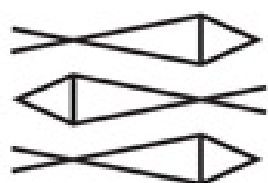


THE BLUE FOX

SJÓN

TRANSLATED FROM
THE ICELANDIC BY
VICTORIA CRIBB



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I
(JANUARY 9–11, 1883)

Blue foxes are so curiously like stones that it is a matter for wonder. When they lie beside them in winter there is no hope of telling them apart from the rocks themselves; indeed, they're far trickier than white foxes, which always cast a shadow or look yellow against the snow.

A blue vixen lies tight against her stone, letting the snow drift over her on the windward side. She turns her rump to the weather, curls up, and pokes her snout under her thigh, lowering her eyelids till there's the merest hint of a pupil. And so she keeps an eye on the man who has not shifted since he took cover under the overhanging drift, here on the upper slopes of Asheimar, some eighteen hours ago. The snow has drifted and fallen over him until he resembles nothing so much as a hump of ruined wall.

The creature must take care not to forget that the man is a hunter.

He began his pursuit away south at Botn. The sky was clear and the first blush of day at its winter blackest. The man slid down over the home fields, then set a course north over the Asar to Litla-Bjarne where it had not drifted as yet.

Once there, he caught a movement on the brow of the hill. Thrusting a hand inside his clothes, he took out a spyglass, extended it, and put it to his good eye:

Yes, there was no mistaking it!

There was a daughter of Reynard on the move.

She seemed blithely unaware of any danger. All her movements indicated that she was on the prowl for a bite to eat. She went about her business unhurriedly, intent on this sole purpose.

The man took a closer look at her.

He bent his thought hard upon her, trying to get an inkling of what she intended, of which way she would go when she had finished her nosing on the crest. All of a sudden she took off at a run; the man couldn't imagine why. Her whole demeanor showed that she sensed a grave threat. Yet she couldn't have had the least suspicion of the man—by ordinary means.

She must have had a foreboding of his intention:

He's a man with hunting on his mind.

The man walked up the hill. He tried to keep the image of the vixen clear in his mind to help him find her again the more easily: “She spins over the hard-packed snow like a top.”

Up on the crest he cast around for the vixen’s tracks. He pinched one fox print between thumb and forefinger; it seemed a sizable beast. In the snowflake that lingered on his fingertip lay a gleaming hair—there was no mistaking the color: blue.

Vertical streaks of cloud in the west.

Maybe a storm on the way.

The vixen nowhere to be seen.

The trail was plain, as far as the eye could see.

The man walked briskly with the wind at his back. It didn't much matter now if the vixen caught his scent; she knew he was after her.

He paused every now and then to cast around, using the same method as before. He bent all his thought on the one goal of working out which way the vixen would run and where he would get within striking distance.

All at once he receives word of which way she is going and where he will get within striking distance:

“The vixen is going north over the plain. She'll double sharply to the east with the gravel beds Melar before her, nothing but stones; a perfect hiding place for a blue fox.”

Was she too intent to take care? Had she given all her mind over to the danger—thereby letting him into her thoughts? Had she paid no heed to warding him off?

Had the man received a thought-message from the vixen?

Out on the stony plain the air was still and freezing hard; only the lightest breath touched his cheek. The man saw a bluish bump far to the north. He held himself still. After a while the bump began to stir. And shortly afterward a blue vixen rose from the stones.

“Ha, there she is!”

A rare beast. Dark as earth to look at, with a thick pelt and bushy tail, clearly jumpy as hell. She sprang away in sharp, stiff bounds.

The man set off at a run.

As he had suspected, the vixen made straight for the blowing snow. In the very instant before the blizzard swallowed her, she stopped short and glanced back at the man.

Then whisked away again at a terrific pace.

There was a whining in the air.

A ptarmigan hurtled past, a hairsbreadth from the man, driven before the wind. It was followed by a falcon, flying high with sure and steady wing beats.

The man turned away from the blast, tightened his scarf, and wrapped the shoulder strap three times around his right arm so the bag rested tight against his hip.

He was not too late for the storm.

The man trudged through the impenetrable murk.

At first he had stony ground underfoot and the going was not too bad, but the snow soon thickened and conditions deteriorated.

He had to trust to his line of thought:

“The vixen can be childishly weather-shy. She’ll dig herself into a drift or press herself deep in the crannies, well below the frost mark, and there she’ll stay until the foul weather has passed.”

Now the man has a chance of lessening the gap between himself and the little fox.

He inched forward.

But just as the man felt he must have gained on the vixen, the snow suddenly deepened. It now came up to his crotch—and with the next step the man sat fast in his tracks.

He could go neither back nor forward; he couldn't see the hand in front of his face.

The blizzard buffeted him from every side, from above and below.

As evening drew on, the weather turned wilder, the frost piercing his clothes in spite of the thickness, and he grew so cold that he had to shiver himself to warmth.

The man decided to let himself be snowed in.

He moved a little while this was happening, so the snow formed a windproof shell around him.

He was of medium stature, stout, and bulky about the chest. His features were coarse; his forehead middling height but broad, giving his face its character. He had small steel-blue eyes, set deep under heavy brows that met in the middle, and a high-bridged, thick nose. The set of his profile and chin could not be made out for the dark-red beard, shot through with silver, which overlaid cheek and jaw reaching down to his breast. He had grizzled earth-brown hair. A domed birthmark perched high on his left nostril.

Such was the man in the snowdrift.

The night was cold and of the longer variety.

The man broke off his ice shell.

He praised the Snow Queen and Jack Frost for the shelter they had given him on this fair patch of ground; from this vantage point he could see far and wide over the white frozen wastes.

He now took to pinching and squeezing himself. When he had finished rubbing warmth into the muscles of his upper arms, he pulled on his gloves, braced his hands on the snow ledge, and hoisted himself off his throne.

Yes, he was a lucky dog.

Having shouldered his rifle and bag, the man didn't slow his pace until he reached the smooth rocks Lofaklopp, those ice-age remnants high up the mountain, where the snow never lies.

There he took off his haversack and removed his gloves, skin shoes, and knitted stockings, laying them to dry on the rock beside him.

No, damn it, he took off every stitch and sat there as he was created: in nothing but his skin. He was the child of Earth-Sun's daughter.

His guts rumbled and the man discovered that he was hungry; he hadn't tasted a bite since gorging himself on boiled fish before he set off, but that was more than twenty hours ago.

He had eaten a bit of ice since then, truth be told, but that was dull and insubstantial fare. He opened the bag:

Hand-thick slabs of lamb; rye cakes with sheep's butter, sour as gall, topped with mutton sausage; a dried cod's head; pickled blood pudding; dried fish; curd porridge; and a lump of brown sugar.

Yes, all this was in his mess bag.

The sun warms the man's white body, and the snow, melting with a diffident creaking, passes for birdsong.

At noon the peaks were still bright and there were patches of blue in the sky. The man recalled the untold glorious hours he had spent in the mountains since he was a lad. Nothing could equal the beauty of those days—except the new chandelier in the church at Dalbotn.

No! The man flings himself flat on the ground: What did he glimpse there? Was it a boulder?

He grabbed the spyglass but could see nothing. Mist on the lens. He wiped it off with his sleeve. What? Could it be what he thought it was? It vanished, no, there it came back into view:

A fox's head! Yes, the merest shadow of a head. It was the blue. Of course, she must have been on watch there for some time. He closed the spyglass.

The vixen gave a bloodcurdling screech.

The land thereabouts is featureless and slopes to the east, with low tussocks and shallow gullies. There was no way for the man to intercept the vixen without being seen. So he lay still where he had thrown himself when he spotted her. The vixen sprang onto a rock and began to howl. There she sat, pointing her muzzle at the sky every time she uttered a sound.

And so the vixen tried to provoke the man to move. She had probably lost him when he flung himself down.

The man lay flat on his stomach. He had managed to twist himself to face north, with his rifle before him, but didn't dare move because there was no rise in the ground between him and the vixen, nothing to hide him from her view. Moreover, his weapon was not loaded. He couldn't prime it without alerting the little fox.

He had to think fast if he weren't to lose the vixen like the day before—that would be unthinkable.

What was he to do?

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