

# UNDER THE OAKEN BOUGH

FOLK AND FAIRY TALES

Compiled and Retold in Modern  
Vernacular By Simon Brooks

Illustrated by Rob Brookes

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# HOW BEAR LOST HIS TAIL

A Tale from Norway



nce, when animals spoke the same language and humans could understand them, Bear had a long tail. It was a fine tail. Imagine, if you can, a tail as long as a horse's, but as furry as a fox's brush! Bear loved his tail. He would sit on rocks or logs with his lovely, luscious tail tossed over his legs, brushing it with his claws. Some said he counted as he brushed his tail one hundred times each day. Bear would also brag about his tail. He would wave it in the faces of other animals saying, "Look at my tail. Isn't it wonderful? Isn't it grand? No one has a tail like mine!" Which was quite true, but the animals did not like Bear shaking his tail in their faces, no matter how beautiful it may be.

Well, winter was on the land. Trees were bare of leaves. Plants were missing fruit. Snow was deep. Ponds, rivers, and streams were covered in ice. In places, you could see pockets of air frozen there. As I am sure you know, bears go into semi-hibernation and often wake up. When they do rouse mid-winter, they are not happy. Would you be happy if you woke in the middle of your nap to find you had a hungry stomach?

"What? It's still the middle of winter? I'm starving! I need to find food. My belly aches. It's grumbling, and I am not happy. Why did I have to wake up? Blooming winter."

Bear, when his eyes fluttered open mid-winter, found that he had hunger pains. He was *not* pleased. Stomping out of his cave, he tried scratching through the snow and digging in the frozen ground



for grubs. The ground was too hard, and the grubs buried too deep. Bear searched for berries on the bushes but only found tiny, hard nubs of fruit which stuck in his teeth. He lumbered, head still groggy, to the streams and rivers and found those covered with hard ice.

A smell came to Bear's nose. It was then that Bear saw Fox jumping through the snow. Foxes have long thin legs, and hop through the snow like a deer might leap. Bear watched Fox closely, and a smile appeared on his face. Something hung from his mouth. It was a piece of string and on the end were five small fish. That was the smell Bear had caught the scent of.

Bear grinned, displaying his sharp teeth. "I say, Mr. Fox! Nice to see you!"

Mr. Fox stopped bouncing and searched between the trees with his keen eyes. Seeing Bear, Fox felt his shoulders fall. His ears pricked, his tail flagged, and he faced his fellow forest creature. "Hewo Bear!"

Bear lifted a paw and waved. "What's that you are carrying Fox? Come here."

Fox knew that Bear would catch him if he tried to run away. He hopped through the deep snow and sat near Bear, dropping the string and fish. "Just some fish for my family," he said.

"And how did you get these fish, Fox? The ponds and rivers are frozen."

Fox had to think very fast indeed. Fox was, and still is, a very fast thinker. These fish that Fox had with him were stolen. There was a cabin in the woods, and the people there had been fishing. Fox had found many of them tied up on the side of the hut, drying in the harsh winter air. If he told Bear where he had found the fish, Bear would go and steal *all* the fish. He might even break into the

cabin, and then nobody would have any fish at all. Fox knew what to tell Bear.

“I caught them.” Fox smiled.

“How did you catch them? You can’t fish with your paws. And how can you catch fish through the ice, with the rivers and streams frozen?”

“Well, I have watched men fish. Last week, I saw what they did on the pond over there.” Fox pointed with his snout. This was true. He had watched. “So, I copied them, in a way. I took one of my claws and cut a hole in the ice. I then lowered my brush into the water and waited for the fish to bite. This is what I caught.”

“Your brush?”

“Yes,” replied Fox. “It’s the name for my tail.”

“Never mind. I’m hungry,” said Bear. “Give the fish to me.”

“But these are for my family.”

“I don’t care. Give them to me. You can catch more.” Bear’s deep voice made Fox anxious.

“But, but. Look Bear.” Fox had another idea. “These fish are small and wouldn’t fill your belly. I might go out and fish some more for my family, but then you would only want those too. Now, my brush is pretty small, so I can only catch small fish.” Fox smiled, wagging his brush, and pointed at Bear. “Your tail, Mr. Bear, is so long and luscious, and so strong. You are not only going to catch more fish, but I bet you would catch much bigger fish than I.”

“I do have a good tail, don’t I? It is much stronger, and longer than yours. I have been told it is the best tail in the forest.” Bear straightened his back and looked down at Fox. “I bet I could catch much bigger, and many, many more fish than you, Fox. Now, tell me. How do I do this again?”

Fox explained how he used a claw to cut a hole in the ice, then lowered his brush to catch fish. “But, Bear. You cannot take your tail out of the water until there are many fish on it. If you pull your tail out too soon, you’ll frighten all the fish away. Just wait a good long time, and you’ll have a fine catch. I am sure.”

“Good. You can go home now, Fox.” Fox bent down, lifted the string with his teeth and took the fish home to his family. And off Bear went through the trees to the pond Fox had indicated. It never occurred to Bear how Fox had tied up the fish with string.

Bear made his way out onto the ice. He slipped, and his legs went in different directions. He dug in his claws and got himself steady on the slippery surface. He staggered out a little further, and with his longest and sharpest claw, drew a circle in the ice. Bear tried to pull the ice from the hole, but it kept slipping out of his sharp grip. Again and again, he tried to pull the ice out with his claws, but failed. In frustration Bear hit the ice, hard. The circle of ice went down into the water and slid under the ice of the pond. There was now a hole with water. Bear smiled at his ingenuity.

Bear took care as he rose, and stepped over the hole he had made. Two giant back paws gripped the rim of ice. He peered down into the water and shivered. Setting his feet with care, Bear crouched, lowering his beautiful, luscious, long tail into the frigid water. Bear grit his teeth. When the tip of his tail hit the water, his breath drew in so sharply, he whistled, and stood upright, yanking his tail from the pond. Bear took some sharp, deep breaths.

“I am Bear! I can do this. If Fox can, then it should be easy for me.” That’s what he tried to tell himself. Bear lowered his tail into the water getting more of it below the surface. Yet his stomach knotted, his claws became rigid, digging deeper into the ice. Lowering his

head to face the hole, he roared at the ice cold water from which he had once more removed his tail.

“This is not as easy as Fox made it seem,” Bear muttered. He shook himself off and tried a third time, one front paw hitting the other. He clenched his teeth so tightly it was a wonder they did not shatter. This time, he lowered his tail all the way. He roared and whined and sat on the icy edge of the hole, still slapping his front paws together. Bear let out a long drawn out breath and shook his winter coat.

There was a nibble on his tail. Bear thrust his front paws down beside his back paws to push up when he remembered Fox’s words: *“Wait until you have lots of fish on your tail before you pull it out, or else you’ll frighten all the fish away.”*

“Yes, I’ll wait and get much bigger fish than Fox. I’ll show him. My tail is way better than his brush!”

The sun rose higher in the sky, and the rays warmed Bear. He was still sleepy having woken up mid-winter, in the middle of his nap. His head drooped, and his chin fell on his chest. Bear’s body bent over and he snorted, briefly lifting his head. His eyelids grew heavy and folding his head into his chest, fell asleep. His snores reverberated off the pond and echoed through the trees.

The sun made its short journey across the sky. The brief winter day saw the bright blues began to darken. It was then when Crow came flying over the pond. “Caw! Caw! Bear! Hey, Bear! It’s Crow. Caw! Wake up! Wake up! Go back to your den! Bear! Bear! It’s Crow! Caw!”

Bear woke with a start. At first, he didn’t know where he was and wondered why he sat on the frozen pond. Then he remembered. “Fish!” he cried out. He attempted to stand, but couldn’t. *I must have*



*caught so many fish, I can't lift them all.* Bear strained as he attempted to rise. His paws slipped. Bear pierced the ice with his long claws and pushed. Or tried to! *These must be some very large fish I have caught. I do have the best tail in the world.* Bear chuckled. *Fox will be so jealous when he finds out what great fish I have.* He strained again.

Bear did not realize that the water hole he had cut had frozen, and his tail was now well and truly caught. Bear strained and pushed, pulled and tugged until SNAP! Bear shot over the ice, spun in circles and slid over the slick surface until he dug his claws in and came to a stop. Slowly and with great care, Bear stood up on his back legs.

*That's odd,* he thought. *My tail does not feel very heavy. In fact, it feels downright drafty back there.* He turned and looked behind him. "What?"

Bear bent over and stared back between his legs. "No!" On all fours, he chased himself around in a circle one way, and then the other. No matter what he did, he could not find his tail. Bear turned back to face where he had been sitting. He noticed something sticking out of the ice. Bear scampered as best he could over the surface of the ice. What he saw was all that was left of his tail, still frozen in the pond. Using his hooked claws, he dug at the ice until he had his long, and now not so luscious, yet decidedly frozen tail in his paws. He tried to push it back on the stump where his tail was once attached. He licked it and tried again. He even tried to screw the tail back on, but it would not stick.

"FOX!" roared Bear.

But Fox didn't come. In fact, Fox has kept well away from Bear from that day to this. And Bear? Well, that was the end of his tail, and this is the end of my tale.

*This version of Bear losing his tail is my reworking of a tale which I found in one of the many books of stories collected by Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe in the 1800s (East o' the Sun and West 'o the Moon, Junior Deluxe Edition, Doubleday, 1957). This is a very popular tale and is told anywhere there are frozen ponds and lakes and bears; from Scandinavia to Russia. In the U.S.A. it is traditionally told by the people of the Northeast, such as the Oneida and Ojibwa people. In one version, the hole is made by Otter, who laughs at Bear. He told bear to use his tail when otter dove into the water to get the fish. AT 2, How Bear Lost His Tail.*