

## Paradoxurus Hermaphroditus

Arun Thomas

June 1992, Kerala. My school vacations were on and I was at my grandparents' farmhouse. My grandparents lived in a house on top of a small hill, with their cows and chickens cackling about every now and then. From the backyard down, there was a huge jackfruit tree. In the vicinity were a variety of different trees of all shapes and sizes. Further down the hill was the house where the family of my granddad's brother lived. Below that was an area with a lot of wild vegetation, ahead of which were rows of symmetrically planted rubber trees. A few feet further down was another stepped level comprising of still more rubber trees. The next level was actually a ramshackle road which sort of wrapped around the hill's waist. From the road, one could see the hill sloping down further, the landscape peppered with rubber trees as far as the eye could see, and the ground itself matted with fallen leaves and twigs. As hills in Kerala went, it was a fairly respectable hill.

These particular vacations, owing to a reunion call of sorts, many of my cousins had converged atop this hill. There was Reshmi the benign, Ashish the footballer, George the craftsman and John the

practical. George and John lived in the house below.

And these were just my generation. There was the next generation honing their skills, which



included my younger brother, but we had our parents to worry about that lot.

During such times, time itself would move rather lazily, filled with a lot of laughter and the occasional bravado. We'd lose track of the days of the week, and would worry more about being yanked out of the revelry every now and then, to be dragged to some obscure relative's house.

On one such lazy day, we had started to construct the morning from the backyard. Ashish and George were testing out their new catapults on a mango tree, John was resting on a country made hammock and Reshmi was annoying me with her constant pleas of not hurling pebbles on the farm hens. What was annoying me further was the traditional mundu (something like a formal sarong for men) I was asked to wear by my granddad. It was impeding my general movement and throwing me off my aim. To give all of us company was mom's pitcher of lemonade, which always seemed to find its way wherever John's hammock was.

If the hens were running helter-skelter, the mangoes were finding life to be rather pleasant. George and Ashish, taking due acquiescence of their incompetence with the catapult, had shifted their target coordinates from the mangoes to the jackfruits. This venture got my attention as well, and I bounded off to the jackfruit tree. With no catapult at my disposal, I started scoring jackfruit hits using my arm. Feeling not a trifle abashed, and armed with more sophisticated weaponry, Ashish and George started aiming for the higher reaches of the jackfruit tree.

I took up the challenge and strained to launch my projectile into orbit. As I did so, I saw something move in the branches. Way up, among the leaves and branches on the very top of the tree, I could

make out a dark figure fixing its gaze on the amateur Olympians. A hint of flashy canines did not help matters. Convinced that one of my two deranged cousins had mistaken the toothed tenant for a jackfruit, I asked them to first stop the diabolical shooting and explain to me why the usually harmless jackfruit tree was presently staring back at me.



It's a marapatti! came a voice from the hammock. (The literal translation from Malayalam would be tree-dog)

It's a what? The menacing name set alarm bells ringing amongst the holiday revelers. Catapults were holstered, rock ammo was shelved, and the five of us exchanged anxious glances. At that moment, I could have sworn one of the chickens in the distance smirked at me with a raised eyebrow. Reshmi asked us to come back up to the house where we could be safe. As she continued

to sound the retreat, John came down to the jackfruit tree and told us to stand ground. His message was simple - This was our territory and we would not move. Moreover, this was a good chance to see the marapatti up close.

To see the marapatti up close? Whatever I had seen had already convinced me that I wasn't going to be anything beyond a pen pal with this scraggly mastodon. But it seemed that the new working committee had already reached a decision. Curses.

In the meanwhile, Reshmi had had enough and had gone and summoned the caretaker of the farm, Appu. Appu had been working for my grandparents for over a decade and knew every inch of the property. Over the years, he had become our man Friday for slippery circumstances - whether it be being helped off a conquered tree, the need for the best coconut water in the area or setting up the net for badminton.

What Reshmi had told him was simple - there's a dog in the tree. And Appu had understood. He arrived at the scene with a really long wooden pole which had a blade attached to the end. Two of Appu's friends who were chatting with him at the time also joined in with indigenous spears.

I heard a voice mention marapatti and meat in the same sentence. It was no longer a ploy to merely get the creature down. It was a hunt. Manoeuvres

of engagement were deployed. It was quite straightforward really. One would prod till M came down, and the other two would take positions and nail the descendant. George and John had joined the hunting party and had two large stones in their hands. Ashish and I were a bit confused as to what to do really. However, Reshmi seemed pretty clear about her role in the event. She would be watching everything from the refuge of the house.



Things started to whirl in motion. Appu started by first nudging the branches below M. No response. No movement. The next nudge was more of a whack on the tree. There was an audible snarl and then the rustling of leaves on top. Everyone tried to follow the path M was taking. I could see anxious faces everywhere. I asked one of the

spear-bearers whether he had done this before. "No", came the reassuring reply.

Appu now had to go around the tree. Others followed suit. The prodding began again in full earnest. About ten nervous minutes passed with the situation at a complete stalemate. M had chosen its position well. A part of it was visible, but the whole of M was quite clearly out of Appu's reach. At this point, one of Appu's chums came forward and tied a long stem of a branch to the pole, thus extending it. Long pole 2.0 looked effective.

Time moved in freeze-frames as everyone anticipated something decisive to happen. Appu's eyes narrowed as he focused on his target. John and George now looked serious. Muscles twitched, and an arched back sent the pole up. For most part of its journey, it looked like the pole would simply break the foliage cover and stare foolishly into the clear sky. But then something happened to forbid any such eventuality.

The following paragraph would not have taken more than 2 seconds to enact itself out.

I was still looking up when almost everyone present started to first scream in what can only be described as incomprehensible anxiety. Yelp, scream, holler all together and all at once. This was accompanied by the sort of rapid feet movement one sees in rats scurrying for cover. It was almost as if there was a Big Bang taking place

right where the jackfruit tree was. I was quite puzzled at why I wasn't quite sharing the sincere enthusiasm of others present. And then, the penny dropped. M had fallen right behind me, and was already beginning to stir.

Of all the moments where you wish your running gear did not include bathroom slippers and a tropical toga, this one took top honours. In that moment, I ceased to have any friends, I began to wonder if I should have had more respect for traditional clothes, or for furry chaps in fruity abodes. And then of course, I ran.

I ran faster than I had ever thought I could run. The choice of direction was fairly simple. I was facing downhill and the "marapatti" was facing my back. Within the first few seconds of the sprint, my toga decided to part ways. Thankfully, I had my briefs on. Next to announce their desertion were my slippers, in a clear protest at being thrust into circumstances and terrain beyond



their understanding. But I kept running. I could sense my cousins' house whizzing past me, the

greenery rapidly coming up to me and a glimpse of a road somewhere far down. Between seconds, I tried to focus on what was behind me, and there was no mistaking of the sound of hurtling feet movements hunting me down. My heart pounded as I ran even harder.

I was down to the last vestige of my dignity, but survival simply had to take precedence. The trees and bushes became a blur, and my bare feet didn't seem to even notice any twigs or pebbles in my path. My ears could clearly hear the creature still chasing me. My soul trembled when I started to hear shrieking sounds behind me. It was ready to pounce. For some very unscientific reason, I turned my head in mid-flight to catch a glimpse of my nemesis, but instead saw not one but two figures. It was not the marapatti and an accomplice, but George and John. The two were all this time running after the marapatti, who, in fact, did chase me. They told me that it was only a split second before I turned that the marapatti itself changed its course and scuttled out of sight.

I had actually reached the road. Standing there in my underpants, I found myself contemplating on the vagaries of life, and gazing back at the route I had hurtled down. As I did so, I saw Ashish making his way down, armed with some strange wooden plank. But the shock was to see Reshmi right behind him, with an even bigger plank. I understood that my cousins had matched

my pace only to make sure I was not alone if the marapatti had caught up. Good stuff, I thought to myself.



\* The Asian Palm Civet (*Paradoxurus Hermaphroditus*) interestingly, is known as marapatti (tree-dog), and also as toddy cat, among many other names.