

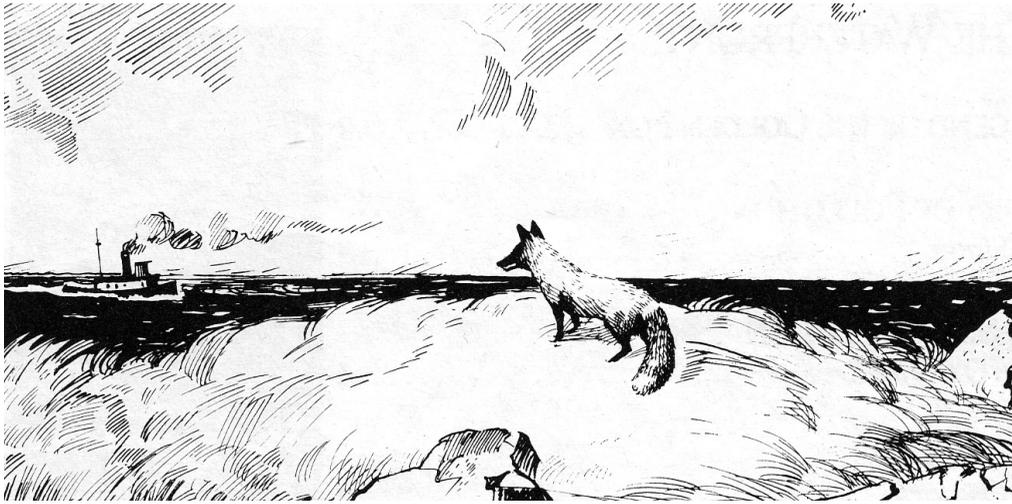
The Legend of the Golden Fox

The year they saw the golden fox, Mugsy got the contract to clean sticks and driftwood from Boston Harbor. He had a tough, elegant boat named the *Priscilla* and not much to do with her that season, and when he got the contract, in order to celebrate, he decided to hold an Easter egg hunt on the harbor islands.

All this was long ago in the time before there was a Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area, in the years when the waterfront was unpolished and nasty, and there were plenty of stories and no lack of storytellers. Mugsy was the outsider. He was a gentleman among wharf rats, a dandy and a dreamer, who never let his aristocratic background, his money, his good looks, and his ritzy friends come between him and the drifters, the boat bums, and the sometime crooks he counted among his best friends. He was a poet manqué, a literate sort who would often shout long quotes from his one great hero, the Sea Rat in *The Wind in the Willows*, while plowing around the harbor in his tug.

“I shipped myself onboard a small trading vessel bound from Constantinople,” he would announce to a disparate assemblage of friends and crewmen, “by classic seas whose every wave throbs with a deathless memory, to the Grecian Islands and the Levant. Those were golden days and balmy nights!”

The wharf rats would listen suspiciously. They misunderstood poor Mugsy, but they tolerated him. He was just one more of the various eccentric types who hung around the docks, and a cut above the others at that. It was, after all, Mugsy’s friend, Arthur—also a towboat captain—who claimed he liked to hire only murderers because they were loyal. “Thieves you can’t trust,” he used to say. Mugsy was more discriminating. The wharf rats may have misunderstood him, but they loved his adventures, and on the day of the Easter egg hunt they all piled aboard the *Priscilla* and, under a bright spring sky, steamed toward the islands and Mugsy’s previously secreted eggs. There was a street kid on board packing a twenty-two caliber pistol; there were a few sailors, temporarily on the beach; a down-and-out marine painter; and a few of the people who hung around



Estabrook's boatyard. And there was also Serena, Mugsy's companion for that period of his life, an elegant English lady with a refined Oxford accent.

They landed at Peddocks and hunted for eggs, moved on to Georges and Lovells and hunted some more, and then, the eggs depleted, they sailed outbound toward the Brewsters. "Thence we turned and coasted up the Adriatic, its shores swimming in an atmosphere of amber, rose, and aquamarine," said Mugsy, still quoting. Someone broke open one of Mugsy's precious bottles of 1959 Chateau Mouton. And someone else emptied it before they reached the outer islands.

Just off Greater Brewster Mugsy hove to and let the *Priscilla* idle in the swell. Serena went ashore to look around, and when she came back she was in shock. "I've seen a fox," she said. "A magnificent golden fox."

The younger ones streamed ashore, Serena in the lead, while Mugsy kept his vessel off the rocks. They climbed over bedrock and tunneled through brush to the fox's den. The kid with the gun was there, the marine painter, and the Eastabrook crowd. None believed in Serena's fox, and yet as soon as they arrived at the den it poked its head up from between the rocks, scrambled to the top of a rock pile, and halted on the rise, its golden fur flowing in the sea wind.

"A real fox," shouted the kid with the gun. "Helloo foxy," called Serena. "I

knew you were here.”The fox looked down at the assembled band and fled over the hill, more in horror than in fear.

The kid lost control and, firing madly into the air, dashed over the hill. Back on the *Priscilla*, Mugsy, who heard the shots whistle, signaled desperately for his crew to return. There was chaos and shouting. They chased the kid, caught him, and confiscated his gun, and then, still in awe of the beautiful vision beyond the squalor of the docks, returned to the *Priscilla*. It was the last anyone saw of the golden fox.

Back on board they told and retold the adventure, broke out more wine, and then steamed back to port.

Mugsy was somewhat subdued. “For now I had done with islands for the time,” he quoted softly.

Things went downhill after that. At the end of the summer the man with the murderous crew got the cleanup contract. Mugsy borrowed money he couldn’t repay, and that winter he disappeared to South America, never to return. The wharf rats missed him. They often talked about his Easter adventure, and even those who missed the event had visions of the golden fox, of something beautiful and good in the harbor beyond the city.

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