



CAT IN THE FOREST

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The clouded leopard stretched its limbs and yawned as though it was tired for losing itself deep into the waves of a comfortable slumber. The dark patches scattered like oceanic islands on its golden fur expanded and contracted almost rhythmically with the stretching. Its yellow eyes, cottony ears, long whiskers, fluffy paws, long, fluffy tail exuded innocence, deceiving its wild essence. But when it flashed its sharp teeth, the innocence dissipated, but not completely. It was as though the leopard was both innocent and feral. The careless birds and monkeys, and the livestock tethered close to the woods without any supervision, knew its nature very well once the teeth sank and the claws bled into their skin. It lived in the lush green and dense hills whose curvy heads crashed into the floating clouds. Through the eyes of a great hornbill in flight, it looked as though a riot had sparked in the hills, letting out threads of smoke as the aftermath. A discreet animal, the leopard could only be captured through camera traps planted in the depths of the hill tracts.

Settled on a thick, long branch jutting out from a strangler fig like a wavy, spaghetti-arm, it basked in the sunlight

that cut through the forest canopy in thin, slanted beams. A plant with a very thin stem and wide leaves shaped like a star filtered the light in a way that it formed a star shaped shadow on the earth. The light rendered everything golden — the leopard's body, the leaves, the rocks, the lazy Arakan Forest turtle's shell.

The western hoolock gibbons that fought among themselves (black vs peanut butter) over the *Koethbels* which lay unattended on the earth and rocks shouted at the top of their lungs, in an unintentional attempt to muffle the bird songs and the robotic hum of the robotic insects. The great hornbills circling the sky above the forest took great offence. The leopard could hear the screaming. The birds, the sun-bears, the gaurs, the lazy turtles could too. The intensity of the war rose to an abnormal level with no peacemaker gibbon willing to volunteer. Except them, the other animals were at peace. The sun-bear was vehemently scratching its back on the trunk of a *Chapalish* tree. While in the act, a camera trap fitted on the trunk of an adjacent *Chapalish*, secretly invaded its privacy. It was clueless about its privacy being invaded. When two Gaurs passed through the same area as night fell, the camera captured them too with dots of lights for

eyes. The traps were like mechanical eyes of the forest, present throughout the carnival of long, thick, thin, evergreen trees.

On a new day with a new sun, as peace was restored among the gibbons, as the monkeys were driven away by the sun-bears climbing up the trees to search for honey, and as the snakes were defeated by the male great hornbills desperate to build homes for their expecting female counterparts, a new war was lurching towards the forest, a war that didn't include the gibbons in powerful positions, a war that made every animal its victim. Since the lazy turtles weren't designed to run fast, the first blow was received by their kind. The war was inaugurated with the felling of a *Garjan*. It fell on one Arakan Forest turtle that was mistakenly left untracked by the conversationalists (hence, not taken in the protection centre for this rare turtle's kind). Its shell ruptured under the weight of the tree and its soul came out to soar in the sky, to pass through the atmospheric spheres, to float among the heavenly bodies which would beam and say, "Hello, you're welcome here." Then fell another. Then another. Like that, huge portions of the forests were cleared, and empty spaces bloomed with the mutilated corpses of the trees. The

chainsaws, drillers, trucks, hill-cutting excavators, and bulldozers silenced the din of panicking animals. In their mechanical language, they conveyed the message clearly to the animals, "Sshh, you are helpless." It wasn't the gibbon war that muffled the bird songs this time. The war wagers were silenced by another set of war wagers.

As the clearing grew and grew in its expanse, exposing reddened soil and felled logs marked with red markers (1, 2, 3...) and driving the animals away from their comfort zones, the clouded leopard noticed the chainsaw wielding invaders approaching close. It knew it had to run away. Before launching into a jump from an uneven slab of rock to grip the branch of a tree, it licked its fluffy, innocent but feral paws. And while mid-air, its yellow, innocent but feral eyes, settled on a sticker, which one of the excavators flaunted on its body. And while mid-air, its yellow, innocent but feral eyes, settled on a sticker which one of the excavators flaunted on its body. The sticker read the name of its not so distant relative.

Shah Tazrian Ashrafi still can't make sense of the imminent death of 2018, mostly because of how fast it went. Send him realty checks at www.facebook.com/shahbazashrafi.