

KAYAYA AND OTHER TALES

PART 1

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1 The Encounter

On the edge of the forest, a waterfall percolating down the ridge, near which there was a big jackfruit tree pitted against a protuberant stone. The stone gave a good sitting space as did the waterfall a cool mist. Michel was a thirteen year old Christian boy, who lived with his grandmother in the vicinity. Michel's house was situated at the edge of the forest, on the slant rocks. Wild Jasmine and Buttercup lined the entrance. The elevation of the house saved the family from thunder storms, heavy rain, fallen trees and rolling boulders. Michel had painstakingly made a slope garden where he grew his vegetables. After working in the field, he would come and swing under the thirty feet tall jackfruit tree and frolic on the branches. He loved the ripe, juicy and enticing jackfruits. The family had planted banana trees too. The smell of the ripe jackfruits permeated the meadows. The harvest was more than two hundred jackfruits per tree, which gave the family a substantial income. Monkeys would often visit and relish on the juicy jackfruits. Michel's grandfather, who was no more, had planted the trees and had boasted that the jackfruits when ripe would be the richest source of vitamins, mineral, and dietary fibers for family's good health. He was best known for chasing monkeys away using a remote controlled device.

It seemed like yesterday. Riding on a stallion, across the meadows, was Mike the postman. Mike delivered an envelope. It was a marriage invitation card from town. Michel's parents and his little sister decided to go to the function. Michel stayed with Grandma. His parents and little sister departed by bus the very next day. In tittle-tattle Michel's mother called from town and told Grandma that they were having a wonderful time, and that she would call before they boarded the bus back the day after. On their return, that fateful night, their bus trying to avoid a collision with a truck coming from other side fell into a gorge, hundreds of feet below. There were no survivors. In the morning, the villagers wearing face masks took more than six hours to retrieve the dead, put them in body bags, and get their last rites done. The mortal remains and ash for all passengers was offered to the forest river. Of the thirty seven dead, eight of them were children. The confusion, hustle and bustle, the sympathetic and benevolent looks, the traumatic environment, the agonizing search, the painful findings, the tearful hugs, the grieving relatives, the inconsolable screams, the crest fallen onlookers, all added to the grief-stricken climate. Grandma was devastated. Michel was only ten years old at that time and did not understand what happened to his parents and his little sister. But now grandmother was all he had. Michel wiped Grandma's tears as he took over a lot of the house work. Grandma was silently very worried for Michel's future and thought of putting him in a dormitory. She was bleak and handicapped and did not consider herself to be dependable anchor in Michel's life. Marshall, her contact from the army, was very nice to them as he helped Grandma sell off ten acres of pine forest, proceeds of which she kept as provident fund for Michel. The family got substantial income from this to cover for daily expenses. "Am thankful to you, Marshall." she said.

Working in the garden and the field, for Michel however was not free of danger as many wild animals including elephants, porcupines, and stags visited them even in broad day light.

He spent the resting hours thinking about his parents and kid sister. God had bruised his soul. In his fated loneliness, he was cheerful only with nature. Grandmother, who never looked her age, had kept a double barrel gun in case the visitors from the jungle came too close for comfort. Her gun was light enough for her to handle on the shoulder, and heavy enough to offer good swing during emergency. She would on occasion sit in the covered parapet with telescopic sight viewing the fauna as they came to the water hole. As a civilian she had government permission to keep a night vision binoculars. Mr. Marshall had helped her purchase this cap. Michel would gaze into the night, wearing this gadget. They most often saw stags; wild boars and gazelles that came to the water hole. Very early in the morning they even saw small wild bears as well as colorful birds visit the water catchment. "We must learn to take photos with night vision camera." she said.

One evening, as Michel was playing on the swing, he looked up to the tree. In a flutter, he saw a small panther cub, a silky black little kitten with rich golden red tan and rosette-like spots, sitting on the branch of the jackfruit tree towards his left. He seemed to have no litter mate and was alone. Michel shouted at the little monster "Shooo! shooo!" and ran to the nearest cottage entrance. He observed the cub from a distance. He was surprised, to see a small porcupine come towards the tree too. The porcupine had black tail and orange quills. To Michel's dismay, the porcupine had defiantly started climbing the tree. He heard the non-chivalrous cub snarl. But the porcupine was not nettled or affected by the petty cub, and started to climb higher. Suddenly the panther cub jumped down on the grass, as if a black form descending from heaven, and ran into the thicket, and disappeared. Michel was dumbfounded. "How was the panther cub afraid of the porcupine?" he thought. His grandmother had already closed all doors and windows shut, except the one through which Michel was peering. She sat besides Michel and said "If I were you, I would use the high speed camera". "Yes I will." said Michel.

Michel's video camera was a semi shoulder mounted HD night vision camera which his grandma had bought. "Grandma, can I have a loaf and hot chocolate please" he continued. Grandma asked "No sandwiches today?" "No grandma, loaf will suffice", said Michel. Grandma disappeared into the kitchen. As Michel was thinking, the panther cub returned with its majestic mother, a black spotted jaguar as if painted with furry spider web with gray shiny eyes. They were headed towards the jackfruit tree. The panther cub, with mother walking next to him, showed a much confident gait. The sun was bright as Michel clearly saw the soul terrifying look on the mother panther. She had piercing eyes, and for a moment Michel thought that his position, behind the window, was discovered. But it was not so. When the pair was close to the tree, they looked up to the tree and snarled, deciding whether to climb up or not. The porcupine however was totally unmoved by the mother and cub and wanted to match the occasion. As a gift of the ingenuous porcupine, a small porcupine quill came promptly and pierced the mother panther. The predator was infuriated and was in great pain. The bristle attack made the panther roar, much like howl as it, with its cub, left in awkward haste. The panther roar made Grandma immediately fetch the double barrel. There was no animal coming towards the hut. Michel, sipping his hot chocolate, was in a focused trance, as the panther and cub retreated. There were no further disturbances, except for the jungle silence. After some deliberation the porcupine started eating a juicy jackfruit again. Much of the ripe jackfruit fell down. The porcupine slowly climbed down the tree and continued to nibble on the soiled jackfruit. From window to window Michel took a lot of pain to stalk the panther and cub and got his video footage in place. "Grandma, my camera is very jealous of your double barrel." said Michel. "Why pray is that?" exclaimed grandma. Michel continued, "Well when you shoot, there is recoil, but when I shoot there is no recoil!" Grandma ignored the smart comment and enquired whether Michel needed more hot chocolate, which Michel nodded in affirmative. When Grandma returned,

Michel asked, "Grandma, you know the girl who visited us last summer, Nitu by name?" Grandma said, "Yes dear I remember her. You like her?" Michel thought for a while and replied, "Yes Grandma." Then Grandma said, "If you want to settle down some day, and have a family, remember, you need to be dependable, honest, loyal, trustworthy, as well as loving." Sipping his hot chocolate Michel said, "Grandma, am I not?" "Yes dear." was Grandma's proud reply.

After the porcupine had a contented meal, it left the shade and went towards the tumbling rivulet in a direction opposite to where the panther and its cub had disappeared. The gurgling sound of the rivulet came from down under, as it formed a major underground water catchment. As the porcupine came close to the embankment, Michel shuddered to see in the picturesque view the panther cub charging a herd of potbelly elephants, with large ear flaps and distinct tusks, out in the open. He screamed at his grandmother, "Grandma!, please come and see this!" The startled tuskers had started running helter and skelter. The stampede created vibrations on the ground that could be felt at the distant hut. Without any intension of inflicting fear or malice one elephant came straight towards the porcupine. The big rodent instinctively ran amok, and disappeared as fast as his legs could carry him. It out-maneuvered the elephant pack into the labyrinth of the forest without ever slackening its speed. The bushes and small trees gave way to the mighty elephants as the rustle left its mark. Michel and his grandma came out cautiously to see the elephants charge. The monkeys were agitated. Grandma carried the gun. Their cottage was safe from the elephant attack, as it was erected on the steep slopes. There was a baby elephant that ran as it suckled on its mother. Michel observed how the mother elephant often had her hind leg out of unison; least she trampled her baby elephant. The baby elephant started running towards them. Grandma pressed the wireless remote. From the house top came a deafening noise of three explosions back to back.

Few monkeys fell from the tree as the baby elephant stopped dead on its track, slipped, lost its foot hold and scrambled to regain balance. Michel continued to take the video footage from the oak tree platform. He crouched motionless as the baby elephant joined its mother. Needless to say, the monkeys continued to chirp excitedly. The wireless devise was only for emergencies, and baby elephant charge was one of them.



Michel crouched motionless as the baby elephant joined its mother.

Grandmother saw, on her return, that the porcupine quills were left scattered under the jackfruit tree. Michel collected the quills cautiously, which would be used, by Grandma, for filling Grandma's stuffed porcupine toy. The pugmarks of the panther mother and cub told volumes of the encounter. There was no panther blood on the ground. At the corner of her eyes Grandma saw a spotted thing fall from a tree not so far from her. It fell on a running monkey. In an instant the panther was all over the monkey and had broken the monkey's neck. The sight made rest of the monkeys charge the panther. Michel saw how aggrieved

the monkeys were as the panther disappeared into the thicket. Michel and his grandmother briskly headed home as they heard the elephant trumpets behind a not so distant bush. As Grandma put her gun away, she suddenly observed that her gun was not even loaded. She stared in disbelief as if anything untoward happened, they would have been at the mercy of the wild beasts. Michel gave her a disapproving look, and was expressionless but he left it at that.

Grandma was cleaning the floor with the mop. The Tom cat slid past and slipped on the shiny floor. As the Tom cat was disappearing Grandma threw a softball at him, which made him speed sideways in haste. But in the meantime, the act of throwing the softball made Grandma imbalanced. She would have had a nasty fall but for Michel who in time pushed her to one side so that she fell on the cushion bed instead. The double bed however was made of compressed wood, and snapped and cracked under the impact. Grandma regained her posture and in a daze called for the carpenter to come instantly. The carpenter lived on the other side of the hill and bicycled to Grandma's house within the hour. He was pretty much in control and knew he could fix it fast. As the carpenter was about to give Grandma the bill, a thunderous impact shook the windows. Grandma quickly armed herself and rushed out to investigate. She saw tens of pieces of a big jackfruit that had fallen on her tinned roofed storage hut. The monkeys were enquiring on lookers at the earthly event. The carpenter quipped, "Why don't you move to the city Grandma?" To this, Grandma's quick reply was, "Mind your own business." Before the carpenter left he said, "Imagine the jackfruit falling on my head, ha!" Peace returned to Grandma's house.

Grandma was always careful never to overfeed Michel as she knew what happened to obese kids. She had to do the dishes. She rinsed the dishes, loaded the bottom rack till the top rack added the required amount of detergent. She tried never to put

plastics in the dishwasher if she could help it. Michel put the clean dishes back in place. Post dish washing, she would be busy stitching a black woolen scarf as Michel worked long hours in his dark room. The photos of the reckless porcupine as well as the panther cub were amazing. The photos of the encounter became part and parcel of Grandma's album. "What is it you want to be Michel?" Grandma asked. Michel looked at the sky and said, "I want to be a safari photographer Grandma. Hope I can sustain a family with it.", said Michel. Grandma continued, "Today the tourism industry is booming, I believe you will enjoy your job, Michel. Your eyes, your creativity and your technical ability will guide you. I had thought of putting you in a dormitory but before you take the turf and wilderness as a carrier, you could practice at the town's horse racing arena. The splendor of your caliber will be demonstrated. Am sure you will in many ways fight the climate change. Come give Grandma a hug." Grandma and Michel sat side by side by the fire and flipped through the photo album together. In the album was a photo of a white swan attacking Grandma. When Grandma had pressed the remote which created a sonic boom, the swan, which had already taken off from the rivulet, upon hearing the noise it changed speed and height and attacked Grandma in utter disapproval of what she had done. As we learn from postscripts, Michel never did see the porcupine or the panther cub come near the jackfruit tree again. The bandit monkeys moss trooped the garden peacefully. The elephants against the ebony mountains continued to frequent the stream, lived in harmony, and seldom came towards the alluring jackfruit trees. They instinctively seemed to stay away from abase human touch, sight, smell, or sound. It was most abstruse that the wounded panther and its cub had simply disappeared.

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