

The Last Cheetah



Vijay Padaki

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My grandfather was a hunter. That is how my friends in school knew me, Cheenu, the grandson of a hunter. He is still alive. If you walk down Seventeenth Cross in the evening between six and seven, you will see him seated in a wheelchair in the first floor balcony, facing the street. You can't miss the house. It is the only two-storeyed building in that stretch, the figure 1952 decoratively embossed on the balcony front. All the other houses in this old area of Bangalore have been knocked down and replaced by five and six-storeyed apartment blocks. It is still called a residential area, but everybody knows that at least two apartments in each block are offices of commercial outfits. The cars parked on both sides of the roads have drivers, snoozing with their seats tilted fully back.

That is his evening outing nowadays. One hour in the balcony before he is wheeled back, and given his evening medication and rub down. The first ten minutes after he is brought to the balcony is the best time to see him. He has a faint smile on his face. You can wave to him and greet him from the street. Many do that. He will nod his head gently, twice, raise his wrist from his lap and wave back. He looks regal seated in the balcony. It could be the height, a good fifteen feet above the road, looking down at the common folk there in his evening durbar. He is less responsive after fifteen minutes, and quite unresponsive after half past six. His eyes are open, but he is looking through you at the great beyond.

His morning outing is also an hour, but we don't see him then. He is taken to the park in the car, wheeled to a clearing within a cluster of old rain trees where the morning sun is allowed in to greet him exclusively. He must get a lot of sunshine, preferably the morning sun, the doctors said. No durbar here, except the occasional wood pigeons and mynahs. A Labrador drops by once in a while to pick up the ball thrown from the other side of the park. He sniffs Grandpa's ankles, prostrates himself before him, slapping his tail on the grass three times, and hops along with the ball retrieved. A gun dog by ancestry, he knows a hunter when he sees one.

The Rajah of [Surguja](#) shot down hundreds of cheetahs in Madhya Pradesh (It was called Central Provinces then.) He also killed god knows how many tigers and leopards! And bears and crocodiles and even wild elephants. While some rajahs bred cheetahs as hunting leopards, some others loved to gun them down in the wild.

The Rajah of Surguja was one of them. They say he shot the last cheetah in India some time in 1947. That is not true. It was my grandfather who shot the last cheetah. It was in 1954 in the month of September. I should know. I have the skin of that cheetah, gifted to me by grandpa. He told me the story himself. It was in this very park, on a morning walk, just he and I. It was in those days when he took in the morning sun walking, not seated in a wheelchair. He also said he wasn't sure how much longer he would be able to enjoy the walk in the park, and that he had so many stories to tell, so much that had remained untold.

For over a year, the cheetah skin hung on the wall in my study room. I liked to see it there when I returned from college late in the evening and switched on the light. I didn't have the heart to take it off the wall, but it had to be done. My father's friend was a police officer. His firm advice was that it should be hidden somewhere, and nobody should know about the skin. It was not safe to display it, we could get into trouble.

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My grandfather was not really a hunter. He could not have been one. Not with a name like Narasimhachar. They called him Achar in the village. Or Achar sir, or Acharji. In the family he was Narasimha. He wore his caste mark on the forehead all the time, a good Vaishnavite trident, refreshing it every morning after his bath. On important occasions, such as a wedding in the village, he wore a Mysore turban as well. The family liked to call him a hunter. I never knew if it was with pride or in jest. I didn't care. I liked being known as the grandson of a hunter.

Grandpa was a farmer, really. He was the field officer of an extension centre run by the State government that provided services to farmers in far off places with no connection to the cities. There was a small number of service centres in the State, each centre serving many villages around it in the taluk. The field officers were not farmers themselves, but knew enough about farming, seeds, sowing, harvesting and animal husbandry and dairying and elementary veterinary practice to make themselves useful to the villages. They were respected by the villagers, and sometimes held in awe.

The field officer's house was the only one in the entire *taluk* that had a gun in it. The only others who had guns were the wandering dacoits. They left the villagers of this taluk in peace. They were too poor. It was only in the mango season that the occasional emissary dropped by. If he was lucky, there would be some wild pig meat to take back.

There were two guns kept locked in a specially built almirah in an inner room. Both were of English make, revered, not country models. Both were shotguns, acquired when the British administered the districts. One was a standard double-barrelled breech loading 12 bore ("Dubby" as the Anglo-Indian Deputy Commissioner called it), and the other was the smaller 16 bore.

Grandpa taught me many things. Once, on a night camp he taught me all about the stars in the sky and how to find directions by watching the stars. I was amazed at the number of stars we could see when we left the city behind. He also told me why a shotgun is called a shotgun, and how it is different from a rifle. He explained how the bigger number was actually a smaller bore. The shot in the 12 bore was one-twelfth of a pound, and in the 16 bore it was one-sixteenth of a pound. I figured out by myself what that was in grams. There were three types of ammunition stocked. The first was called the slug or the single ball, meant for big game, especially the tiger. It was hardly ever used. The second was buckshot. It came in two sizes, the LG, holding six pellets inside the cartridge, and the SG, with nine pellets.

The LG was popular because it was good for both wild pigs and boar, and the other big cat in the jungle in these parts, the panther. There was no birdshot ammunition. Shooting birds was a cowardly act in the villages. There were over two hundred pellets in one shot that spread out to the size of a bullock-cart wheel, so that at least one hits the bird! It was sinful. And shooting snakes was unthinkable.

Grandpa had learned very early that snakes are as scared of us as we are of them. They get out of our way as soon as they sense footsteps heading their way. Except the Russell's viper. A *ziddi* (stubborn) by nature, the viper stands his ground defiantly, daring the human to cross his path. Too bad if you had a brush with a Russell's viper. It was a fifty-fifty chance of your being saved. There were snakes everywhere in the village, and you learned to walk with the right kind of stride, and you carried the right kind of stick to deal with them. You never hit them with the stick, of course. You used it get them out of the way.

Hunting by the field officers was forbidden. The gun could be used only under a small number of out of the ordinary circumstances. These were listed in the Service Standing Orders and Operating Procedures, and had the strictest definitions. One of them was crop damage by marauding animals, such as wild pigs. They came in the mango season.

In the old days, the guns would be kept on a table in the verandah when the District Collector came to the centre on an inspection tour. The carton of ammunition was displayed next to the guns. Eley-Kinloch was the standard supply, the red and green casings fitted flush into the rimmed brass caps. The display made the revenue collection from the farmers smoother. And quieter.

Grandpa gave me a handful of spent cartridges. He put them in a biscuit tin and stuck a label on top that said For Dear Cheenu. The cartridge shells were kept upright in my bookshelf in two neat, tight rows. They were more awe inspiring than the little framed picture of Raghavendra Swamy that aunt Kamala had given me for the bookshelf. I put that picture on the small bedside table. Aunt Kamala was satisfied and pleased.

After the great World War, the white man's presence in the districts dwindled rapidly. The guns remained. They were now serviced by the nearest District Police Station. An armourer would be sent out once a month to inspect the weapons, oil and clean the barrels, check the ammunition stock and make the necessary entries in a leather bound register.

Another regular was the crop inspector, who brought with him the DDT spray. It was a fortnightly spray at first, but he soon turned it into a weekly visit, proclaiming the spray the greatest boon to mankind since the steam locomotive.

The villagers understood the power of coal, they did not understand steam power or, for that matter, the spray. They had members of the family working in the coalfields not too far from their villages. Most had never travelled by train, but had taken a ride to Nagpur to see them at the railway station. It meant a whole day's outing, an hour and a half by bullock cart to the District road, and over two hours by bus from there to Nagpur city. There were three railway crossings on the way. They loved it when the crossing was closed, piling out of the bus to watch the train hurtling by. A visit to the tent cinema close to the bus station was the mandatory pilgrimage before returning exhausted and exhilarated to the village.

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When the young Narasimha returned to the village with his bride from Bijapur, he had the villagers enthralled with stories of their day and night train ride from one State to another. Not only was there a bullock cart waiting for him, a convoy of four more carts was at the dusty road where the bus from Nagpur dropped them.

The women took over and helped Vatsalabai settle in quickly. They gave her a guided tour of the village, took care of the milk and butter supply to the house, arranged for extra coal for the kitchen, and taught her to make *jowar bhakri*. They showed her how to tell a god-sent cobra from the evil viper, the devil's agent. They introduced her to the Nageshwari shrine at the edge of the village. Vatsala made it a practice to visit the shrine at least once a week after that.

One evening, returning from the shrine, Vatsala noticed the usually sedate langur apes in an animated state. They were darting across treetops, crying out hoop-hoop, the still air making the hoops sound so much louder. She didn't know what it was that made her do it, but she found herself walking faster, heading straight home instead of stopping by the well to toss in the handful of flowers. Reaching home, she asked Narasimha about the excited langurs. Pandu must be back, he said, adding that it was a good thing she came straight home.

Pandu was the name given to the cheetah spotted now and then in the taluk. He was also known as the eccentric one, the wandering monk, the one who was seen in many different places at different times, always by himself. His mate was not seen as often, but was thought to be the bread winner of the

family. She went out for the kill whenever needed, leaving Pandu with his meditation. People often wondered whether Pandu and his mate had any offspring. Nobody had ever seen any cheetah cubs in the taluk. Why not, they wondered. The women in the village had an explanation. They thought Pandu and his mate had decided not to have babies. What sort of world was left for them to live in?

The boys in the village were the first to notice something wrong. The mango season was on time, and they were at them after school and the day's household chores. But they tasted different. So did the sugarcane. The grown-ups didn't pay them any attention. The boys were always imagining things. Besides, it was time for the first mango party of the season. They went to Acharji's house to invite him and Vatsalabai to the party.

It was all nicely connected. The first basket of mangos was always sent to grandpa. This year there was Vatsalabai as well, so it was a special consignment. Outside their kitchen was a pit for dumping the mango skins and stones. That attracted the wild pigs. It was reported by the villagers as crop damage. Grandpa was allowed to take action, and shoot a pig or two for this criminal behaviour of the pigs. The villagers gathered at night in a clearing in the nearby woods. While the pigs roasted on a low fire spit, the villagers sat all around the fire, eating mangos, singing and breaking into dance as the night progressed. The local *mahua* brew helped. The mangos were the local juicy variety called *chusni*, to be squeezed and sucked, not sliced. By the end of the party there would be two huge mounds of empty mango skins, one on the *janana* (women) side and one on the *mardana* (men) side.

When the boys came to see Narasimha, he admitted to them that he had noticed it too. There was more to it, he thought. He had seen a full grown cobra slithering away, but at half its usual speed. And when he raised the gun to shoot the wild pig, he thought it was unsteady on its feet, swaying a bit, as if it had indulged in some of the local brew itself. The most unusual sight was the krait lying on a rocky patch in the daytime, as if it was sunning itself. Everybody knows that the krait is a nocturnal serpent, never spotted at daytime. What was it doing out there at ten in the morning in that stuporous state?

Grandpa told me that he had no way of proving anything. After all, the spray came from important government officials. It was known that they had received it as a gift to India from countries that had won the great World War.

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Narasimha and Vatsalabai were seated under the old neem tree in front of the house. They often had an evening chai there, watching the sun go down behind the hills in the distance. They saw a small group of villagers striding up. Here it comes, another crop damage, he murmured. The villagers had come to him with a different story this time. It was a cheetah.

Grandpa told me the story in full detail in one of our walks in the park. A fully grown calf had been killed and dragged to a spot in the middle of the woods. The villagers insisted that he simply had to kill the cheetah. They were furious. Every cow and calf was precious in every household. He tried to explain the rules and regulations laid down about using the guns for any big cat. They were unimpressed. Their counter argument was drawn from natural law. It was the nature of the cheetah to drag a fresh kill to a secluded spot and leave it there. This was done after a ritual first small helping. It was the nature of the cheetah to return to the kill after a day for a second leisurely helping. It would be a perfect opportunity to shoot the beast, preoccupied with its butcher duties. In fact, some of them were already setting up two *machaans* (platforms) on the trees facing the kill.

Reluctantly and not without some trepidation, Grandpa headed indoors to take out old Dubby from its almirah. Grandma Vatsalabai went into the puja room. He put on his jacket, thrust a handful of cartridges into the pocket, and picked up his trusty four-cell flashlight, all in one shaky set of moves. He stepped out of the house and asked the men to lead the way. Wishing to keep the number small, only three of them accompanied grandpa into the woods. There would be two each on the two *machaans*. The three men carried lathis, which was less than reassuring. One of them had a large

carving knife slung on one side. The motley group marched single file towards the woods, grandpa bringing up the rear. Grandma had assured him that she would remain in the puja room till the party returned from its expedition.

The sun was down by the time the party entered the woods. Visibility dropped rapidly to just about ten feet. The men advised grandpa not to use the flashlight. He knew they had arrived at the machaan when the air was filled with the stench of the rotting carcass. The machaans were ready. The men had thoughtfully created make-shift rungs for the party to climb up. They seemed certain that the wait would not be longer than an hour or two. They gave grandpa a leg-up and left the scene. The darkness was thick now. Four men in place on two machans, waiting ...

Grandpa remembered being told during his training that the movement of the big cats through the forest is silent because of their padded feet. He now wondered how they would know if the cheetah had arrived. What would be the sign? Just as he thought of whispering the question to his companion, he was tapped gently on the shoulder, and told that the cheetah was near the kill, circling it before settling down for the feast.

Grandpa put his hand in his pocket, took out two cartridges, slipped them into the two barrels, and closed the breach. The butt at the shoulder and the barrel half raised, he waited for a proper sighting. At last, he could see the full outline of the beast, his left side presented to the machan. Grandpa raised the gun and squeezed the trigger. There was a sickening click. Grandpa cursed his luck that he should have a misfire at this most important moment. The cheetah, alerted by the click, took a step to the side, looked up at the machaan, and began to retreat when grandpa's companion turned on the flashlight, hoping to stop the beast in its tracks.

Grandpa fired the second shot. It worked this time. But they saw the cheetah leap into the thickness of the woods on the left. Silence.

There was a pow-wow across the two machaans. Grandpa was willing to admit that he was no hunter, and that it was a bad shot. They should go home. The villagers were sure that the cheetah had been hit, and that it could easily be tracked down and killed.

That was the worst news grandpa had heard in all his years in the village. The Standing Orders were very clear on the matter. No big cat was to be ever fired at and left wounded, as it could turn a man-eater. It was the sole responsibility of the person causing the wound to find the animal and kill it, with all the attendant dangers of getting face to face with a wounded big cat. It also meant bearing all the costs of organizing a *hanka*, which was a large contingent of men with country weapons, beating drums and all, to drive the animal to a clearing and then shooting it.

The villagers insisted on pursuing the mission. They won, not surprisingly. They climbed down to the ground cautiously. Grandpa opened the breach to reload. Damn, the first barrel had a 16 bore cartridge lodged well inside the breach. In his hurry to fill his pocket, he had not checked the cartridges carefully, and the odd 16 had got mixed with the 12 bore cartridges. Grandpa accepted his fate stoically. He loaded the one available barrel and waited for the others to lead the way again. The others were clear that it was grandpa who had to be at the head of the line, as he had the gun. They won again.

Into the thick woods went the foursome, taking one cautious step after another, grandpa leading, the occasional encouraging word from one or the other behind. At least they were there with him. Grandpa mumbled his gratitude to the lord above for small mercies. He had his gun at the ready, but was wondering all the time how long this crouched and agonizingly slow trek would take. On the other hand, it would be a relief if it went on till daybreak. Then they could all go home and worry about the hanka later.

There was a lull in the conversation, the men not knowing whether to talk or stay silent. The steps had slowed now. About twenty feet in front and to the right, they heard the crack of twigs on the ground,

followed by a blood-curdling snarl. Grandpa turned in the direction and fired. His companion turned on the flashlight. It was there on the ground, felled by grandpa's LG, writhing. It was actually as close as fifteen feet. With a new found determination, grandpa reloaded and fired, reloaded and fired. He emptied a total of five LGs in the direction of the beast till it stopped moving. It was done. The villagers raised a victory cry: Jai Hanuman!

One of them took out his matches, lit a dried twig, and burnt the cheetah's whiskers. It was believed that the big cat's whiskers were highly poisonous, and were used to dispatch one's enemies by grinding it and secretly mixing it in their food. The one with the knife began to skin the animal immediately. The next day, he rubbed it with salt and hung it up to be dried in front of grandpa's verandah, stretched fully on a bamboo frame. It made a pretty sight against the sun, the light shining through the sixteen holes. When people ask me about the holes in the cheetah skin in my room, I change the topic deftly. How can I possibly explain?

Two days later when grandpa and grandma Vatsalabai were at their evening chai under the neem tree, they heard the unmistakable low snarl of a cheetah behind the barn on the side, the sound of sawing wood. It was the mate. It had tracked down its missing partner. They hurried indoors and bolted the doors. Through the parted curtain of the window, they saw the mate stepping out from behind the barn, pausing, and walking away. This happened the next two evenings as well. When the villagers heard about the visit, they pleaded with grandpa to shoot it down. It would be an easy target. He refused firmly. This time he won. The cheetah stopped the evening visits after the third time.

My grandfather actually shot the second last cheetah. It was the female. The last cheetah was the surviving mate who died of loneliness, wandering through the hills, denying himself food and drink and breathing his last in a pit half filled with mouldy leaves and leeches.

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The Labrador hopped into the clearing in the park, chasing the ball. He went up to the wheelchair, and sniffed at the footrest, as he was accustomed to. He then started barking, raising an alarm. The wheelchair was empty. The walkers and joggers went about their routines not noticing anything unusual. Then an elderly couple came along. They remembered grandpa on the wheelchair, and went up to the barking Labrador. They were joined by the driver who had taken a tea break. The three of them asked many passers-by about grandpa. An old rag-picker sleeping on the stone bench half raised himself, and told the group that he had seen the aged gentleman rising from the wheelchair and stretching his arms to the sky. He then took a four-pod steel walking stick from the back of the wheel chair and hobbled away, ever so slowly, as if that was what he had to do. The rag-picker had turned and gone back to sleep. Did he remember where he went? Which direction? Of course. He walked in the direction of the little pond in the wooded area, beyond the banyan tree. It was now dried up and the pit was filled with mouldy leaves.

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