



Beyond Forest Boundaries

A collection of short stories
of People and Wildlife

“Storytelling is the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today.”

Robert McKee

When we talk about wildlife, we generally believe that they live deep inside forests and large sanctuaries or national parks - places away from villages, towns and cities. Since the past several decades we are seeing that there is wildlife in our very own backyard, sharing our home, food and water. Once we start to observe the different animals, birds and insects around us, we will start to see that they are affected by the way we live and vice versa. This book gives you a peek into the lives of the people and wildlife that live next to each other in a place called *Kookalthorai* which is near Kotagiri, The Nilgiris district, Tamil Nadu.

Kookalthorai is a large valley where tea and vegetables are grown by a diverse group of people and the valley is surrounded by hills and small forest patches. The water from these hills collects in the valley making the soil very rich to grow different kinds of vegetables. In the past many forest areas were converted to farm lands and from then must have begun the struggle, between human beings and wildlife, for common resources like food and water.

This region is connected to contiguous forests of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve via the Moyar valley which is an important elephant corridor. When we started to work on organic agriculture, ecological restoration of forests and water sources we heard from the residents, many incidents of their interactions with wildlife. We started to record these and developed them into short stories which give a glimpse of the daily lives of people and wildlife in *Kookalthorai* valley. While the stories are true, the names of the people have been changed. We hope that you will enjoy the stories and illustrations which depict the realities of life in a biosphere reserve.

- Nayantara and Baby Shalini

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The Wandering Elephant

On her way to get water for her house, fourteen-year-old Gita heard screams from the village- "*Elephant!!*" Wondering if she heard right - she looked around in the dark to see where all the noise was coming from. She kept looking in the direction of the sound when she saw a big shadow moving her way- the *elephant!* Never had she seen any wild animal near her house, let alone a big animal such as the elephant.

The *elephant* was alone and had long sharp white tusks -sticking out on both sides of it's trunk. Excited and a little scared, she looked at the elephant in amazement to see what he was doing. He broke through a fence, entered a farm and walked towards a banana tree in the field. The fearful and angry shouts in the village continued. Calls to the Forest Department were being made- asking for their help.

Meanwhile, Gita still couldn't take her eyes off the *elephant*. She saw him eat as many bananas as possible before the frightened and angry villagers started to chase him away using fire sticks. It looked like this worked because she then saw the *elephant* move away from the field -climb up the hill- and moved towards the forest.

By this time, Gita could not see the *elephant* but could only guess that he had safely made his way to the forest as the shouts died down in the village. After some time, she saw a man dressed in khaki clothes like the kind policemen wear and guessed that this could be someone from the Forest Department. Though, he soon left seeing that the *elephant* was not there anymore. The next day, Gita saw the same man with other men



Elephants are the largest living land animals and travel through many places at different times of the year. They seem to like bananas and jackfruit and are seen around these trees when they are fruiting. The male elephants have long tusks and are generally seen moving alone or in small groups.

who were dressed like him, moving around the village. Like detectives, they spoke to a few people who saw the *elephant*-collecting whatever information about what had happened. They then moved on to check the field to see what all the *elephants* had destroyed and then they left. Since that day, Gita hasn't seen that *elephant*-or any *elephant*- cross that path again.

The Mysterious Nai Siruthai

After a long day at the farm, Kaushal and his puppy returned home at 7 o'clock. He wanted to take the puppy inside his house and keep her there but could not because there was no place for her. Instead, he went outside and tied the puppy with a chain and gave her some rice and milk to eat. Staring at the puppy eating, he started to think about all the pets he had while growing up. Right from cats, dogs, cows, and goats, he was always surrounded by animals. He enjoys the company of dogs the most because they followed him everywhere he went.



As it got colder, Kaushal decided to go inside the house, where it was warmer. While he was in the kitchen, making a cup of tea for himself, he heard the sound of the chain getting pulled. At first, he thought it was just the puppy playing around-trying to break free from the chain. Then suddenly everything became quiet. Wondering what was going on, Kaushal shone the torch and peeped outside the window. He saw a *medium-sized 'dog'* playing with his puppy. Curious to see who this 'dog' was, he moved towards the front door.



The 'Nai Siruthai' takes different shapes and sizes, based on how the local people describe the animal. Some believe that the animal is actually a leopard, some believe it to be a hyena and some like Kaushal describe it to be a Dhole (also known as Wild Dogs). However, there are no records of the Dhole carrying away domestic dogs.

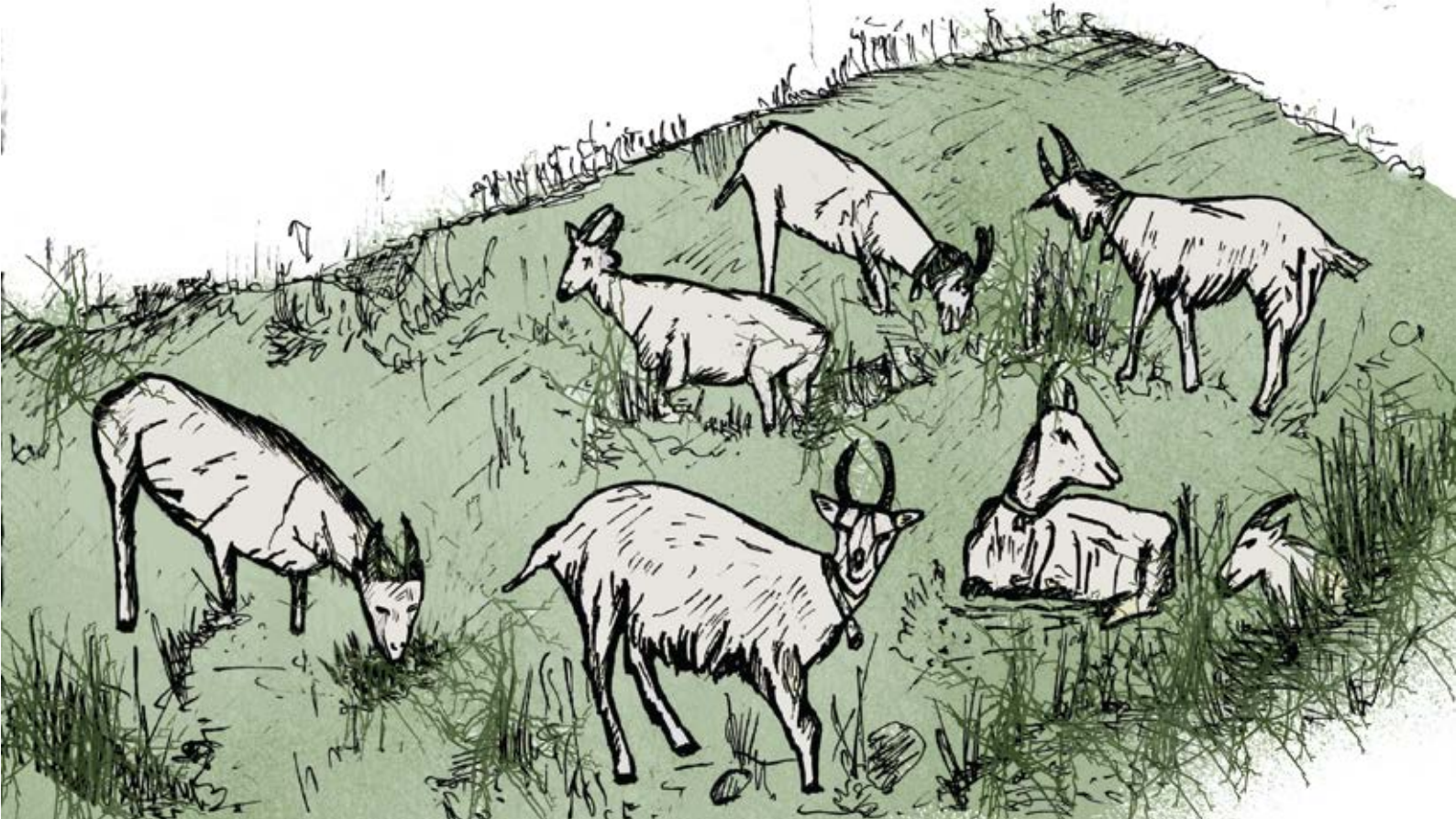
At that moment, Kaushal heard the puppy let out a loud cry. He rushed out and saw the 'dog' attacking the puppy. As he hurried to help the puppy, he heard the chain break. He then saw the 'dog' carry the puppy away by the neck, through a narrow path in the bushes. He saw two more shadows waiting for the 'dog'. At that moment he knew that it wasn't a 'dog'- but a '*Nai Siruthai*'.

This is not the first time that a dog was taken away by a '*Nai Siruthai*', just the previous day, his neighbour's dog was almost carried away by the '*Nai Siruthai*'. A few of them from the village managed to save that dog just in time. The dog did get hurt though and was taken to the hospital to get injections. However, this time Kaushal could not save his puppy as he was alone and the '*Nai Siruthai*' took a narrow path where the animal quickly disappeared into the bushes. He was quite upset but also understood that this is a part of life and not much can be done in such situations. Kaushal feels that these animals started coming out of the forests only recently- searching for food and water. It was a very rare sight to see a '*Nai Siruthai*' during his childhood.

The Hungry Tiger

One sunny afternoon, Maalithi found a rock under a big banyan tree to rest while her goats grazed in the forest behind her house. All of a sudden, she saw the goats jump and run away. At first, she thought they were playing around and called out to them, "Baaaaaa".

Usually, they come running to her when she calls them. Though this time, none of them were in sight! Wondering where they disappeared, she started to search around. That's when she saw the imprint of tiger paws (pugmark) in the mud. Scared, she looked for

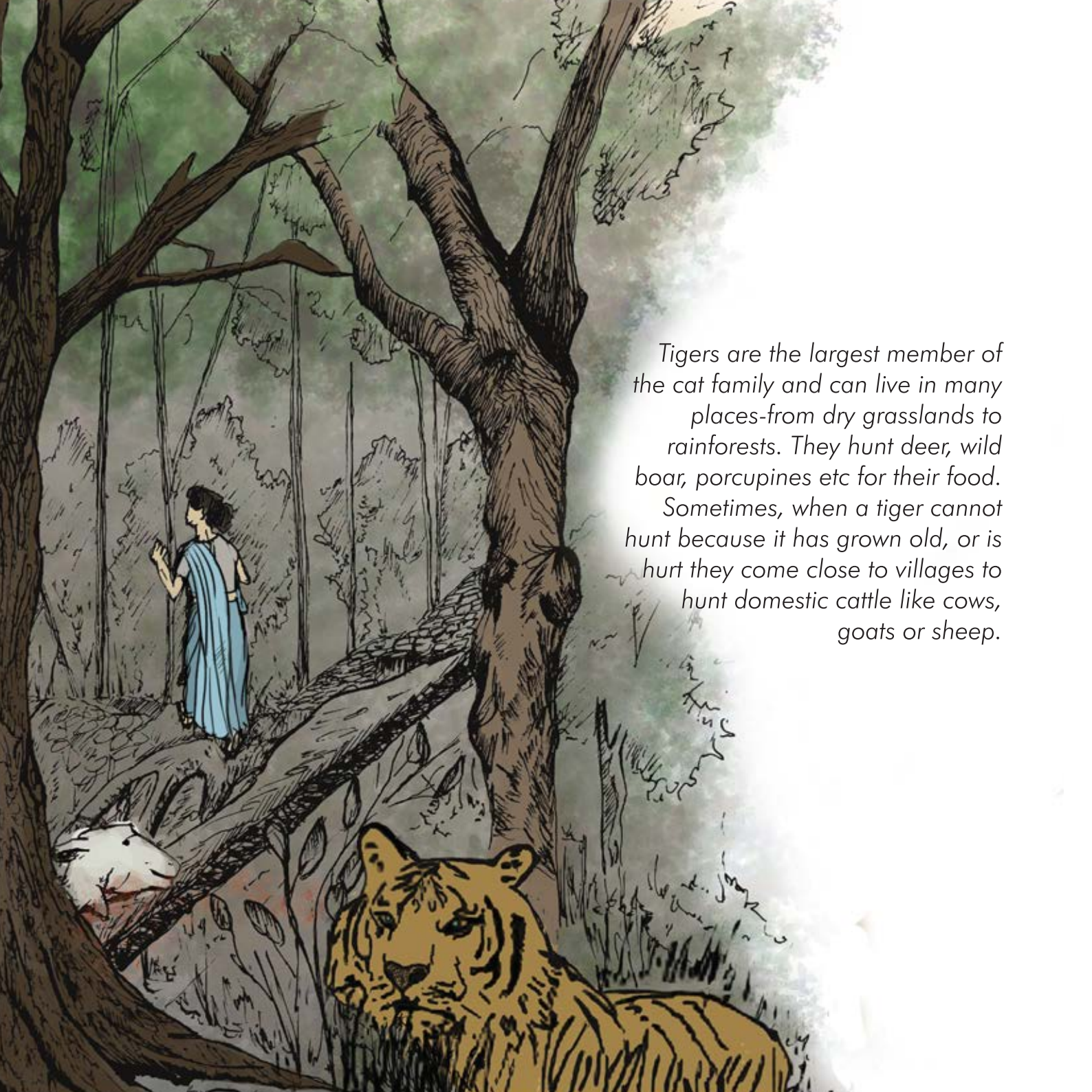


the goats everywhere, hoping against hope that the *tiger* had not eaten them. She searched everywhere until it got dark. Just when she was about to lose hope, she found a trail of blood leading to a small path covered with overgrown bushes. Following this path, she suddenly stopped in her tracks when she saw an orange shadow in the dark. Before she could do anything, she saw from the corner of her eye a goat's head lying on the side. Immediately, she turned around and ran back to her village to tell the people what had happened.

After hearing the story, the villagers told her not to look for the goats as it was too dangerous to go back again. "You can always buy more goats", one of the villagers told her to make her feel better. But only Maalithi knew how much those goats meant to her. She took care of them as her children and loved taking them to the forest to graze.

Not giving up hope she told the Forester of that region what had happened. The Forester said he would visit the area where the goats were attacked though he never came. Maalithi did not give up and she searched the fields around the forest. One day she found the other goats that had escaped though the mother goat which had just given birth a week back had been eaten by the *tiger*. Without their mothers, the baby goats would struggle to survive. "Who will feed them?" she asked herself. There was no option but to sell and so she did that with a very heavy heart. After she gave her goats away, Maalithi could not eat for a week!

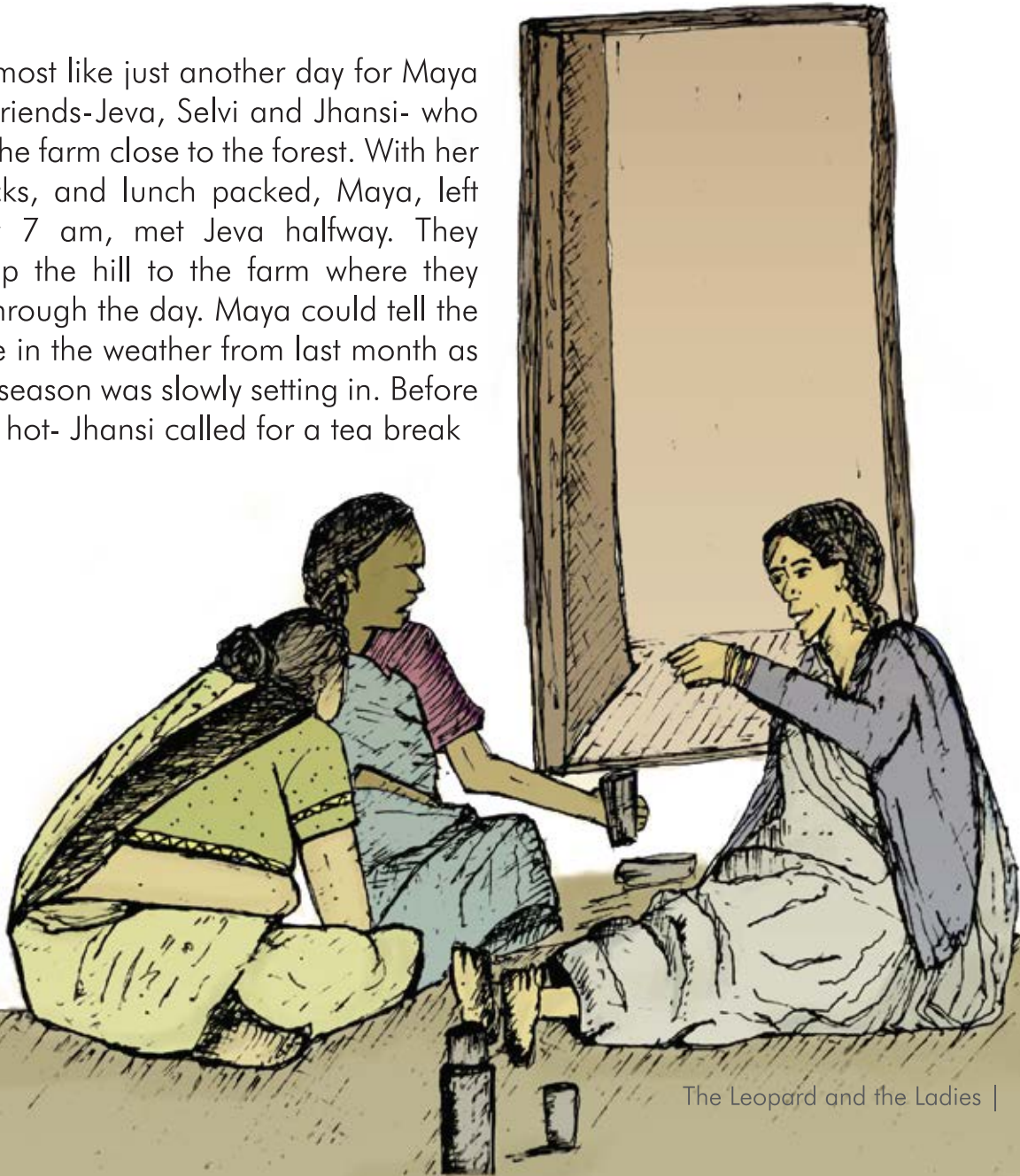
Looking back on this experience, Maalithi still loves all animals with all her heart and she believes that only if you do something bad to them will they do something bad to you.



Tigers are the largest member of the cat family and can live in many places—from dry grasslands to rainforests. They hunt deer, wild boar, porcupines etc for their food. Sometimes, when a tiger cannot hunt because it has grown old, or is hurt they come close to villages to hunt domestic cattle like cows, goats or sheep.

The Leopard And The Ladies

It was almost like just another day for Maya and her friends- Jeva, Selvi and Jhansi- who work on the farm close to the forest. With her tea, snacks, and lunch packed, Maya, left home by 7 am, met Jeva halfway. They walked up the hill to the farm where they worked through the day. Maya could tell the difference in the weather from last month as the rainy season was slowly setting in. Before it got too hot- Jhansi called for a tea break



to rest before they got back to work in the sharp sun. They all met at the shed on the farm. One by one, the ladies started to unpack their breakfast, snacks and pour tea that was still kept warm in their flasks. Apart from resting and eating, tea time is also spent chatting away about news in their lives.

Just as Jeva was completing a story from the previous day, Maya suddenly stopped her and pointed towards the forest, almost in a daze. The group stopped talking and looked in the same direction as Maya's gaze.

After a few seconds, Selvi broke the silence and asked, "What did you see Maya? Show me!" Maya then took Selvi outside the shed and pointed to a rock in front of the forest and saying "Can you see something yellow on the rocks?" Selvi, still struggling to see with her poor eyesight and against the sharp sunlight, says, "No! Please tell me, so I know what to look for." But before Maya could answer, Selvi suddenly shouted, "Leopard!"

The *leopard* by this time opened his eyes and looked in their direction. Catching on to the stare of the *leopard*, Maya realized that the leopard knew that the women have seen him. To be safe, Maya took Selvi back into the shed to join the other women. They sat there for a while, looking at the *leopard*, before getting back to work. During her work, Maya would take short breaks to look at the *leopard* to see whether it was still there. And, every time she would see the *leopard* in the same place. At the most, the *leopard* would change positions and continued to sit on the same rock. Lunchtime came and went, and the *leopard* was still sleeping in the same spot. By this time, the women were used to the *leopard* being around and the *leopard* seemed to be used to the women. Finally, at about 3 pm, Maya looked up to check and caught a last look at the *leopard* before he got up and disappeared into the forest.



Leopards are one of the few big cats that are sighted near human settlements. They have started coming closer to villages and towns and prefer to hunt dogs and other smaller cattle like goats. On cold, windy days, leopards have been sighted outside forests and sitting on rocks basking in the sun.

The Chicken Thief

At about 9:30 in the night, Meenakshi heard her dog barking outside. She knew something was up because her dog barks when a stranger or a wild animal is there. That is why Meenakshi always keeps dogs as pets to protect her. The bark was followed by a chorus of loud clucks by the chickens.

Paying attention to the bark and the cluck, Meenakshi and her husband ran outside to see what was going on. By the time she could react, she saw two chickens lying outside the cages where the chickens were kept. Through the corner of her eyes, she saw the third one being dragged away by a small creature. From similar experiences that have happened before, she knew very well which creature was after her chickens- Mongooses! Many of her and her neighbour's chickens have been taken away by mongooses. They have even taken away the eggs that the chickens have laid.

This gave Meenakshi a lot of worries because her earnings came from the sale of the chickens and eggs. She took extra care and made a safe place for the chickens by using stick fences to stop the *mongoose* and other animals from taking them. Somehow, that night, this *mongoose* made its way through all the fences and killed three of her chickens! Though this time she made sure that the *mongoose* did not take her dead chickens! She quickly picked up some stones from the ground and threw them at the *mongoose*- while he was trying to escape through the bushes.

Mongoose live in holes in the ground called burrows. They like to eat small animals like birds, rats, mice, insects, reptiles, frogs, and worms. They also eat seeds, nuts, and fruits at times. They are quite smart and have been seen to break open bird eggs by throwing them with their front paws on big stones.



The *mongoose* let go of the dead chicken and ran for his life. Meenakshi was sad about the early death of the three chickens. She decided not to waste the meat and made a meal out of two and gave the third to her neighbour. Meenakshi soon had to give up the rest of the chickens because they were slowly being taken away by the *mongooses*. Now Meenakshi goes to work on neighbouring farms. With no chickens around the house the *mongoose* also stopped visiting. She has seen wild dogs (Dhole) near her house and suspects they are eyeing her pet dogs.

The Uninvited Visitor

One chilly October night when Soundarya was cooking dinner for her family, something out of the ordinary happened - a *Sloth Bear* for the first time was standing at her front door! Her husband was wrapped in a blanket watching TV while her daughter, Suja was studying inside the room. She came out of the kitchen and stood still, only to see that the *sloth bear* had both the hands and head inside the house through the half-open door. They were trapped! Seeing how the *bear* would have got into the house soon, she tried to scream out to her husband only to realise that no sound was coming from her throat. At that moment, Soundarya noticed that the *bear* was not scared or angry after seeing her and just carried on trying to get into the house in the most peaceful way. Acting fast, she ran to her husband and pulled his blanket to get his attention. It was then that he too realised what was happening when he turned and saw the *bear*. He then ran towards the door while Soundarya finally regained her voice and shouted a deep, "Aiyoooooooooooo".

This was followed by a loud thud and crash-the goodies the *bear* was trying to steal fell to the floor when the animal escaped to the gate. She then saw the most amazing sight- the *bear* climbed the gate just like how a human being would do, stood on the other side and let out a loud cry! It was the first time Suja had seen, let alone heard a *bear*. Frightened and curious, Soundarya kept checking to see with the torchlight if the *bear* had moved but it hadn't until the sun came up.



Sloth Bears are large animals that move around alone and eat fruits, flowers, honey, and insects. Their long curved nails help them dig out insects and their long mouth is used as a vacuum to suck up all the insects. They can be quite dangerous at times. Every year especially when the Jamun and Pear trees have fruits the mother bear and her cubs can be seen around town climbing up trees to feed on the fruits.



Just when they thought the *bear* had left, it came back again three days later, leaving quite a mess behind as evidence of the visit. This time the door was closed so the animal left mud trails around the front door. Some flowers from the trees in the garden were plucked and thrown around, and Soundarya saw scratch marks on the cemented pathway to their home. For over two months the *bear* moved around the fields near her house that was surrounded by forests. This made it tough for her as she was frightened of big wild animals-especially *bears*. She found it hard to get water and had to accompany her son up and down the hill- to and from school- using a torch to guide them in the dark.

After being forced to share the space around the house with the bear, she realized that the *bear* was attracted to the guava trees that were planted not too far from the house. She also observed that the *bear* only visited lone houses with fewer people around. Not receiving much support from her neighbours to drive the *bear* away, the family decided to do something on their own. They cut down one of the guava trees next to their house and set up a CCTV camera to record any movement of the *bear*. They also switched on the electric fence every day when they finished work by 5:30 - 6pm. At times, when they need to work late, they continue to work with the electric fence switched on. It was their luck that the *bear* disappeared after two months, leaving them to go about their life. Soundarya makes sure the door is closed while cooking in the evenings and does not want to take a chance again.

Gaurs and Gods

Ranjini looked out her window one Monday morning and saw a beautiful day ahead. Every Monday she goes to the Muneshwaran temple on top of the hill. Today by the time she got ready, the elders had already left for the temple. So, she decided to go with two of her friends-Harshini and Divya. Suddenly, on their way up to the temple, Harshini stops in her tracks and stares in one direction, scared. Following her gaze, Ranjini saw three *gaurs* standing in their way, about 15 meters away. The three girls and three *gaurs* just stood still and looked at each other for a while before the *gaurs* moved away from the path. The animals moved towards the tea bushes and started eating tea leaves. With their way clear again, the girls started to slowly climb up the hill to get to the temple, knowing that the *gaurs* were close by. Suddenly out of fear and relief, Divya ran up the hill as fast as she could. This disturbed the *gaurs*-making them move again.





The Indian Gaur is a large wild animal closely related to cows and buffaloes. They mostly move in groups-except for grown-up males who are many times seen alone. The mothers in the groups get very protective of their calves and sometimes may charge when they feel there is a threat.

Uncertain about what was going to happen, both Ranjini and Harshini retraced their steps and ran downhill. At a safe distance, they kept an eye on the *gaurs*. Soon, Harshini also ran away, leaving Ranjini all alone-wondering what to do. After thinking for a while, Ranjini picked up some stones that were lying near her feet and threw them in the direction in which the *gaurs* were standing, and shouted hoping the noise would drive them away. The animals did not move. Instead, they kept looking at her.

By this time, Ranjini wanted to get to the temple, so she decided to run up fast and hope for the best. To her luck, the *gaurs* did not do anything and she made it to the top without any danger. Meanwhile, the elders from her family saw everything that happened from the top and asked Ranjini, “Why did you come alone at this time? Why couldn’t you come with us earlier?” Ranjini was left with no answers. Then the elders advised her saying, “Anyway, leave it, next time come with some grownups.” She too felt bad for what happened and quickly went into the temple and prayed to God and asking for a clear passage, free from *gaurs*- whenever she comes to the temple.

The Guest that never left

One warm February afternoon, Razia was standing at her front door, staring out into the forest when she saw something black moving on the trees. Confused at what she was looking at, she moved closer to get a better look. At a safe distance, she could see an animal which looked like a monkey, only bigger and darker!

This monkey had a long black tail, its body was covered with black fur, had a black face and a thick coat of golden light brown hair around the head. She was used to the other brown monkeys that visited her house in a group but had never seen a black monkey that looked like this! Soon she realized she was not the only one admiring the new guest.

Slowly, as the news spread, others from the village gathered to see the *black-faced monkey*. After being informed, officials from the Forest Department also came to see what all the fuss was about. They told the people that it was okay for the *black monkey* to stay around the village as long as no harm was caused to the animal.

Knowing that the *black monkey* was a rare sight in the village, the Forest Department encouraged the people to take good care of the animal. At first, everyone was a little afraid as they had never seen a monkey like this before. As days passed people's interest in the *monkey* increased.



They started to feed the *monkey* different types of fruits and vegetables, only to find out that the *black monkey*-unlike the brown ones- liked certain fruits and vegetables. Of course, the banana was the *monkey's* favourite, but the animal also feasted on carrots and potatoes! Like everyone else in the village, Razia started to enjoy the company of the *black monkey*-often treating the animal bananas, carrots, and potatoes.

On days when the *black monkey* was not to be seen, Razia would worry and keep food outside and call out for the animal to come back. The *black monkey* had become a part of her family. The animal would sit around their house spending time with her and her husband moving from tree to tree in the forest close by. The *black monkey* would sometimes get chased by dogs and bullied by brown monkeys. This made Razia and her husband care for the animal more.

Razia noticed how different the *black monkey* was from the brown ones which would move around in large groups and trouble everyone in the village. They would enter houses uninvited, stealing and dropping food everywhere, even while people were around!

Because of this bad behaviour, the Forest Department officials had left traps to catch the brown monkeys and release them back to the forests. Razia found the *black monkey* to be better-mannered as the animal only took what was given. Except for the times when the *black monkey* would eat up all the rose plants in the neighbourhood! Though this didn't seem to bother anyone in the village.... so far!



The black monkey is called the Nilgiri Langur. The Langurs are found mostly in higher places in the Nilgiris. This is the first time people of the village had seen a Nilgiri Langur in their neighbourhood. They are usually found in groups of 9 to 10. They eat flowers, buds, leaves, stems, bark, and insects. The brown monkeys are called Bonnet Macaques. They are commonly seen in groups in the Nilgiris district and are known to raid people's houses in search of food.

Who invited the Wild Boar?

One Saturday morning, Seema was getting ready to go to the bank. As usual she took the dustbin from her house to empty it in the common spot in the village. When she opened the door, she was greeted by unwelcomed visitors. Six *wild boars* were blocking her way! They were as scared of her as she was of them. When they saw her, they all ran into the overgrown bushes that surrounded her house. She then waited a while to make sure they have gone before stepping outside. After about ten minutes, Seema opened her door, picked up a small stone from the ground, and threw it at the bushes where the *wild boars* had just disappeared into. No one came out. Finally, Seema felt safe enough to leave to start her day.



Wild boars are wild pigs with large ears, long snouts (noses), and small eyes. Overgrown wild bushes are safe places for wild boars to hide from danger. They are known to eat almost anything, relishing waste food thrown away by humans.



She hurried as fast as she could to the bus stop, only to find the last bus for the morning had already left. Had she had reached just a minute earlier; she would make it on time. Now, there was no use to wait for the next bus because the bank would close by that time. She needed to go to the bank to take some money. Now with no choice, she had to live with whatever little money she had till Monday.

Angry with the *wild boar*, Seema decided to complain to the Forest Department to have them removed. First she decided it was better to go home and have lunch. Just as she was about to reach, a medium-sized *wild boar* ran across at lightning speed. She was in shock! Had it been a second later, the *wild boar* would have crashed into her. To make sure there were no more unexpected dangers, she sat in the corner and watched the area carefully. In about a minute or two, she saw eight *wild boars* come out of the overgrown bushes and walk over to the garbage spot. They were all eating from the waste which was lying all around! It all made sense to her now, the *wild boar* started coming near her house because of this new garbage spot. Earlier, the municipal workers used to collect the waste from the houses, but it has been more than a month since they came. So everyone started to throw their waste in this garbage spot-attracting the unwelcomed visitors!

A Helping Hand

Early one morning, about 20 years ago recalled- Mohammad, he was going to his usual spot, down, beside the stream to use the toilet. In those days, the forest was their toilet. On his way up to his house, he saw from a distance, a pale yellow and white body with dark spots- lying on the ground. At first, he thought it must be a *leopard* and made a loud sound to see if the animal would get scared and run away. To his surprise, the animal just lay there. Curious to see if there was a *leopard*; he called his son to come with him to check. He was scared to go alone.

When he and his son got closer to the animal, they saw it was indeed a *leopard*... that was injured. He was no longer scared of getting attacked. So, he went closer and saw a piece of barbed wire stuck to one of the paws. “No wonder, the *leopard* was so close to the village. The animal must have come to get an easy source of food as it cannot hunt!” Mohammad told his son. He looked into the eyes of the *leopard* and realized it was in a lot of pain. At that moment, Mohammad did not think twice and immediately called for help from his relatives and neighbours. As soon as the message reached his village, the forest officials were informed about the situation and were on their way.

In the meantime, a group of people from his village headed to the spot, one of whom came with a large gunny sack to help carry the injured animal. Luckily, the *leopard* was medium-sized and not too heavy to carry up the hill. About five to six young boys from the village carried the *leopard* to the village and waited till the forest officials came. In about an hour, they saw a jeep park in front of the temple in the village. A vet and a few other forest officials jumped out of the jeep and ran towards the place where the



leopard lay. After inspecting the injured paw of the *leopard*, the vet opened the surgical kit and removed the barbed wire, using tweezers. Soon after the paw was treated, the *leopard* was carried and put in the jeep, where the animal was taken to Mudumalai for further treatment. After that, Mohammad has no idea what happened to the *leopard* but was happy that he and his son could help save the wild cat.

Leopards are part of the cat family and generally move around alone. They hunt on any animal that they can overpower like deer, wild boar, dogs, and even domestic goats. Leopards are also known to come closer to villages and towns when they are injured to find food as they cannot hunt. There are increasing cases of animals getting injured because of barbed wire fences.

