh c’mon! Jes say 1, 2, 3 go.” Bixby hopped up and down in frustration. “Well...I...uh...”Mr. Beaver huffed, flummoxed he looked to Oswald for some reason. “I’m with the Hare on this one, let’s get her started”

“1, 2, 3 go!” Bixby chanted and the crowd picked up the chant.

Mr. Beaver through up his paws in resignation. “1...2...

Bixby got down in position like a predator ready to pounce. Oswald stood at the ready. “...3...Go!” finished Beaver without much enthusiasm. But the crowd made up for that. Oswald launched himself toward his first step. Bixby, for his part, faked a huge leap. Pulling back in mid-air Bixby twisted spectacularly and landed even with Oswald as Oswald completed his first step. He did it again on Oswald’s next step, and then backwards on the third. His antics were a huge hit with the throng that easily and apparently were ready to follow this whole race as it progressed.

Oswald ignored them. He was running his own race. Had his own plan. Let the whole glade support this clownish hare and all his hundred relatives. He was a tortoise and it was rain off his shell as far as he was concerned.

On his maybe tenth step, with Bixby still playing to his audience, the Hare made a pained squeal in mid-air as he back flipped over Oswald.

Bixby landed on his side with a grunt and cry of pain. Oswald snorted. “So it’s over already Fluffbrain?”

“Ohhh” groaned Bixby in reply.

Oswald kept moving, one step after another. The Animals who had gasped in horror as Bixby apparently injured himself for their amusement now rushed to see if he was okay. Oswald was kicked and spun and had to shell for a moment as the masses stampeded by.

“Whoa yea okay!” He grumped coming back out of his shell and moving forward once more. “Don’t concern yourself with me I’m just the tortoise that’s all.”

The Tortoise & The Hare

“Two time champion!” He snorted to no one but himself. But he had spoken too soon. Through cries of “Is he okay?” and “Get up Bixby” and Mr. Beaver’s angry calls to “Get Back. Get back everyone. Give me room!” Oswald caught the sound of Bixby breaking into thump filled laughter. “Well Crud!” he thought.

Behind him the tension of the spectators broke with gales of animal hilarity. “Thank You! Thank You!” Called Bixby “I’ll be here beating him all day!!”

The crowd joked and jostled right along with Bixby as he easily pulled even with and then loped past Oswald. “Don’t feel bad Gramps.” Bixby called back. “I’ll wait for ya near the finish line, even if it takes all day and night like last time. “

“Like last time” Joked a jay who had temporarily perched on Oswald’s shell. “Like last time he says.” The jay squawked directly in Oswald’s face and then took wing to keep up with the rapidly disappearing multitude.

“All that rudeness is definitely uncalled for.” Mr. Beaver said as he waddled up alongside Oswald.

“Rain off my shell.” Oswald replied.

“Still” Mr. Beaver said over his shoulder, his pink pennant waving in the breeze.

“Uncalled for and unnecessary.”

“Harrumph.” Thought Oswald. Mr. Beaver continued on the path. “I must move on to the finish line.” He called, “Keep your tail up and all that.”

And then it was quiet, only the gentle glade breeze stirring flowers and grasses to keep Oswald company.

“Just the way a tortoise likes it.” Oswald thought to himself. And kept keeping on.



Chapter 5



Oswald did not put out extra effort during the day. He moved along at a steady tortoise pace. He stopped and refreshed himself at the little brook that fed the glade's pretty little pond. He snaked when he felt hungry and rested when he felt the need.

At one point near the late afternoon happily warm and feeling quite cheery, he stopped and had a nice chat with a transient butterfly who had no idea that there was a big race in which Oswald was competing and most likely losing miserably.

And still Oswald walked on, the sun setting over his shoulder, he paused for a leisurly snack of fleshy mushrooms, washed it down with a gooey juicy slug. Then he was back on the move.

The night darkened and grew cool, Oswald had no choice but to slow his pace. Mother moon came rising full and bright. Oswald gave her a silent thanks for the small bit of extra warmth.

He walked on through the night, the dale, normally busy with all types of creatures of the dark was conspicuously quiet. He did spy a young shrew at one point. But he ignored the most unpleasant fellow, and the shrew threatening Oswald with bodily harm if he tried to follow disappeared into the shadowy underbrush.

His footpads grew sore and as the night wore on Oswald slowed his pace even more. He had plenty left in reserve, but there was no need to hurry. Oswald felt more and more comfortable with the decision he had made. This race was foolishness and he had no intention in getting caught up in this hare-brained hula-baloo again.

The gray light of dawn was just beginning to lighten the looming forest ahead as Oswald, huffing now slightly, began the long slow rise out of the glade and towards the finish line.

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Suddenly out of the morning mist and pre-dawn gloom Oswald picked up noises and he could taste growing number of creatures. And then many of the shadows he had assumed were bushes or tufts of grass began to move along with him.

The sound picked up and as a pink orange glow settled over the world Oswald could now see that he was indeed surrounded by the outlying spectators.

“He’s finally here!” A robin Oswald did not know shrilly tweeted and then took wing further up the line spreading the word s she went. “He’s here! He’s here! The slow old boy is finally here!”

“Harrumph.” Oswald snorted. “It had been a quiet walk.”

Animals cheered and called out good natured pokes. “Here comes ol slow and steady.’ Croaked one crow to another. “Don’t ya mean wacko and lazy?’ Cawed his friend in return. “Steady and slow don’t seem so good now eh?” this from an older hare, some relative of Bixby or temporarily passer through, no way to know.

Most of the remarks were along that line. Oswald took them all in good stride He was going to continue with *his* race. He actually smiled as he topped the hill and caught sight of the finish line. Mr. Beaver was the first he picked out, after all the area was swarming with hares of all age varieties and colors. But as they caught sight of Oswald the race path cleared and there was Bixby.

“C’mon Gramps, ya still got a chance!” Bixby croaked.

He sauntered towards Oswald. Looking jaunty but as Oswald drew closer he could see that it was an act. Bixby looked overwrought. The stain was a deeper shade of green. There were bits of stem and leaf stuck between his incisors. Oswald could see Bixby’s still clutched a handful of clover shoots in one hand.

“Do ya’ want me to...ohh!” Bixby stumbled a bit and for a moment Oswald thought he was going to come crashing down on him.

But at the last minute the hare caught himself. “Whew!” Bixby whistled “That’d been sumthin’ heh gramps?” For his part Oswald simply snorted. “Harrumph” Bixby tried to

lean on Oswald's shell, and for a second time nearly fell over as Oswald continued moving.

"Whoa." Bixby complained. "Give a guy a little help here."

"Bix-by!" All the animal spectators started chanting "Bix-by!"

"Ask your fans for help." Oswald grumped. "I have somewhere to be."

"Bix-by! Bix-by!"

"Oh ho!" Called Out Bixby. "And so yer thinkin' what?" He gestured to the crowd, shoulders shrugging as if to say "*this guy's crazy.*"

All the animals close enough to hear joined in mocking. "Yer thinkin I'm too tired to beat ya'!" Bixby dashed past Oswald kicking a cloud of dust and small pebbles in Oswald's face. By the time Oswald could see again Bixby was skidding to a stop inches from the finish line.

Bixby spun on his heels arms raised, he threw the clover into the sky and as it drifted down like confetti the crowd went wild. "I'm all hopped up on clover." Bixby yelled back to Oswald still some twenty lengths or so back down the path. Oswald could just barely make out the words over the cries of "Bix-by! Bix-by!" It helped that Bixby hopped in the air at the end of his speech. "Oh hopped" Oswald said to himself. "That makes more sense than popped."

Then Bixby crouched and sprang, sprinting back helter skelter down the path directly towards Oswald. "Look out!!" He hollered as he came "I'm out of control and cra-a-zy!"

Oswald tucked his head in only and plowed forward. But at the last minute Bixby leapt in the air easily clearing the top of Oswald's shell. "Yee haw!" He laughed as he went soaring over and past.



The Tortoise & The Hare

“Bix-by! Bix-by!”

“Oswald. Oswald.” Said Oswald.

“And so we’re comin’ down to the wire folks.” Bixby strolled along side Oswald. One hand held in a loose fist jes below his green stained snout. “Its Bixby and Grumpy Gramps neck and neck.” Bixby walked a little faster. “Now it’s Bixby!” He slowed his pace allowing Oswald to get a step ahead. “Now it’s Grumpy Gramps!”

Oswald tried not to let it get to him. “Would giving him a good bite on the foot be out of line?” He wondered. Bixby stepped past him again. “Now it’s Bixby, he’s pulling away!”

“Bix-by Bix-by”

“Can Bixby do it?” Asked Bixby. “It’s been a grueling race. Does our hero have enough in the left in the tank to beat his opponent?”

Suddenly Bixby stumbled and slowing considerably seemed to stagger “What’s this!” he called his voice aghast with trembling emotion “What’s this is the Champ’s going down?”

Oswald stodgily walked past as Bixby stopped, swayed. Some of the spectators cried out in anguish believing that Bixby was indeed about to lose the race for all Hare-kind yet again.

Oswald did not bother to look back. He didn’t care what the foolish Hare did. From behind he heard the crowd gasp and then moan.

“Bixby’s down, Bixby’s down gentle friends!”

“Get up! Get up!” Oswald heard the throng yell “Get up Bixby!”

“Wait folks! Look at this the Champ’s trying to get up! C’mon everybody let ‘em here it!”

“Oh brother.” Oswald harrumphed. The crowd of course got nosier than ever with shouts of encouragement and love. Shouts of “You can do it!” & “Don’t give up!”

“Look at that everybody he’s back on his feet. The champ is back on his feet. The kid jes won’t give up...”

Now Oswald could see Mr. Beaver through the crowd. He didn't look pleased by all this nonsense. Oswald knew how he felt. "...he's got the heart of a lion this kid." Bixby the commentator continued.

Oswald could feel Bixby coming up alongside him. But he didn't need to feel him because Bixby provided a compelling play by play.

"And here comes Bixby again! The crowd has gone wild for this plucky young kid. Will he avenge his family's loss or will the cunning tortoise steal a victory once more."

Despite himself Oswald started pushing his pace. He knew he was being toyed with but hope against hope maybe the hare would trip over his own tongue.

But then Bixby was pulling ahead. The crowd noise swelled to a rhythmic pulse inside Oswald's shell, a wholly unpleasant experience. The finish line was just ahead. He looked to the side and saw indeed that, even at his fastest speed Bixby was going to take the lead at the last second.

Oswald slowed at last. Bixby still continuing his play by play had descended into near incomprehensible hysterics "It Looks like the Champ is gonna win! He's gonna win!" Bixby sobbed in mock tear filled joy. "His family's honor is restored!"

The exalting mob was lifting Bixby up in triumph. Mr. Beaver was saying something to Oswald as he finally crossed the finish line, but Oswald couldn't make it out; and didn't care that he couldn't.

His race wasn't over yet.

The hullabaloo continued. Oswald continued. Mr. Beaver was patting him on the top of the shell offering at last some support. "Now now." His voice expressing all gentle concern. "You did your best." Oswald of course "harrumphed" in response.

Oswald looked around as he entered the cool forested floor. Gentle green ferns sprouted among the rotting debris and a delicious pungent smell rose from every direction Oswald craned his leathery neck.

The Tortoise & The Hare

The noise and chants of “Bix-by!” faded the deeper he went under the tall firs. Mr. Beaver waddled along wringing his forepaws. “Oh dear. Are you okay?” Mr. Beaver put a paw on Oswald’s forehead.

Oswald gave him the “Harrumph.”

“Well my old friend you are acting like a couple of logs have come loose of your damn. Where is it you’re going? You know our glade is in the opposite direction, yes?” Mr. Beaver asked the question expecting a response, and then quickly added. “And don’t you dare harrumph at me again!”

Caught with his mouth open Oswald said instead “You don’t need to come with me...” and then as if an afterthought. “...old friend.”

“But where are you going? The race is over.” Mr. Beaver was beginning to get winded and huffed as he waddled along. “Stop this nonsense you lost this time I know you must be heartbroken” Oswald did “harrumph” here but Mr. Beaver ignored him and continued. “But it’s not the end of the world, you can save face by coming back to the glade and apologizing to Bixby and the other hare’s”

Oswald, beginning to tire a little was glad to see that directly ahead the small forest was thinning and bright sunlight glimmered off of emerald green grasses. Mr. Beaver wheezing and slowing his pace, slapped his tail angrily on the path. “Oswald Tortoise you’re the most stubborn...I...you...never have I...” Mr. Beaver was so flustered he could not find the correct words.

Oswald craned his neck out as far as it would go. Looking back over his shell he said. “The word you’re looking for is harrumph!”

“So you lost the race.” Mr. Beaver reached out one more time. “So your “supreme” tortoise ways that you lord over us all have proven to be hollow wood. That’s no reason to wander off and die.”

Oswald barked a laugh. “Is that what you think I’m doing?” He started on again calling out over his shell. “Go back to your pond Bucky. “ Mr. Beaver sputtered and shivered momentarily such was the infrequency with which he was addressed in such a way by lesser animals.

“Well then...” He demanded. “...just where are you going?”

“I’m going home” Thought Oswald. Then he said it aloud. “Home.”

Mr. Beaver shook his head watching Oswald head down the forest path toward the wrong dale. Perhaps the race had overheated him and temporarily addled his brain. Perhaps it was just old age finally catching up with the old boy at last. “If it’s your home you seek, old friend, you are headed in the wrong direction.”

Oswald answered him with a snorted “Harrumph!” and continued on. Mr. Beaver watched him go a bit longer. It was a sad thing when an animal got so old, had survived till the very end of their days and they got the call to “wander home.” He had known a few others who had done such in his life. He wondered if he would have the strength to do so if he ever lived long enough to hear the call.



“All the Great Builders speed to you ol’ Shellback.” Mr. Beaver said sorrowfully. “You’ve lived longer than any of us and more besides it’s time you had a good rest.”

From some ways off now Oswald called back “Darn tootin!”

Mr. Beaver, a little astonished that the tortoise had heard his honorable farewell, but still equally annoyed that the ill-mannered grump had ruined it with his sassy response, couched his voice yet quieter and said. “May you dream of quiet ponds.”

The Tortoise & The Hare

“You go dream of ponds. I just want a quiet dark hole.” Oswald called back yet louder.

He had reached the demarcation line between the cool dark of the fir forest, and the sun washed unexplored meadow beyond and turned back to face Mr. Beaver.

“Why of all the...I never...”

Mr. Beaver was too flummoxed to answer. “Good riddance to bad wood!” He finally managed to blurt out. It was one of the worst condemnations a beaver could give. And then he added just for good measure his own. “Harrumph!” He turned and strode off towards their glade. No his glade.

Oswald hadn't waited to watch him go and was already moving among the bright green grasses and pastel petals of this pretty little patch. He could smell deep earth and rotting plant, fungi and fauna, and water ahead of him. Not as much as the pool, the beaver pond he'd left, but yes still, quite a bit. And wait something new, blueberries. He had eaten them once as a young tortie, and had never forgotten that musky profoundly sweet smell. It got his mouth watering and he poked his stubby tongue out to get a good sense of their direction.

“Hi there old fella.” Came a voice floating to Oswald's right. Turning He saw a lark alighting on a long blade of meadow grass. It swayed under her weight dancing in the light wind, but the beautiful bird gracefully held steady. “Welcome to our piece of heaven friend.”

“Hullo.” Oswald thought this lovely lady a fine welcoming committee.

“Just passing through or if you'd like you're welcome to settle in for a stay.” She said with a voice like music. “I don't believe we have a tortoise

Oswald breathed deeply of the rich blueberry smell, the musty fir trees, which were much closer in this tiny dale. He examined every scent as he filled his senses with the imagery of his new home. Among the greens, the firs, flowers, the wet, the blueberries, birds, toads, beyond a dozen other animals he caught a suggestion of a Mr. Fox. Not a problem for Oswald.

In fact in some ways having a fox for a neighbor might be preferred.

Thomas Foster

He didn't catch a whiff or hint of hare.

He nodded at the lark.

"I thank you for your kindness. I think I'll stay awhile" Oswald said and ambled off for a breakfast of blueberries and whatever else he could dig up. He could work on finding a hole later, or just sleep in his shell a few nights until he did. There was no hurry.

"Never a hurry, never a worry." Oswald said to no one in particular. "Slow and steady is the Tortoise way."



Epilogue



Oswald spent the rest of the spring resting, eating, slowly getting to know his new neighbors.

After a little good natured attempts to make a meal of Oswald, Mr. Fox and he settled into an understanding and he found the fellow to be quite articulate and urbane.

Of course he and the delightful Lady Lark became fast friends. Oswald and she often dined together as dusk settled over the dale and the Lady would serenade from atop his shell as he tucked inside for the night.

He spent the summer in, as Lady Lark had near named it in their first meeting a little piece of “tortoise” heaven.” Even the bees seemed to buzz about their business a little more leisurely.

Eventually the mornings got colder, the leafed trees began to turn and the abundant blueberries were fatter and juicier than ever.

Oswald thought he should get started digging. “As soon as breakfast is done.” He said to himself around a mouthful of berry, juice running stickily down his neck.

Noise from behind him let him know that some creatures or other were approaching fast. And he, despite the deliciousness of the berries was in the process of shelling when Mr. Fox’s white foot pads trod into his portaled view.

“Good eats on this fine morn Ozzie.” Oswald, head coming a portion of the way from beneath his shell rim. Nodded politely and finished swallowing before replying.

“Blueberries and bugs as always for me fuzz face. And how about...” He caught the second scent sneaking over his left hind and quickly shelled. “What’s this...?” He began

Mr. Fox was laughing and trying to explain as a second set of white padded feet snuck into view. "Harrumph!" Oswald finally caught the taste of Mrs. Fox over the blueberries.

"Don't worry my impenetrable friend, I've brought the Mrs. to meet you."

"He told me he was friends with a tortoise but I would never have imagined it was you." She was saying as he cautiously extended his neck, "too friendly with a fox made food of a fool." That was a saying common to all good creatures, not just tortoises.

"Yep it's just me, old Oswald the tortoise."

"Mr. Beaver said you had crawled off to die of shame or some such nonsense." Mrs. Fox barked a laugh. "You don't look dead."

"Are you sure?" Oswald cocked one eye at her pretty white and copper face. Mrs. Fox's eyes sparkled with amusement. "There's blueberries here and no hares so..."

Both Foxes tittered gleefully. "Oh my dear you were always so droll." Mrs. Fox said doing a little leap she snapped at a Butterfly passing overhead. "He is the epitome of dry tortoise humor." Added Mr. Fox.

"Speaking of hares, your friend Bixby was quite delicious I must say."

Oswald sputtered coughing up a blueberry seed. Astonishment outweighed caution or embarrassment and he stuck his head out craning on his neck to see if she was making fun.

"You're saying what exactly?" Oswald grumphed.

"The poor dear was just exhausted from all his frolicking about." Mrs. Fox said her pink tongue touching a pearly fang. "I offered a congratulatory ride back to his den in my jaws."

Oswald knew hare's weren't the smartest but still? "And he accepted just like that?"

"Oh no." Mr. Fox jumped in here too proud and excited to resist. "She told him she wouldn't spoil the race by eating him."

"Well?" Oswald asked

The Tortoise & The Hare

“My dear old Mr. Tortoise it didn’t spoil the race at all.”

The Foxes burst out laughing and soon Oswald joined in.

