

# The Trader Fox

## A Collection of Short Stories by Shen Shixi

### Preface

#### Reading Is the Lamp Lighting Up My Life

I have read some autobiographies of writers. Many of them came from well-educated families, having lots of excellent children's tales to read in their childhood, and a granny who loved to tell them stories. They were immersed in a wondrous world of literature and arts. How I envied them! I had almost nothing to read in my childhood. My family was poor and struggled to make ends meet. My parents had neither the interest nor the wherewithal to buy books for me and there was nothing else to read aside from the textbooks given out by my local school. Besides, my granny lived in rural Ningbo, came only once every few years, and had no stories to tell at all.

I was always a sickly child. It is said that newborn babies in their first four months are less likely to get sick thanks to their inborn immunity. But I was an exception. Only six days after my birth I was rushed to hospital because my belly button was infected and filled with pus. From that day on, I was constantly in and out of hospitals. My deepest impression during childhood was of my grandmother walking to my bedside on those tiny dumpling-shaped feet of hers, feeling my forehead and releasing a long sigh, "He's burning up yet again." Then, she would hoist me onto her back and take me to the doctor's for those penicillin tests which always numbed my scalp.

Because of my sickliness, I was very skinny and grew up looking like a reed. Up till today I have never needed to go on a diet. And, due to my weak health, I was often bullied by my peers. I remember that in first grade my class teacher picked me to be monitor because I was bright, obedient and clean-cut. However, I was dismissed one

month later because I failed to fulfil my duties as monitor for the simple reason that the other boys all looked down on me and even the girls ignored me. The class teacher patted my head sympathetically, and said, “You’re pretty clever and your performances are good, but you’re too weak. It will be rather hard for you to find yourself a place in a tough world out there when you grow up.”

I was very much ashamed that I bowed my head and sobbed my heart out. Then for a long time I was trapped in a sense of inferiority and could not escape. I was afraid to go out alone and to meet strangers, to have PE classes, to be called on to answer the teachers’ questions in class, to play with naughty boys, to see the scornful looks in girls’ eyes and afraid that monsters would come for me on those long lonely nights...

I began reading to kill time. Poems, short stories, novels, and children’s tales, I greedily devoured all these literary works a poor boy like me could get my hands on at that time like a dry sponge absorbing water. Books took me into a colorful new world. I cried for the plight of the shepherdess who had fallen victim to the witch’s trap and laughed for the frog prince as he finally broke the spell he was under and gained his freedom. Books became my closest friends, my funniest toys, my kindest teachers and my most lenient parents. Books were not only comfort to my soul; they also make up for the imperfections of my personality. I could clearly feel my intellect maturing faster than other kids of my age. I knew a lot of things that others didn’t and it gave me a sense of superiority. As a result, my inferiority complex faded without a trace and I became very confident. Physical strength is definitely a form of power, but my mind, enriched by all the books I read, was better equipped to help me adapt to the society.

When I was sixteen and had graduated from junior high school, fate pulled me far away from the big city of Shanghai to a Dai village in Xishuangbanna, Yunnan Province, where I went on to spend six years as a peasant and three as a local teacher. While teaching at the Mengman Cooperative Elementary School, I got a sudden urge to learn writing. Even though I had read some literature before, my fundamental knowledge of Chinese was too poor to attempt to write an actual novel. I

even had trouble writing a simple letter home. There were countless characters I miswrote, and to make things worse, I couldn't use a dictionary. I had to start from scratch.

The method I used to study writing was laughably primitive. I borrowed an immense book named *How to Write* and began to copy it from cover to cover, reproducing every one of its over 200,000 characters. After several months of book-copying I was finally able to grasp the different forms of articles and genres. Then, I read every single magazine and newspaper I could get my hands on, recording all unfamiliar characters and sentences that I found movingly beautiful. I would go over these records to memorize and recite them repeatedly, refining my appreciation and making them my own. In two years these copied words and sentences filled a dozen notebooks and made a thick pile. At that time, I was billeted in a mud cottage of just eight square meters. There was no electricity in Mengman; lighting was provided by paraffin lamps. For fear of losing a minute of time, after reading in bed and getting sleepy, I'd turn down the lampwick. When I woke in the middle of the night after a light sleep, I'd turn up the lampwick and carry on reading or writing.

After two years of hard work, I finished my first work, a prose of 2,000 words. Entitled *The Rustle of the Golden Bamboo*, it was published in the supplement of *Yunnan Daily*.

Reading is a bright lamp that will light your way for a lifetime, of which I am very deeply convinced. If I have achieved anything in writing animal-related stories, it is because I acquired the very good habit of reading as a child. Copious reading improved my literary capabilities and my writing skills. Even if I was very busy with work, I would still use every possible spare moment to read and to enrich my mind. I voraciously read large numbers of books on biology, zoology and animal behavior. I used my vacations to follow zoologists deep into the primeval forests to experience life there and widen my knowledge base. Of the books I have read, four have had the greatest impact on my life: *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* by the American biologist Edward O. Wilson; *On Aggression* by the Austrian zoologist Konrad Lorenz, winner of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine; *The Naked Ape* and *The Human*

*Zoo* by the British zoologist and ethologist Desmond Morris. When reading these four books, I felt the elation akin to chancing upon an oasis in the middle of a desert. Even if I did not totally agree with the concept of sociobiology as described by Wilson, the revolutionary viewpoints in this theory were certainly an eye-opener for me. And the brilliant studies of the animal kingdom by the two distinguished zoologists, Lorenz and Morris, opened my eyes to new angles when observing animal behavior and structuring my stories.

Knowledge is a strong pillar of spiritual support, one that will never fall. It will give you what you need to stand tall, swell your chest, hold your head high and face life with courage.

A passion for literature, for reading and for books is an inexhaustible gift, a gift that will keep on giving for a lifetime.

June, 2011 in Shanghai

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## **Dandelion the Tigress Cub**

Early that morning, I set out to catch pangolins in the Mengbanaxi rainforest. Milky white mist swirled among the branches, and the visibility was so low that though I could hear birdcalls, I couldn't make out where the birds were. I made my way forward in the dense jungle, hacking through the thick undergrowth of vines and branches, and brushing off the wet spider webs that kept catching at my head. Suddenly, when wading through the cogongrass tall enough to hide in, I heard rustling ahead of me. I bent down and carefully pushed aside the grass to take a peek. Through the hazy mist, I caught sight of a black-tailed python as wide across as a bowl by an abandoned anthill. Gazing fixedly with its cold eyes like glass beads, the python slowly slithered its seven-meter-long body along, its red forked tongue flicking in and out. I knew then that this snake was about to strike at a prey. Just as I thought, a few seconds later, the python slowly arched its body back until it looked like a tautened bow ready to fire. It tightened up and lashed out, open-jawed, at lightning speed, biting at something behind the anthill. When it withdrew, I could see it was carrying in its giant mouth a little tiger cub about the size of a cat. Slowly being swallowed into the dark maw of the python, the poor creature was thrashing about its tiny paws in the air in a futile attempt to escape. .

Undoubtedly, this cunning python was seizing the opportunity of the mother tiger's absence hunting for food to eat the cub she'd concealed among the grass. The tiger may be one of the fiercest animals alive, yet its cubs are no less vulnerable than other infant creatures.

I had no time to think. I drew out the long knife I had on me and hurled it at the snake. The blade cut into its tail, the snake froze, spat out the cub, and slithered towards the thick bushes on the left. In a few minutes, it vanished among the mist and vegetation.

I just rescued a tiger from the jaws of a python.

I took the cub back to the orchard eight kilometers away from Manguangnong village, and raised it in my little mud cottage. I lived alone on a hill, guarding this orchard which was a little more than 16 acres in size. Since I didn't get many visitors, I was free to keep whatever animals I liked. This cub was a female, her eyes as yet unopened. Her body was gold and fuzzy over and felt

like a giant dandelion when I held her. The striped markings on her body were as yet very faint. She had a small round face, large ears, thin whiskers around the mouth, and some distinctive yellow, white and black spots between her cheeks and forehead. She was totally cute, and I decided to name her Dandelion.

The first problem to tackle was how to feed the cub for the first three months of her life when normally she would survive on her mother's milk. My first idea was to rent a dairy cow as a wet nurse. The year before last I had a dog which died from being unfortunately run over by a horse and cart shortly after having a litter of three pups. I took the pups into the pig pen to be suckled by a pig and they grew up just fine. This experience taught me that animals can indeed nurse the young of a different species. I searched around in the village and decided on an eight-year-old spotted dairy cow. Granted, the cow was a little old and not a prolific milker, but her docile temperament made her easy to milk. I paid the owner a pair of new rubber shoes for him to bring the cow to my cottage.

The owner happily accepted the boots, untethered the spotted cow and led her along with me. But as soon as we reached the fence of the cottage, the cow suddenly stopped in her tracks, refusing to move forward no matter how much her master shouted and ordered. He pulled at the rope, straining every sinew and shouting at the top of his lungs. However, the normally obedient cow had turned into a fierce-tempered steer, her eyes bloodshot, her neck knotted with tension, her legs firmly planted as if nailed into the ground. The owner, now in a rage, picked up a stick by the roadside and lashed out at the cow in fury. Snorting viciously, the cow lowered her head and charged, with her two sharp horns targeting at the owner directly. He panicked, threw down the rope and ran. The cow turned tail, lowing in fear, and fled into the forest.

This left me no choice. I went to the market, and this time bought a nanny goat that had just given birth to serve as Dandelion's wet nurse. But the same problem recurred with the nanny: as soon as she reached the fence, she started to look fearful and refused to take another step. Being a smaller creature, she was much easier to handle than the large and muscular dairy cow. I bound her hooves together, carried her into the room, and put the hungry cub before the nanny goat's teats. I tried to force the goat to nurse Dandelion by placing her teats into Dandelion's mouth. The goat was scared out of her wits, bleating and trembling all over as if in a slaughterhouse. No matter how hard I tried, not a single drop of milk emerged.

Undoubtedly, the reason why the cow and the goat freaked out at the cottage fence and would rather die than go further was that they'd caught the scent of a tiger in the air. Actually, though Dandelion was a tiger, she was just a newborn cub without the teeth to kill even a frog, let alone pose a threat to a full-grown cow or goat. On the contrary, either of them could have easily stepped on Dandelion and broken her spine had they wanted to. But neither creature possessed the reasoning power to judge Dandelion's strength, so they feared Dandelion as much as they would an adult tiger.

A Western zoologist once reached the bold conclusion that mammals think through their nose and it seems there may be something in that assertion.

I had no choice but to take on the role of Dandelion's wet nurse by myself. I found a large plastic milking bottle, bought several rubber teats, went to the village every day for fresh milk, and bottle-fed Dandelion like a human baby.

Ten days later she was able to totter around on her own. In the evening when I appeared by the fence on my return from working in the orchard, Dandelion would dash out of my cottage, making mewling sounds. As soon as I entered the yard she would run to me and rub up against my legs, and when I picked her up she would lick my fingers and beg for food. She could always awake the tenderness in my heart, make me forget my tiredness and get on with feeding her immediately, without thinking about a moment's downtime.

Some people even told me: "You two were destined for each other. It's like she's your real daughter."

Three months later, I stopped giving her milk and began feeding her chopped-up meat. She grew fast, and was very soon the size of a wolf dog.

I had kept pet cats before, and found that in many ways the cub behaved in very similar fashion to a cat: they both like to sit on the floor and clean their paws and fur; they both are inclined to poop in dark corners and scrape up the dirt to cover up the evidence; they both like to hide under the bed and stare around from there with large, light-sensitive eyes, watching for any small movements; they both love to scratch away at a piece of soft wood, sharpening their claws on it and sending the debris flying everywhere. It's hardly surprising, considering that both species belong to the cat family.

Baby animals are very playful, and Dandelion was no exception. One thing she never seemed to tire of was boxing with me. Boxing also happened to be my favorite sport. When I was in high school in Shanghai, I was a mainstay of our school boxing team, participated in city-wide high school boxing league competitions and won a bronze medal. After I came to work here in the countryside, though I no longer had a ring to step into I loathed to abandon my hobby, so I would put on my boxing gloves in my off-duty hours and punch at imaginary opponents. It was good exercise and very therapeutic.

That day at dusk, having nothing to do after dinner, I put on my boxing gloves and walked into the yard, eagerly took up my stance and was about to deliver a combo of deadly punches to the world champion my imagination had conjured up when Dandelion dashed out in front of me. Her eyes were fixed on my boxing gloves and she was yowling. I thought to play around with her, and hit her with a straight jab to the jaw, neither light nor heavy, which knocked her to the ground. She rolled over, got back on her feet, flattened her tail and narrowed her eyes. She puffed up her coat, snarled at my boxing gloves as if at some dangerous enemy, and lunged at them with open mouth and bared teeth. I delivered another left hook to her neck, sweeping her over. She didn't back off, instead, she became more excited, jumping and scratching and giving her all just to attack my boxing gloves. She really amused me: to have a real sparring partner was way better than punching at thin air. Dandelion's actions raised my spirits, and I crouched down to start a very unique boxing match with her. I was nimble, moving left and right, first a hook, then a jab. Receiving my punches, Dandelion fell all over the place, but she was not in the slightest bit of being put out by the attacks. Instead, she became more and more excited, and our little boxing match continued until the sun went down. I was exhausted and couldn't move an inch from my bed, but Dandelion seemed like she had plenty left in the tank.

After this, Dandelion became a real boxing fanatic. Donning my gloves would produce an excited reflex action in her: she would look at me with shining eyes and rush like a whirlwind at my gloves. Sometimes, after dinner I would have other things to attend to and have no time for boxing. At times like this, she would run to my side, rub against my legs or lie on my arms, badgering me with her little mewling sounds. If I got impatient and pushed her away, she would become agitated and displeased, and would go scratch the wooden posts by the fence or hide under the bed, complaining loudly. I couldn't concentrate with all the racket and would get angry



with her, point at her nose and reprimand her aloud. Only then would she quiet down, and would go sit in a shadowy corner behind a pillar, looking all forlorn and despondent, fixing me with an imploring gaze, like a child longing for her parents' love. I would give in under that gaze, put down whatever I was doing and take the boxing gloves down off the wall. She would emit a great roar, a cheer almost, and run happily into the yard before I even got out of the door.

I was well aware that Dandelion's obsession with boxing came from her instinctive need to practice hunting skills. Most young mammals (and humans are no exception) like to play games. Games are rehearsals for real life and prepare the young for the environment in which they exist.

I started to bring Dandelion along with me on my hunting trips. Tigers behave very differently from hunting dogs. Whereas the dog will stay faithfully by its master's side, tigers are very independent by nature and will rush into the bushes as soon as they're let out. But when it comes to intelligence, hearing or the sense of smell, tigers are just as good as dogs. Dandelion would never venture too far from my side, and as soon as I whistled, she dashed back from whichever bush she was exploring and appeared at my side. Sometimes I'd shoot a pheasant out of a tree with an arrow, and it would drop into a wide expanse of grass as tall as I. Thinking it would be a lot of trouble to search for the bird, I would crook my index fingers, put them to my lips, and produce one long whistle to summon Dandelion, and in no time at all she would come rushing towards me like the wind. I would point at the tall grass and say, "Dandelion, go fetch the pheasant." She would immediately launch into the grass and bring me back the bird. Sometimes it was a hare I shot. The wounded hare struggled on stubbornly through the bushes, and I called Dandelion, who caught up with the hare immediately and brought it to me.

Once, I took the tiger cub to the bank of the Lancang River to hunt wild ducks. As soon as we got there, her eyes lit up and her ears pricked up as she crouched down and flattened out her tail. Her staring eyes were as wide as saucers and she bristled as if facing some invisible enemy.

"What's the matter, girl?" I asked quietly as I stroked her back.

She ignored the question. Rather, using the reeds as cover, she carefully prowled towards a scallop-shell-shaped rock by the side of the river. As she closed in on the rock, she pounced in a flash and landed on the far side of it. A few minutes later, she came running back to me proudly, brandishing between her teeth a giant salamander some two feet long. The salamander was still

alive, and thrashed about on the grass.

The cries of the salamander sound like those of a baby, so it is also referred to as a “baby-fish” in Chinese. They live in hidden niches between rocks by the side of large rivers, able to live underwater or move on land on their four legs, and are considered quite precious amphibians in China. They are normally very sensitive to their surroundings. As soon as they hear the tiniest noise, they dive into their maze-like underwater caves, which makes them very difficult to capture. Dandelion, purring with excited pleasure, was hitting the salamander around with her paws as it continued to thrash around trying to escape.

So she had learnt to hunt on her own. I felt very happy for her.

One afternoon, I went to the orchard to harvest bananas and just as I entered the banana section, I heard something crashing around. Assuming a theft was in progress, I sneaked my way toward the source of the noise and gently pushed aside the banana leaves blocking my view. There was no thief; the reality was much more breathtaking. A large group of elephants were busy trying to help a pregnant cow elephant deliver her baby. Several large males used their bodies to bring down some banana trees and their trunks to pile up those trees to form a windbreak wall, creating a temporary shelter for the mother-to-be. Some female elephants in the group flexed their trunks to pick fresh and clean banana leaves, laying them in a deep pile to create a birthing bed. An older female led the pregnant elephant into the makeshift enclosure, while another worked as a midwife, helping the birthing process by using her trunk to pull on the baby elephant struggling in the mother’s birth canal. The male elephants, once the shelter was built, dispersed to the sides to form a protective circle around the shelter.

Elephants have a very low birth rate, which makes the birth of a baby elephant very important to them. The males positioned as guards around the shelter were far more tense and fierce than usual, alert for brutal predators following the scent of blood and coming for the baby. You could see the males patrolling around the shelter, scooping up dirt and mud with their trunks to throw up into the tree to chase away the chirping birds. They wouldn’t allow any other creature get close to the newborn, including the birds flying nearby.

They hadn’t seen me, and I thought it best to back away as soon as possible. I let go of the banana leaves and started to retreat, but in my anxious haste I kept on looking around for fear of

being pursued by a male elephant and suddenly tripped over a vine concealed by the undergrowth. I fell to the ground, landing without even a scratch onto a cushion of soft grass. But my long knife slid out of its sheath and dropped to the ground with a distinct metallic clang.

And behind me came the high-pitched trumpeting of agitated wild elephants.

Damn, I'd startled the elephants! I leapt up and made a run for it, but my two short legs were no match for the quadruped elephants. As the distance between the pursuers and the pursued shrank, I turned my head and saw four male elephants with large tusks chasing after me. Right at the front, just 30 meters from me, was a white bull elephant. Massive and robust, with his tusk poising and his trunk raising, he charged toward me with malign intent like a miniature snow mountain.

The only way out was to take to the trees. As I ran I looked on every side and, luckily, there was a coconut palm on the front slope to the left. I swerved sharply, made my way to the foot of the tree, and climbed up it summoning every bit of strength and speed I had.

But I'd only made it halfway up when the white elephant reached the tree. He reared up on his hind legs, forelegs in the air, his long trunk lashing at my feet like a steel whip. Snap! The tip of his trunk touched the bottom of my feet. What a close call! Just a second later and I'd have been dragged down by the elephant's soft trunk.

The coconut palm was about twenty meters tall, and I was very soon at the top, astride a thick strong stem. Only then could I sigh with relief. I was high up the tree, with nothing the elephants could do about it. I thought myself safe.

The four bull elephants gathered under the tree, their raised trunks touching almost in the shape of an umbrella, their voices low and rumbling as if deep in discussion. When they broke apart, the three gray ones began digging up dirt from beneath the tree using their giant tusks. The white one took a few steps back, and crashed his body full force against the coconut palm.

Dong! The tree had a hollow core and the impact reverberated like a drum being hit. The comb-shaped giant palm leaves shivered under the impact. I was not in the slightest afraid. They could dig dirt with their tusks but could never excavate a deep hole and uproot the tree. Although the trunk of the coconut palm is in general rather fragile and the giant elephants are the Hercules of the forest, this tree trunk had such a wide girth that it took my two arms fully extended to encircle it, which means ramming it would not bring it down.

And indeed, the three gray elephants, with their six tusks, dug and dug at the bottom of the tree for a long while, only to dig up about 30 centimeters of surface earth. They were already so tired that they foamed at the mouth. Even after the white one attacked the tree a few dozen times all he managed to knock off the tree were some dead leaves, and he was already stumbling all over the place, tired and shaky.

Once they're exhausted they'll leave. That's what I thought would happen. The sun would soon go down, and after sundown, they would go back into the forest.

The four bull elephants were tired and panting, and stared blankly at the top of the tree. After a while, they once again put their heads together, their trunks raised in umbrella style, as if discussing how to solve a difficult problem. This time, after they broke apart, the white elephant ran towards a small river tributary about 10 meters away, sucked up a trunk-full of water, and came back. He aimed his trunk at the foot of the tree, and squirted the water out at high speed, almost like a high-pressure hose. The dirt, already softened up by three gray elephants, turned immediately into mushy mud slurry, and began flowing away downhill. The other three elephants copied the white one's actions and began hurrying back and forth between the river and the tree, washing away the earth from the tree's roots. Their trunks were very long and could store an amazing amount of water, and, just a while later, a pit half-a-meter deep appeared, revealing the tree's curly roots, which were slightly purplish and looked mustache-like. The white one resumed charging at the tree, shaking the trunk and the canopy, rocking it to the point of falling over.

Deep inside I was beginning to grasp the seriousness of the situation. Coconut palms are not known for their deep root systems: in fact they are short and few in number. If this continued, it would not take long to topple the tree. There was another tree, about seven or eight meters away, a strong and flourishing banyan but I couldn't swing across to it from the coconut palm like a gibbon could.

Sharp cracking sounds came from the roots, the death cries of this poor coconut palm.

If the tree was indeed to fall, I didn't even dare imagine the consequences. I would fall to the ground like a ripe fruit and get seriously injured in the fall. All I had with me was one long knife. Even a hundred knives would make little impression on the elephants' tough hides, whereas they could grasp me by the waist with their long trunks, pick me up easily and toss me around like a rubber ball, before making mincemeat of me with their tusks...

There was only one lifeline left: to call Dandelion to help me out of this deathtrap. The tiger is known as the king of the jungle. Even elephants are wary of them. But Dandelion was not yet a full-grown tiger, so I wasn't sure whether or not she could scare off the elephants.

I put one forefinger into my mouth and gave several long whistles.

From my high vantage point up in the tree I could see very far. As soon as I whistled, I caught sight of a colorful figure leap out from the bushes at the foot of the hill and move rapidly towards the orchard. A few minutes later, the figure got closer and it was indeed Dandelion! She was carrying an otter in her mouth, and appeared on a gentle slope about 50 meters to the right of the tree.

Megaphone style, I cupped my hands around my mouth, and shouted, "Dandelion! Get these pesky critters away from me!"

Dandelion tossed the otter aside, looked up at the top of the coconut palm, and seemed to grasp what was going on. She crouched, raised her tail, and, using the banana trees as cover, made her way towards my position.

Thanks to the cover provided by the banana trees, the elephants did not spot Dandelion, but they had an acute sense of smell and, being downwind of her, caught that special smell that tigers give off. The white elephant raised his trunk up high and sniffed at the wind. The other three stopped their watering, and trembled with nervousness.

Grrrrrr...Dandelion was closing in on the four elephants and from behind a banana tree she issued a menacing growl.

The white elephant instinctively took a few steps back, and the three gray ones got panicky, jostling and bumping into each other.

Tigers are intimidating creatures and I assumed that when Dandelion appeared with bared teeth and flashing claws the elephants would turn and run.

Dandelion leapt out from behind the banana trees, teeth bared and ready for a fight.

However, the outcome truly surprised me. On spotting Dandelion, not only did the elephants not run away, but their fear disappeared and they stopped backing off. The white elephant stuck up its trunk, raising its tusks in readiness for a fight. The three gray elephants snorted loudly through their trunks and prepared themselves too.

It was no wonder the elephants were willing to fight the tiger. Looking at Dandelion on her

own, she was already the size of a water buffalo calf, with slanted eyes and white brows. She was a majestic and fierce presence. But to see her alongside the elephants, she looked in comparison like a little boat alongside a large ferry. The bull elephants could easily see that their challenger was still in her youth, a juvenile female lacking in both build and ferocity. Aware of their greater strength and numbers, and confident of winning easily against this young tiger, their fear evaporated.

Dandelion pounced, and the white elephant rushed up to her, brandishing his tusks. Dandelion twisted at the waist and leapt out of his way, but was hemmed in by two gray elephants coming in from left and right, their long trunks whipping at her head like two steel whips. One trunk slapped her ears with a loud wallop, and Dandelion rushed away in surprise, stopping right by the side of the white elephant's leg. The white elephant raised his leg and kicked at her rump, knocking her over. The two gray elephants stabbed at her with their tusks, but Dandelion reacted in a flash, rolling over on the ground. The two grays missed their target, their tusks landing deep within the banana trees...

Aloft in my tree refuge, I broke into a cold sweat.

While the white elephant and two of the grays were dealing with Dandelion, the third gray remained by the roots of the tree to prevent me taking this chance to escape.

Dandelion was driven off, hotly pursued by the white elephant and two of the grays. They chased her all the way down until she escaped into the bushes at the bottom of the slope before they made their way back, triumphant.

Dandelion was not yet full-grown, and was initially no match at all for these elephants. With her spine almost broken by the elephants' feet and her body almost pierced by their tusks, I thought she must be very scared and wouldn't dare come back to help me.

After chasing away the tiger, the white elephant became surer of himself and was bossing the gray elephants in directing water at the roots of the coconut palm as fast as they could. By then, the sun was half sunken behind the hills and the orchard was shrouded in a layer of thin mist. The white elephant trumpeted loudly and rammed hard into the tree with his giant body. Dong! It swayed under the impact like a drunkard. Crack! Some roots snapped; the tree tilted slightly. Another two rounds of hosing and this tree would certainly fall.

Wooo—Suddenly, from the southeast corner of the orchard came cries from the female

elephants. I looked down towards the sound. Inside the makeshift delivery room, the mother lay on the ground, absolutely exhausted by just having given birth. The newborn elephant lay on the pile of green banana leaves as one of the older females sprayed it with water to wash the blood off its young body. And, under the shade of the banana leaves I could just make out a very familiar two-tone figure, pacing up and down in front of the birthing enclosure. Two females, clearly in a state of panic, were running around roaring, trunks aloft, attempting to stop Dandelion reaching the shelter.

I felt a deep sense of relief. Undeterred by the ferocious attack of the male elephants, Dandelion had not, after all, given up on rescuing me. She circled around the hill, looking for an opening, seeking out the weakest link. Catching the scent of blood, she had run to attack the newborn elephant.

There are two types of elephants: African and Asian. The biggest difference between the two is in the size of its females. The female African elephant is almost as large as her male counterpart, and has very well-developed tusks. Asian elephants tend to be smaller than their African cousins, and the females, as well as being smaller than the males, don't have long tusks.

Dandelion gave a roar, and lunged at the cow elephant blocking her way. The females were not so brave and scattered, leaving the shelter open to attack, and Dandelion was in there in a flash. The two older elephants taking care of the baby elephant stood in her way and roared loudly to summon help. The message was clear: Get back here fast, a tiger's about to attack the baby!

Startled, the big white elephant turned round, stopping its attacks on the tree. The three grays also stopped hosing the roots.

Woooo! Wooooo! Wooooo! Help! The birth shelter's about to become a slaughterhouse!

The three gray elephants raised their trunks, snorted at the white elephant, and scraped the earth with their great feet, urging him to race back and help out the mother and child.

The white elephant reared up on his back legs, looked towards the birthing pen, then took another look at the top of the coconut palm, hesitating, his trunk swinging up and down. Clearly he was torn between wanting to go back and save the baby and reluctance to give up on the tantalizingly close victory.

Dandelion continued to pile on the pressure. Agile and nimble, she worked her way behind an older elephant whose age constricted her mobility and leapt up onto that elephant's backside. The

older female reared up as if she'd been burnt and fled from the shelter in desperation. Dandelion took this chance to run at the baby, her claws extended and teeth bared. The new mother struggled to her feet, shielding the newborn with her body. Dandelion sprang onto her and took a bite at her back. Perhaps because of the thickness of the elephant's hide, and the young tiger's teeth were not yet strong enough, the bite didn't penetrate, so she turned instead to bite the elephant's ears, which fanned out like a Chinese fan palm. Elephant ears are thin and crunchy and would be a tasty bite for her.

The bitten mother opened her mouth wide and hollered in pain. The two females outside the shelter were too scared to help directly, and had chosen instead to ram into the banana trees forming the shelter walls. Dandelion leapt off the mother's back before the walls came crashing down. The elephant allowed the banana trees to roll onto and bury her body, not daring to move or dodge for fear of injuring the vulnerable new baby.

Wooooo! The mother began hollering in pain.

From Dandelion came roars that sent fear deep into the hearts of the female elephants. She jumped and lunged, chasing the two older elephants and the other two females around the shelter. All they could do was to call out in alarm.

The three gray elephants were now circling, restless, frustrated and impatient, intermittently sending reproachful looks to the white elephant. It was obvious that if they continued wasting their time here a tiger catastrophe was a certainty. Whatever way you looked at it, clearly the safety of the baby and the female elephants were top priority. The white elephant let out a long sigh from its trunk, recognizing there was no choice. Finally, he directed one last bitter roar to the top of the coconut palm, swung his trunk, and rushed back toward the shelter.

The three gray males followed close behind on their rescue mission to save the females.

From below by the birth shelter came waves of sound – the tiger roaring and the elephants trumpeting. Night was approaching, and the darkening sky meant I could no longer see Dandelion and the elephants: all I could faintly make out was the violent shaking of banana leaves, a movement that gradually descended toward the foot of the mountain. The animal noises began to subside. Dandelion had succeeded in drawing the elephants off, withdrawing back up the mountain.

I slid down the trunk of the tilting coconut palm in a very big hurry and fled the orchard.



Soon after I made it back to the cottage, Dandelion reappeared. I checked her body closely but discovered no blood or wounds, and relief washed over me. I stroked her back and smoothed out her roughed up coat. What a star! Already so smart and brave, as an adult this tigress would surely rule the forest!

Around this time, Dandelion grew up fast. Her body was about two-meters long, her glossy orange fur was silkily smooth, streaked with black stripes. Her four paws were white as snow and, most unusually, her face was dotted with black, white and yellow spots. Her eyes burnt like torches; she was mighty and brave, and became my right hand help when we went hunting. Whenever we went, she almost always caught something, perhaps taking a wild boar, or running down an argali. Rarely did she fail.

One morning, I took Dandelion with me to the Bauhinia Strand to hunt red deer. It was March, so the bauhinias were in full bloom, and the animals were fattening up on the rich grass. The newly grown furry antlers of male deer were starting to branch into what are commonly known as four-prong antlers. The pilose antlers at this time of the year always sell for the highest price. I was fully expecting Dandelion to help me chase down and catch a male deer with branched antlers which would sell for quite a sum.

As we passed by the Dishui spring, Dandelion suddenly stopped in her tracks and put her nose to the ground, sniffing at something and walking in circles. I called out to her, but she just raised her head, took one look at me, then lowered her head and resumed her circling. We were at a piece of boggy ground beside the spring, devoid of grass and trees, a place where nothing could hide. I walked forward a few steps then turned around to call her, even whistled to her, but she simply ignored me and didn't move. This wasn't Dandelion on the trail of a quarry: in that mode, her eyes would go up at the corners, her tail would stiffen and go up and she'd growl. No, her facial expression was one of happiness and sweetness, her tail was relaxed and swaying, her eyes seemed to smile. She would sometimes cock her head as if studying something, and extend a front paw as if to touch something. She was completely taken over, as if she had found a rare treasure.

For two full years now I had raised her from a cub but had never seen her show so much interest in anything. I was curious, and walked over to investigate. At first I saw nothing in the patch of wet mud. Then, upon closer inspection, I saw a footprint very lightly impressed in the

mud. It made no sense at all, what was so wonderful about a mere footprint? I patted her on the shoulder as a sign we should leave, but instead of leaving, Dandelion sat down in front of the footprint as if it had somehow bewitched her and rooted her to the spot.

My curiosity stirred. I bent down to study the footprint. It was in the shape of a quince flower, with four clear toe marks, a dent at the place where the sole should be, and a small hexagon-shaped outline at the base of the sole. It was a classic tiger footprint! It was slightly larger than Dandelion's own print and by my reckoning it was that of a male. Dandelion stayed by the footprint, fascinated by it, and it was only after I'd spent half an hour calling and urging her that she consented to leave it and follow me.

After this delay, when we finally reached Bauhinia Strand, the sun was high in the sky, the red deer had had their fill of grass and were now hidden away in the maze-like swamps, out of sight. I caught nothing that day and had to go back empty-handed. I'd gone out with high expectations but returned with dashed hopes!

In the following days, when the rays of the setting sun slanted over the hills, Dandelion would run to the hilltop in the orchard and look towards Bauhinia Strand, which was often shrouded in cloud and fog. One time, in the middle of the night, Dandelion, who was sleeping behind my bed, suddenly gave a low growl and leapt up to run out of the door. I assumed that she'd scented danger: perhaps a dangerous predator had made its way to the hut. So I got up too, took the shotgun off the wall and ran into the yard. The moon was high and the wind sharp, the crickets were singing away in the bushes, and there was nothing out of the ordinary whatsoever. But Dandelion's face showed such a tender expression. One ear kept twitching non-stop, a sign she was listening to something intently. I also listened, and, after a while, the roar of a tiger came from the direction of Bauhinia Strand. The shore was far away and the call was soft and distant, and at some points I could not hear it at all. Dandelion, however, reacted as if she was hearing the most beautiful sound in the world, her head raised high and her chest puffed out, snorting air in the direction of the tiger calls, looking extremely happy.

Dandelion was two years old by now, which in terms of tiger life stages counts as early adulthood. At this point she should leave her mother and live on her own in the forest, find a mate and raise the next generation. This would be the natural path for her, the normal course of a tiger's life. I knew, of course, that, unlike dogs, a tiger could never be a lifelong companion for a human.

On top of this, my parents and sisters, hearing I was raising a tiger, were scared enough to have nightmares about it: they showered me with letters, urging me to get rid of her, convinced that one day she'd swallow me whole in a fit of anger. My girlfriend (now my wife) had also given me an ultimatum: I must choose either Dandelion or her. The Manguangnong villagers were scared of Dandelion and refused to come to the orchard, which meant that the bananas were rotting on the trees and pineapples in the fields for lack of anyone willing to pick them. So the village chief was extremely angry, threatening to skin Dandelion alive. There are several sayings on the subject of getting close to tigers, all of them stressing the inherent great danger, for instance: "To raise a tiger is to raise troubles," "Befriending a king is like befriending a tiger." Well, in my case it was "Befriending a tiger is like befriending a king." A degree of danger was undeniable: if she killed someone I would be in big trouble, and if one day she decided to sink her teeth into my neck, that would be the end of me. Up until then she had never shown any inclination of harming me, nor had she killed any creature in the village, but however you looked at it there was a potential risk. Under pressure from all sides, I started thinking I should return Dandelion to the wild.

Early next morning, while I was weeding the orchard, Dandelion slipped away into the forest. At noontime, I whistled for her many times, but she didn't respond and I guessed she'd gone off to Bauhinia Strand in search of the male tiger. By nightfall, she had still not returned, and I assumed, with a wave of sadness, that maybe this unceremonious departure was the end, that she would never come back to me. Even though I'd been considering returning her to the mountains and knew in my heart that one day she would leave me, I did feel a wrench, for we had spent two years living together.

She was just an animal after all, leaving without any farewell. It hurt to think I'd spent two years raising her, all for nothing. I didn't feel like cooking and sat down to smoke in silence. The sky became dark. Inside the pitch-black hut, the only light was the tip of my cigarette, which flickered orange in the darkness.

Suddenly, from the yard came the sound of soft footfalls: Dandelion was back, making her way with great difficulty through the door, carrying a giant prey in her mouth. I felt a rush of happiness and immediately lit up the hearth. By the light of the fire, I saw she was carrying a large red deer, a male with four-prong antlers! Dandelion was wet all over, bits of grass and mud sticking to her coat, and totally exhausted. After dropping the deer in front of me, she crouched

down panting heavily. I'd misjudged her: she hadn't run off without a sign, but had gone to catch deer at Bauhinia Strand.

I cut off one of the deer's legs and presented it to Dandelion. She'd had a tough day and her stomach was surely empty, so by rights she should have devoured the leg. But she merely stuck out her tongue and licked at it without biting. Instead, she pushed the leg towards me with her mouth.

I thought she might be thirsty and wanted water before eating, so I took a bamboo ladle and scooped up some water from the earthen pot. Not only did she refuse the water, but turned away from my ladle.

I felt her forehead and even pried open her mouth to check the color of her tongue. Everything seemed normal and she didn't look sick in any way. Had she been, there's no way she could have carried this 50 kg-plus deer all the way from Bauhinia Strand back to the orchard.

Then, Dandelion got up and walked away from me. She went to the spot behind my bed where she slept every day and looked at it and, then to the earthen jar that she drank from daily. She paced deliberately and sniffed as she walked, her gentle eyes showing a reluctance to leave. Finally, looking dejected and downcast, she came to my side, rubbed her neck against my leg, and made strange purring noises.

I realized that this was Dandelion's farewell ritual, a farewell to me, and to the cottage of the orchard – to the home where she had lived for two years. I suddenly realized that she'd gone to Bauhinia Strand to hunt deer because she knew I liked bucks with four-prong antlers. Her refusal to eat the leg despite her stomach being empty was a signal that this deer was for me alone. She had caught it to express her gratitude for me raising her, and to tell me that she was leaving.

I felt very moved. She hadn't just left abruptly. Her emotional intelligence showed she knew the right thing to do. I was still sad at her leaving, but was consoled by her gesture. I meticulously helped clean off all the grass and mud over her body, wiped the droplets of water from her face, and smoothed out her fur, grooming her as if preparing a daughter for her wedding.

"Dandelion, if you want to leave I won't stop you." I told her, my arms encircling her neck. "Don't forget me. Come back and visit once in a while. If things don't go well out there, come back any time. This place will always be your home."

I believed she understood. Even though I am a human and she a tiger, I thought our hearts

were connected. Though she had no human speech, she understood everything.

Moonlight shone through the doorway. Dandelion pulled away from me and began reversing her way out, still facing me. When she reached the yard, she turned, swished her tail, and leapt into the patch of palm trees beyond the yard. When I ran after her, she'd already disappeared into the silvery moonlight.

I never saw Dandelion again. About a year and a half later, one day at dusk, the village chief who'd threatened to skin Dandelion alive came to my orchard looking very excited. He told me that in the morning he'd gone into the Mengbanaxi forest to cut firewood. Turning in a valley, less than a hundred meters away, he had come face to face with three tigers - a powerful and fierce full-grown tigress and her two young cubs. The chief was scared out of his wits, his legs almost gave way beneath him. The two cubs bared their teeth, ready to spring at him, but the tigress swished her tail and held the cubs back from mischief. She looked at him for about 30 seconds before leading the cubs off into the bushes.

"She must have been that Dandelion of yours," the village leader declared. "Why else would she act so kindly to a human?"

That made sense to me, so next day I got up really early and made my way to the Mengbanaxi forest, hoping to meet Dandelion after such a long separation. Sadly, though I searched for a whole day, I failed to find her.

## Tricked by Foxes, Not Once but Twice

As an urban “educated youth” I was sent from Shanghai to serve in Xishuangbanna, a poor rural area in southwest China, and just three days after getting there I was tricked by a fox.

That day I went to market in Menghun town, and bought a large capon, intending to poach it up for chicken soup that night. At dusk as daylight was fading, I was on my way home alone carrying the chicken, heading back to Manguangnong village along an ancient river path full of wild animal tracks. The path was very quiet. There was no one else around. I turned a corner, and suddenly, lying in front of me on the stony shore just a dozen steps away, I saw a fox in its death throes. Seemingly poisoned, it was foaming at the mouth, with its shoulder twitching and its hair standing on end.

Startled to see me, it staggered up in an attempt to get away, but as soon as it got to its feet it toppled over feebly. Its collapsing looked so realistic that I didn't suspect for a second it might be faking it. It dropped straight to the ground, knocking its head loudly against a stone. It lay on the ground, its four limbs extended, the white butterfly-shaped flash between its brows twisted in pain, and fixed me with a gaze full of despair. I could see quite clearly that it was an adult male fox. Its thick glossy coat shone beautifully, like a piece of red gold silk. I couldn't check the desire I felt stirring and rising inside me to capture it. The pelt was of such amazing quality I couldn't tear my eyes away, and while the fox was there for the taking, it was only natural to take advantage. Besides, catching a fox empty-handed would give me something to boast about to any kids I might have in the future, so why not?

There was a wild banana tree nearby and I placed the capon under it; there was no way it could escape, its legs and wings being trussed up with string. Then, I took off my belt, shaped it into a loop, and went over to the struggling fox. Catching a dying fox would be as easy as catching a turtle in a jar, I thought. But, as I reached the pebbly shore and raised my looped belt towards the fox's neck, it suddenly “came back to life.” It sat up, flipped nimbly onto its feet, and vanished in a flash from beneath my fingers. I was shocked by this “resurrection,” and a further shock came when I heard behind me the terrified squawking of the chicken. I turned around and was stupefied by what I saw: beneath the banana tree, a black-eared vixen with a few udders hanging on her

belly was biting at my chicken. The bird was tied up tight, completely unable to resist or run away. For the vixen, it presented a much easier meal than stealing from a cage. I bent down, intending to lob a rock at her to chase her off, but I was too late. With her teeth holding the chicken by its neck, the vixen dashed for the opposite shore of the riverbed. The “dying” fox circled back and rejoined the vixen. Victorious, they ran off, shoulder to shoulder, one holding the chicken by the neck and one by the legs. At the edge of the forest, the male turned and winked at me. He also shook his fancy red-and-white tail at me in a rather strange movement, whether in gratitude or apology I couldn’t say.

I stood there, dazed at this ironic turn of events. I’d wanted to take advantage of the fox, but it was he who got the bargain!

I walked back to the village, downcast and dejected, and shared this story with the village chief, who laughed and told me: “These foxes are really savvy. They saw your fair face and your smart clothes, figured out that you’re a student fresh from the city and so dared to trick you with the tactic of aiming at a pigeon and shooting at a crow.”

This was no consolation at all. Aside from a sense of regret at the loss of my chicken and anger at being tricked, I also felt annoyed at having been made a fool of.

A few months later, I went over to the riverbed path one morning to cut firewood. From beside the fallen trunk of a dead tree, I caught the sour smell of foxes. I was using my machete to clear away the wormwood when, with a whoosh, a fox suddenly came shooting out of a deep hole by the roots of the tree and slid past my feet. It had a red-and-white tail plus a white butterfly-shaped spot between its brows. Surely this was the same fox that had played dead to trick me of my chicken the other day!

The fox stopped about twenty meters away from me. Then, as if tripped by creepers on the ground, he fell heavily and rolled over several times like a ball. Facing me, he twitched at the mouth and hissed, as if in great pain from his injured waist. He turned as if to make off, but after just one step, he started to wail with pain, seemingly from damaging a hind leg. His body tottered left and right. He raised one hind leg up in the air and turned in circles on the spot. From all appearances, had I walked up with my machete, I could very easily have chopped off its head.

But I realized immediately this was a repeated performance to lure me into chasing him again. As soon as I got close, his waist would miraculously heal, he’d stop limping and would hare off

like lightning. He must be daydreaming to think I'd fall for the same trick! He was trying to fool me again, and this time the goal was clear: to lure me away from the hole by the tree roots, which must be his den. The vixen was highly likely to still be in the den, and, if I guessed correctly, like last time, the dog fox would draw my attention with his little dying act while the vixen would complete the trick. I didn't have a chicken with me this time, nor any other form of food. What exactly their game was I didn't know, but there was one thing I knew for sure: they were ganging up again to trick me. But this time, I was determined not to go after the male, to see their trick fail, leaving them to taste bitter failure. What amusing payback this would be!

I gave a sardonic laugh. Not only did I not pursue the male, I stepped toward the hole, my machete held high and waited by the entrance to the den, ready, as soon as the vixen poked out her head, to chop down without hesitation and brandish her severed head! An entire fox pelt in return for a capon. It was a good bargain.

Behind me, the male began limping more markedly, his cries becoming more and more pitiful. His mouth flecked with spittle, he moved a few steps towards me, but I ignored him. Why should I care when only one of his legs was limp and he was foaming at the mouth? Even if all his four legs were limp and he was lying motionless, rolling the whites of his eyes, I wasn't going to be fooled a second time.

After a while, the fox seemed to realize I wasn't going to be taken in by his clumsy acting, so he put weight on that "limp" hind leg, straightened his crooked waist, and stopped his agonized circling. He crouched there, fixed me with a pathetic gaze, and made long wailing sounds from his pointed muzzle, apparently in great distress.

Frustrated now? Disappointed? Well, you asked for it. Do you think a fair-faced student fresh from the city is so easily tricked? Now let's see if you dare look down upon an educated youth like me any more!

The fox crouched in the bushes about ten meters away from me, while I crouched, machete at the ready, by the entrance to the hole, while the vixen stayed curled-up deep inside the den. Neither of us budged for about ten minutes.

Suddenly, with a shrill, full-throated cry, the fox leapt up and hurtled towards a small tree nearby. The posture of his jump was very different from his usual movements: his feet were tucked in close to his belly and his head stuck out forward. Half his head smacked into the tree



trunk with a loud bang. One ear was gashed, and the right side of his face, from the eyelid down to chin was scraped bloodily by the abrasive tree bark. He got to his feet, and sank his teeth into the curve of a front leg. His body shook with the violent force, and, with a loud ripping sound, he tore from between the inside of his front leg and his chest a patch of skin the size of a human palm. It did not detach but dangled from his chest, swinging about. Fresh blood began to seep from the wound, dyeing the patch of fur bright red. He seemed to have a small red flag hanging from his chest and flying in the wind, which was absurd and scary all at the same time.

The fox must've gone mad, I thought. Distracted by his crazy behavior, I stopped monitoring the hole and then - whoosh! A red figure leapt out of the hole while my attention was elsewhere. I came to in a flash and slashed down with my knife, but all it hit was thin air. Kicking myself, I looked up and, sure enough, there was the vixen, making into the bushes behind the earth mound carrying something pink in her mouth. Those foxes had got the better of me again!

The vixen ran up the mound and stopped to gently place the little pink object onto the ground. It was only then that I realized what she'd been carrying was a cub. Barely a month old if that, the little guy had only a thin fluffy coat, and looked like a small sun in a patch of mist. He wriggled on the ground. The vixen changed position, picked him up again and disappeared fast into the dense bushes.

So there must be a litter of cubs hidden in that hole! To confirm my guess, I got down onto my stomach and put my ear close to entrance to the den. I could hear a clear hubbub below made by the cubs. I didn't know exactly how many cubs were down there, but fox litters normally have at least three cubs, at most seven, usually four or five. These cubs were originally snuggled in the warm embrace of their mother; now, with their mother suddenly gone, they were frightened and cold, so they kept up a thin, shrill caterwauling, crying for the warm security of their mother's body.

When I stuck my ear to the den, wild and urgent calls came from the male fox as he jumped up and down, scratching with his paws at the wounds on his chest and face, getting blood all over his body, dyeing red the white patch between his brows. It looked like he was playing the role of the sword-and-horse *dan* in a Peking Opera.

I knew the fox was trying to draw my attention onto him. Without actually knowing why, I suddenly choked up with emotion and lost the heart to continue crouching at the mouth of the den.

I stood up, and only then did the male fox show the slightest sign of calming down. Oh the things parents do for their children...

Then, from the bushes behind the mound came the vixen's wowl. It was high-pitched and piercing, powerful and commanding. I saw the male's ears prick up, listening intently. Then, he lifted his head and looked up at the clouds and the sun with a grave expression and serious eyes. Suddenly, he lifted a foreleg, put the kneecap into his mouth, and bit down hard. Even though I was more than ten meters away from him I could hear the crunch of bones cracking and shattering under his teeth. For me it was the most hideous sound in the world, bringing me out in goosebumps.

A few minutes later, that part of his foreleg was almost completely bitten off, hanging on only by a strip of skin. The broken-off section dangled in the air, like a piece of lotus root still connected to the base by thin fibers. Apparently worried I might doubt his determination to sever his own leg, he took the dangling section and pulled at it hard. His excessive violent exertion sent his body round in clumsy circles, and, after two circles, that bit of leg finally came detached. Blood spurted out, flooding the grass around him red, and I could see the eerie white color of his bones. He looked at me with expectant and imploring eyes, then hobbled back as if to run away. He seemed to be saying, "Look, I really am injured. I really can't run fast. I'm really easy to catch, so come on and get me!"

I understood that everything the fox was doing was still a ruse. This self-inflicted injury was a cruel trick to lure me away from the den so that the vixen could move the cubs to safety one by one. This time, even though I figured he was still tricking me, I was helpless to resist. It felt like the hole by the tree roots in front of me had become a cauldron of boiling oil, a suffocating steamer basket and I couldn't stay a second longer. The only way I could still stay by the den, I thought, would be if I'd had a heart transplant, swapping my youthful 17-year-old heart for one of an unscrupulous 70-year-old. Maybe then I could bear to stay by the den with a machete ready and a cold smile. I felt a strong force pushing me, compelling me to pursue the fox.

Limping and staggering, he ran haphazardly, dripping blood wherever he passed. Several times I could have brought the knife down on him, but for some inexplicable reason, every time the blade was about to hit him, my wrist would swerve to the side, sending it into the grass.

The male was screeching in pain, struggling, and unyieldingly heading away from the den. I

chased after him, and knew without looking back that the vixen was busy moving her cubs out of the den...

Eventually, long wavering cries came from the bushes. The vixen's voice seemed calmer, as if reporting that all was well again. Relief flooded the male's face, and he changed his posture, straightened his waist and lifted his head as if to end our little chasing game, suddenly come alive again, and fly into the bushes to reunite with his mate and cubs. I was hoping he'd give me a sly wink, shake that large red-and-white tail of his, then run into the bushes and disappear without trace. But, as he made a movement to spring away, he suddenly toppled over, never to rise again.

The fox had lost too much blood. He was dead.

*Jiang Boyan LLC*