

**Excerpt from “The Wonderful Thing About Tigers,” William Gray, *Wanderlust*, May 2015.**

It was almost as if the tiger had flicked a switch in the forest. One moment it was quiet and calm – the trees swathed in webs of early morning mist – the next, the air was charged with tension. Gomati had heard the distant alarm calls – the shrill snort of a spotted deer, the indignant bark of a langur monkey – and her mood suddenly changed.

She blasted a trunkful of dust up between her front legs, then shook her head so vigorously that I had to clutch the padded saddle to keep my balance. Gomati’s mahout, sitting astride her neck, issued a terse reprimand before urging the elephant into the tangled forest. There was no path; Gomati made her own. Soon the air was infused with the pungent aroma of crushed herbs and freshly-bled sap. Spiders and beetles drizzled from shaken trees; our clothing became wet with dew and stained by moss and lichen. We sounded like a forest fire – crackling, snapping, trailblazing. But through all the noise came a single piercing cry. Gomati stopped and we heard it again – the tell-tale alarm call of a spotted deer.

Manoj Sharma, my guide, leaned towards me. “When the tiger moves, the deer calls,” he murmured. “We must be close.” I nodded slowly, my eyes chasing around the shadows of the forest. Sunlight sparked through chinks in the canopy, but the understorey was still a diffuse patchwork of muted greens and shadows-within-shadows – the perfect foil for tiger stripes. Apart from an occasional rumble from Gomati’s stomach, the forest was silent. No one spoke or moved.

A minute passed, perhaps two. Then we heard a woodpecker hammering against a dead tree. I glanced at Manoj, but he shook his head. The woodpecker was not one of our forest spies. “Scimitar babbler, laughing thrush, green magpie.” Manoj’s voice was barely a whisper. “They will tell you if a tiger is near.” So we waited. And we listened.

Gradually, the tension slipped from our bodies. The woodpecker stopped drumming, and Gomati grabbed a nearby branch and stuffed it into her mouth. I reached forward to stroke the elephant’s neck; there was a soft patch, free of wrinkles and bristles, behind her ear.

They say tigers make the orchestra of the jungle play and, suddenly, several species seemed to launch into a gusty rendition of ‘I can see a tiger!’ Sambar and spotted deer began whistling to our left, while langur, babblers and others pitched in with a well-rehearsed repertoire of coughs, grunts and chatters.

Guided by the commotion, Gomati waded into the undergrowth once more. After 50m or so the alarm calls ceased, but now Gomati’s trunk was raised and she began to hesitate. The mahout dug his heels in, but she shuffled to a halt. For the first time that morning, the elephant let out a deep, resonating rumble. Clearly, Gomati was going no further.

Moments later we saw why. Less than a dozen metres ahead, the vegetation thrashed from side to side as three tigers burst from cover. The two cubs kept low to the ground, melting into the forest like wisps of smoke. But the tigress paused to glance over her shoulder. For a second or two, she stared straight at us – her eyes locked on ours with the intense scrutiny of a supreme predator. Then she turned and vanished.

It was the briefest of encounters – an exchange of glances that jolted the senses, seared the mind. “You are very lucky,” Manoj told me as Gomati trundled back to the rest house. “Not one tiger, but three!” Somehow, though, numbers seemed irrelevant. I began to realise that it wasn’t the glimpse of the tigers that had moved me, so much as the supercharged atmosphere of their native forest stronghold. Spotting the tigers had merely reaffirmed their beauty; tracking them had revealed their spirit.