

## GERARD LOUGHRAN

### The Leopard's Reward

I know we Africans have our witchy stories, tales to frighten the children or bolster the courage of our elders in times of adversity, which alas have been many. But I am a modern African. I have a bachelor's degree from a recognised university and I know that God does not reside at the summit of Mount Kenya. I work on my country's biggest newspaper and what I am about to tell you is true.

At holidays, it is customary for our people to leave the cities and return to their villages to be with families, to feast, to remember, and to slip something small to their country cousins. Accordingly, I left the capital and took a bus back to my own home area near the Lake. A few seats behind me were two age-mates, so naturally upon arrival we headed for the Bristol Hotel, actually a shack of cardboard and corrugated iron, where we sat on beer crates, slowly emptying their contents over the course of the evening while consuming plates of *githeri*, rice and goat's meat.

Let me state right away that the beer did not induce or distort in any way the experience that took place as I walked the last mile to my family home in the pre-midnight hour. What I saw, I saw. What happened, happened.

At first, I thought it was a blanket roll in the middle of the dirt road, fallen off a bus roof perhaps. Then it moved, and in shafts of moonlight through the trees, I saw the rosettes on the pelt, the lithe, powerful body and the massive skull turned directly towards me. A leopard! I was a dead man.

Some white people have romantic notions about Africans and wild animals, that we maintain a kind of spiritual affinity with them, that our closeness to the earth makes us one under the skin, noble Brother Lion, clever Sister Serpent and so on. I would hesitate to characterise this thinking as racist but certainly it is nonsense. Wild animals scare us to death, they terrorise our villages, destroy our crops and sometimes steal our children. Our view is that non-domestic animals should be killed without question and if edible, promptly devoured.

Right now, however, it looked as if I was the one facing such a fate. Mentally, I measured the distance between where I stood and my mother's front door. Given a leopard's ability to cover ground at 36 miles per hour, I would be dead meat between its powerful jaws before I got half-way. Cautiously, I took a step backward whereupon the animal rose, a female, more than two feet at the shoulder, five feet nose to tail, maybe forty kilos. Instantly, I froze. She stared at me intently. Why had she not attacked? Why was I not dead already?

The guide books all refer to big cats "coughing." The one before me was not coughing, she was making a strange, impacted, mewling noise. She was also distractedly tossing her huge head from side to side like a fly-tormented horse, while between her front paws were pooled what seemed to be small lakes of saliva. Most extraordinary, her jaws were wide apart in a huge gape,

as if she was emitting a furious, silent roar – and now I realised they had been that way since our encounter began. The truth dawned on me. This animal could not close her mouth.

Moonlight turns everything black and silver. But I know that the eyes watching me were leopard-yellow, the huge, curving fangs stained the colour of old ivory, and the glossy saliva dripping from her bottom jaw streaked blood red.

The leopard took a step towards me and I backed away. But then she lifted her head, side-on to me against the moon, the gaping jaws outlined in profile, and I saw the extra fang. Not curved, not a top jaw tooth nor a bottom one, but something dark and slender, extending from the roof of the leopard's mouth to the tongue below. She had somehow picked up a foreign object, which was lodged between her jaws, preventing the animal from closing her mouth.

The obvious solution was to call the Game Department, but this was before the days of mobile phones. The Bristol Hotel had a telephone but I knew somehow without question that the leopard would not allow me to retrace my steps and even if she did, she would drown in her own body fluids by the time help arrived.

Looking straight at me, she slowly sank to the ground, turned her head again and lifted it towards the moon. There was no doubt I was being invited to intervene, to use my human intelligence to put an end to this animal's hideous suffering. The invitation was clear and my human intelligence set out my next step. It was human courage, or rather the lack of it, that was holding me back. For what I was being required to do was *put my hand into the mouth of a wild leopard*.

It was the awful, grunting, helpless, strangling sounds that finally propelled me forward. She did not move. I craned to see better. Was it a thorn twig, a tough piece of acacia, part of a game trap, a nail even? I went down on two knees, praying hard to the god I knew did not live atop Mount Kenya, shuffled forward and reached out my hand. In seconds I will have only one arm, I thought. In minutes I will be dead. Carefully, the leopard turned her head, facilitating my movements. I reached inside. Smooth, slimy, pencil-thin, jointed, it was a bone, a dik-dik's maybe, or a Tommie's, from the leopard's last meal, lodged painfully like a million-to-one chance of a victim's revenge.

My touch on the bone was light but the leopard jerked in pain. The jaws were as far apart as they could go. To ease the bone out, I would first have to press one end deeper into the flesh, into the roof of the mouth or down into the tongue. I shuddered at the thought. Was there a less painful way? I could feel her lower teeth scrape my wrist and the leopard's breath came hot and steamy onto my face as its saliva streamed across my knuckles.

I have always had strong fingers, my farming family's bequest to me. Adjusting my kneeling position, I braced my index and middle fingers round the back of the bone and pressed hard against the joint with my thumb. Instantly, it cracked in half and the two pieces fell into my palm. Cautiously, I

withdrew my hand, got to my feet and backed off. Ignoring me, the leopard exultantly emitted that growling, rumbling, un-lion-like leopard's roar it had been prevented from making for who knows how long. It raised its head and shook it vigorously from side to side, sending sheets of bloodied saliva across the *murrām* road, into the grassy edges and over my shoes.

I knew at that point that I was quite safe and we looked at each other steadily for an age. The leopard gulped and swallowed many times, then, breathing normally again and without ceremony, she turned, bounded from the road and vanished into the bush.

It was long after I had greeted the family, eaten yet more meat and downed gallons of hot, sweet tea that I remembered the cameras that had been round my neck throughout the episode. How could the Photographer of the Year three years running fail to record one of the most extraordinary animal sequences of all time? But, truth to tell, I was not concerned. It had been a private encounter, a unique interaction between the species. Perhaps it was for that reason that I have never, until now, retold this story, nor, particularly, its extraordinary conclusion.

When my mother opened our front door the next morning, what she found lying across the doorstep was the carcass of a freshly-killed Thomson's gazelle. It had not been trapped or shot, it had been suffocated in the style of a leopard. The teeth marks were still visible around its clenched windpipe.

The family, if ever the subject comes up, still puzzle about this strange episode, about how this kill appeared on the doorstep between midnight and dawn. They are not to know, of course, that it was not chance, some gazelle which escaped a leopard's clutches to die randomly at our door, that it was in fact a gift, a leopard's reward.

***Gerard Loughran** from Newcastle, is a retired foreign correspondent. He began writing short stories as a diversion about a year ago. Born in Newcastle upon Tyne, he worked out of London, Nairobi, Beirut, Paris, Moscow, Luxembourg and New York, covering news events ranging from wars in the Middle East to World Football Cups in Germany and Argentina. The story of the leopard, with its overtones of Androcles and the Lion, was told to him by a Kenyan photographer. Many Africans say it could never happen, but the photographer swore it happened to his uncle.*