

Panthera pardus

by Ajay Nair

The panther must have got him.

Normally, I call a panther a leopard. The word 'leopard' implies a certain grace and sleekness that the word 'panther' cannot capture. But I am not looking for grace. I am looking for menace. 'Panther' is all about menace. It's about a black creature (though this one was of the spotted, tawny variety) with evil eyes and sharp fangs and a sneaky, stealthy tread. That's what I need right now. I don't need the wimpy spots and tree-climbing affability of the common leopard. Leopards are lazy. Panthers, on the other hand, spring upon you with surprising alacrity and tear your head off.

Before you made me etymologically digress, I was telling you that it had to be the panther that got him. By him, I mean Safoni. Now *that* is a name and a half — Sa-fo-ni. I bet you don't know any Safonis lurking around in your circle of acquaintances. I do. Or did. Though I'd guess knowing a dead Safoni is the same as knowing a live Safoni. Even worm food is food, isn't it?

Safoni was my best friend and lover. Which came first? I don't know.

Perhaps, it had been love at first sight. Who wouldn't fall in love with his deep, black eyes that spoke of a personal hell of pain embedded within his soul, with the smoke of some half-forgotten misery curling up through its dark interior? And his hands. At first sight, they were like any other hands; standard issue five fingers each, line-riddled palms, the works. But look closer. These were damn fine hands. They were perfectly proportioned, with a natural symmetry and shape that grew on you. The fingers were finely sculpted with prominent, strong knuckles and healthy nails. The palms were a smooth expanse of whiteness and promised you that you'd be ok if only you allowed them to hold your life. Yes, it could well have been love at first sight.

The problem is that I cannot quite remember. You know how memory is just a distorted version of facts that loses its shape and

clarity with time? It is possible that I did not fall in love with him till later, after we had already become best buddies. It's my fault. I never bothered to record these things — in a diary or something. If I had cultivated this habit, I would certainly have noted the exact date when I realised that I loved Safoni and the date when I realised he was my best friend. That way, I would be able to ascertain which came first. These things can sometimes be important; the root causes of love and all that.

Anyway, what matters now is that the panther got my lover and my best friend, all conveniently wrapped up in the human package that was Safoni. It was not a bad package at all, as far as packages go. I have already told you about the eyes and the hands. These were situated in a hunky body; all smooth lines and taut muscles. Safoni was a tough guy.

But for all his toughness, he did have a touch of the effeminate about him. Yes, I know that toughness and feminine traits are not mutually exclusive. But I have a conventional view of things and I like easy stereotypes, and I use them as convenient crutches when I feel like it. So you can go take a running jump if you are offended. Besides, I liked his effeminacy. It turned me on, big time. I have always preferred to play the more masculine part in my relationships, and his mannerisms fit the profile that I typically seek in my partners.

Why did I love Safoni? It was because he was kind and generous. He was courteous and polite and had a refreshing sense of humour. There was no trace of arrogance about him. He embodied a certain stability that I valued. The values he cherished were the same as mine — that of honesty and integrity, and of selfless service. He could also walk on water, of course.

I crack myself up, all the time.

Anyway, in reality, Safoni was a heartless sonofabitch. He had abandoned his parents as soon as he was able to. He had run through at least ten lovers in the past; some of them had filled that role simultaneously in his life. He was cruel to animals and the homeless. He once told me that one of his favourite memories was

pelting a cat till it died. When he told me that, his eyes took on the wistful look of a melancholy poet remembering some great passion. He loved playing mind-numbing manipulative games with people. He used words as weapons and he was skilful with them.

I am a lot like that too. I abandoned my poor mother when I was eighteen. The last I heard, she was being taken care of by some shelter which has a slightly unsavoury reputation. I have broken several hearts in my time; I just seem to get tired of my lovers after a while and then I leave them. The inability to form deep, lasting attachments can be quite liberating.

Safoni and I were made for each other. We had a good run, till the panther intervened.

We used to go hiking in this forest reserve. It was illegal and that was half the fun. We enjoyed making love against the rough barks of trees deep in the jungle, or sometimes on the prickly forest floor. Safoni found small insects to stomp on and sometimes, snakes to beat to death. I liked to swim naked in the streams that cut through the woods. Sometimes when it rained and we were drenched to our bones, we'd laugh like madmen. Once we thrashed a forest guard unconscious. Glorious times.

We hadn't accounted for the panther when we went in the last time. It was a bright day and the sun shone mechanically, moronically. The thing about the reserve was that once you had slipped inside it a couple of miles, it was very pleasant, with the tall trees protecting us from the hot rays. Hardly anyone went inside. We had gone in much further; about three hours worth of walking continuously. Safoni was angry about something and kept snapping at me. I was getting tired of his barbs and told him to back off. He started imitating my stutter. I don't like that and he knows that well. He just wouldn't stop.

The long walk had taken its toll on me and I was parched. He childishly knocked my bottle of water to the ground and started laughing like a maniac. He then began to talk about this other man he was growing to be friendly with. He talked about his wealth and his looks and his interest in Safoni. He was trying to make me

jealous; he found it amusing to rile me sometimes. I was tempted to take him out with a punch, but I don't like to resort to violence unless it's called for. Instead I tried to shout him down, but my stuttering got worse. He laughed harder till his laughter choked my thoughts and my senses. It was then that he slipped.

In several places, the forest had sudden, small cliffs; nothing steep, just a few feet. He had slipped off one and landed hard on his leg, breaking it. I went down to where he was lying, crying with pain. It was my turn to laugh. He tried to get up again and again, but collapsed back, every single time. I started poking him with a stick. I told him how the wart on his neck was the most disgusting thing I had seen. I was enjoying this power; this brief period of madness deep in the jungle. I didn't even realise that the sun was setting.

It was then that the panther arrived. Safoni saw it first, stalking us from behind a patch of trees. We'd spotted panthers before and usually, we chased them till they disappeared. We'd hear of some attacks on humans, but mostly they were rumours. Safoni, in his fallen state, was worried though, and I stoked his fear. I walked over to him and while he struggled hard, I managed to bind his hands with some rope that I had on me and his mouth with his handkerchief so he could not scream. I could see the bone jut out painfully from his ankle. The fear in his eyes was something else. I retreated to a vantage point some distance away from where I could continue to see him. After a while, as he tried to drag himself away, I saw the panther, a starving, emaciated specimen with its ribs showing, approach him. Safoni peered at me through the darkness, but I doubt whether he saw me smiling.

I am squeamish by nature and I didn't wait to see what happened. Besides, it was getting dark very quickly and I didn't want to spend the night there. As I left the scene and walked out of the reserve a couple of hours later, I felt a lightness inside me that I haven't felt for a long time; certainly not since I met Safoni.

Given that I haven't heard from Safoni for the last two weeks — since the day of that memorable hike — I am convinced the panther

must have eaten him. It's a pretty rotten way to go, but what can I say? Cats are cruel.

