

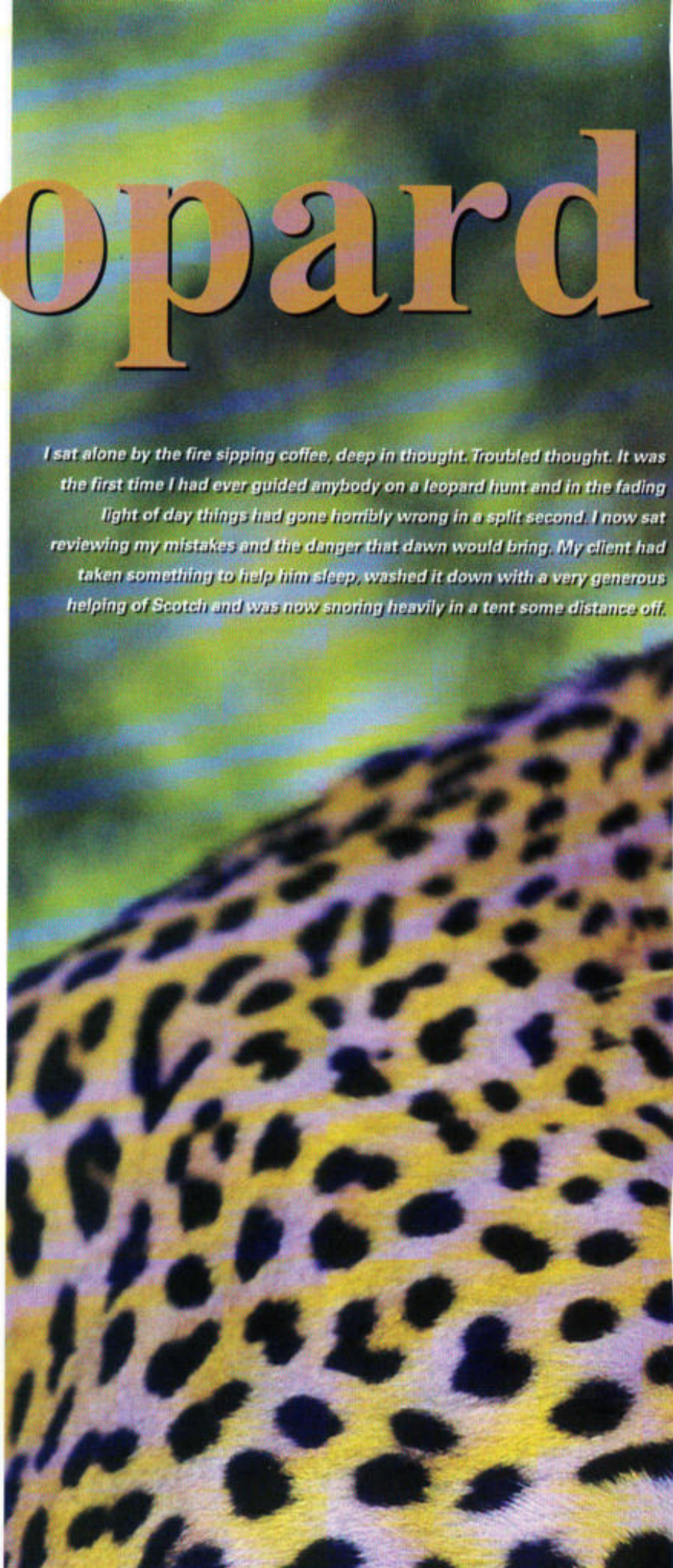
Leopard

By Ganyana

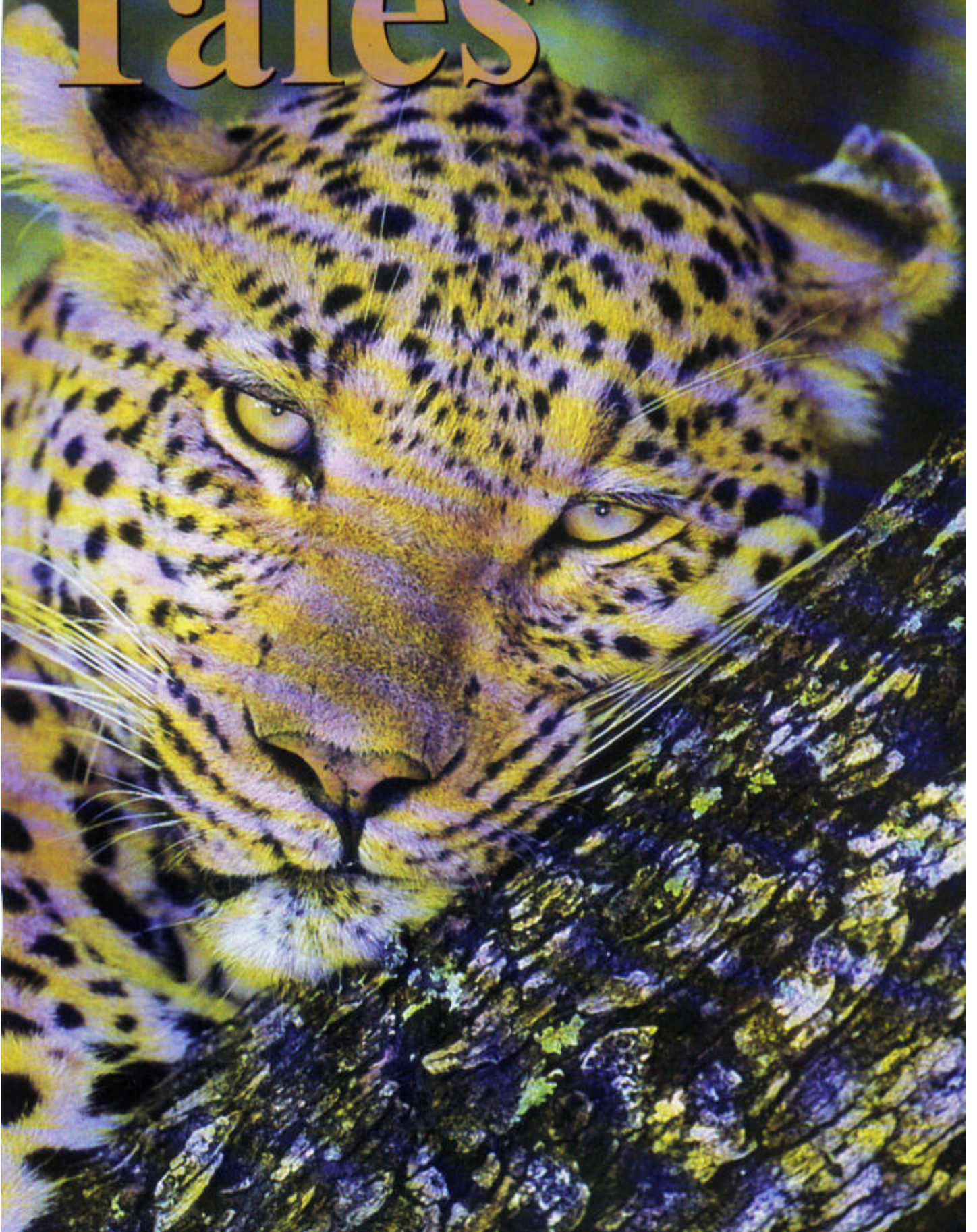
I sat alone by the fire sipping coffee, deep in thought. Troubled thought. It was the first time I had ever guided anybody on a leopard hunt and in the fading light of day things had gone horribly wrong in a split second. I now sat reviewing my mistakes and the danger that dawn would bring. My client had taken something to help him sleep, washed it down with a very generous helping of Scotch and was now snoring heavily in a tent some distance off.

I had hunted leopard before, quite often in fact. Problem leopard that were killing stock, when my job was simply to remove them as quickly as possible with no thought of sport. The two methods I had used when growing up, and even as an officer in the Wildlife Department, had been exciting. I had either run the leopard to earth using a Bushman tracker, or gone to the nearest kraal and borrowed a pack of hunting dogs, politely known as begenjies. Given fresh spoor, either the Bushman or the dogs would deliver the leopard at least 50% of the time. Sure, I had also set up blinds near the kill and waited for the leopard to return and on occasion resorted to poison or bear traps, but I had never had to choose the site for a leopard blind, hang the bait, and then rely on somebody else's shooting ability. But now I was on leave from the Wildlife Department trying to supplement my income legally. If word got out that I had wounded and lost a leopard I would be the laughing stock of the department for months to come. Worse still if things went wrong in the morning and I got myself properly scratched up. Any required sick leave would be "unpaid leave" since the injury would be classified as "self-inflicted whilst not on duty".

That long night in the Nyakasanga, I reviewed every detail of the hunt with care and my shortcomings were only too plain. I had sited the bait in a rain tree on the edge of a dry river-bed. There had been plenty of spoor, both fresh and old, indicating that the leopard regularly used that route. The rain



Tales



tree had an eminently suitable branch stretching out over the river with nothing to obstruct the view of the leopard. In short it was, I figured, the perfect "bait tree." I had secured the dead impala to the branch with wire as advised by my PH friends with considerably more experience in these matters than me, and done a good drag up and down the river-bed, as well as the elephant path leading down to the river. Unfortunately it had been too late to set up a decent blind that first evening and I had gone back to build it in the morning. The leopard had eaten well that night and we had to shoot another impala to reinforce the bait.

Sitting alone by that fire I called the cook and asked him to find me some cigarettes. I hadn't smoked in years but this seemed like a good time to start again. Drawing deeply on a "gwayi", my nerves settled down to a mad panic and I could now see the failings of my bait and blind sites. From the blind I could see the bait clearly, but I could not see the river-bed. When the leopard fell off the branch it would disappear from view and there was no hope of me putting in a back up shot. Also there was a very thick patch of jess on the other side of the river, less than ten paces from where the leopard would land as it fell out of the tree. Even a dying leopard would probably have had enough strength left to reach it. I had also underestimated the effects of "buck fever". My client could shoot. He had shot very well on the range with his 'scope sighted .375 and had taken both impala cleanly so I was not unduly worried about his shooting ability on game. I had positioned a single Y shaped stick in front of his seat to serve as a shooting rest, and left it at that with no further thought on the matter. But he had his heart set on a leopard after his fifth safari to Africa. I had forgotten what excitement could do and what looking through a high magnification 'scope could do to excitement, especially when 'Jaws', the mother of all leopards (to quote Saddam Hussein) climbed up for supper. Hindsight told me that I should have used two sticks and secured the rifle in position with elastic allowing the client only minimum movement of the rifle. At the time, though, I was confident that provided the leopard returned before last legal shooting light, we would have spots safely in the bag and could get on with the buffalo.

We had gone into the blind at 16:00 and settled down to wait. I am not a patient person, and had soon tired of looking at birds, keying out the few trees around that I did not know the names of and slipped into

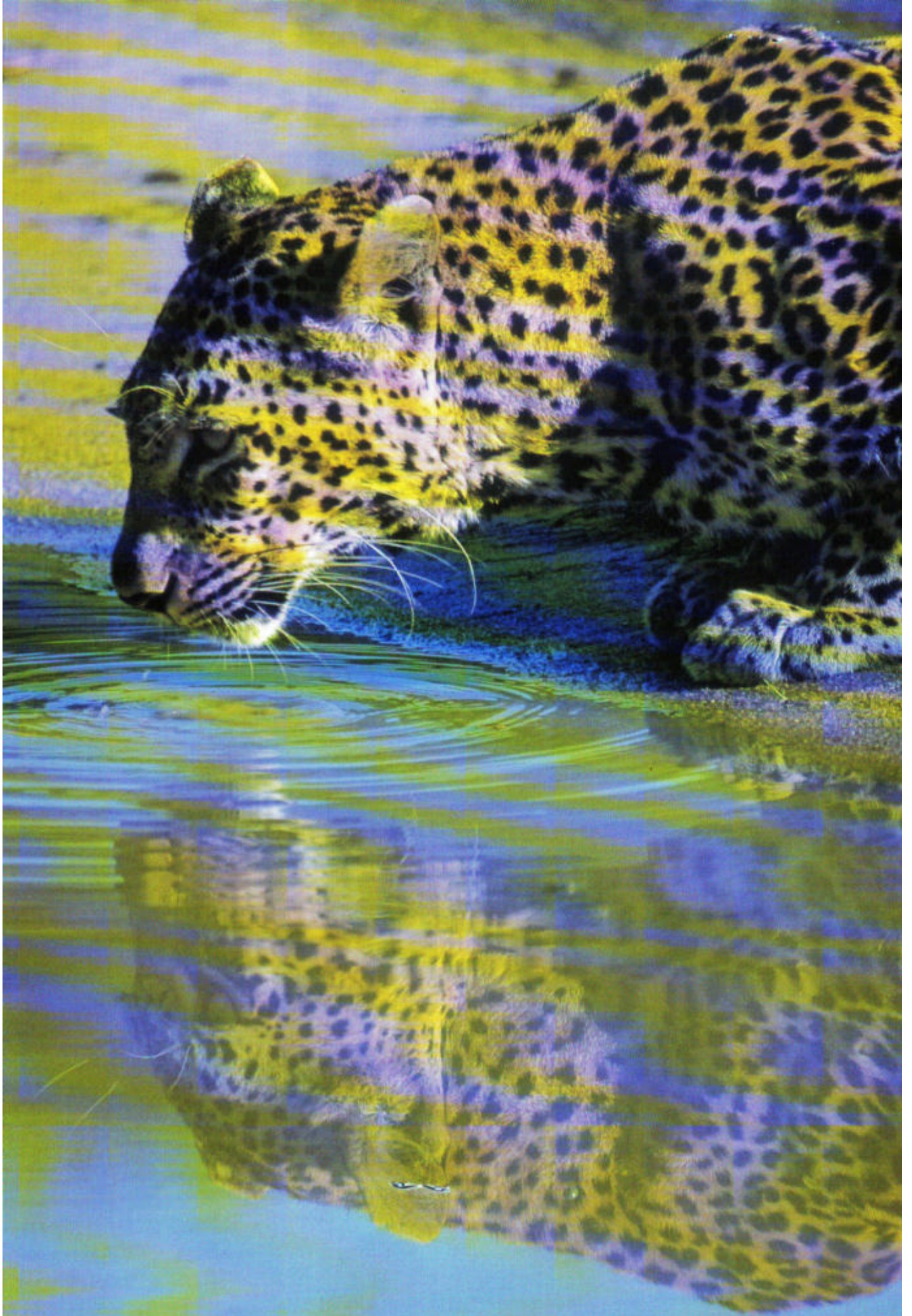
day dream mode. That big leopard would live not far away and how much more fun it would be if I could bring my father's Bushman tracker here into the safari area and simply follow it up in daylight instead of sitting here bored, watching meat rot. My client sat reading Capstick's "Death in the Long Grass" just to help build up the excitement. It was nearly five to six when the leopard arrived. I was just about to stand up and get ready to pull out since last legal shooting light ended at six, when 'Jaws' silently leaped up into the tree and walked calmly out onto the branch. I shook the client out of his reading and pointed out the leopard as it settled down to feed. The Game Scout looked at his watch. Another time or place I would have asked him to give me a five minute extension on shooting time since it was still quite light, but being an officer I knew I had to stick precisely to the rules. The angle of the leopard wasn't great but I quietly told the client that as we were rapidly running out of time he would have to take it like that or we could try again in the morning if he didn't feel confident. He said he would take the shot and I cautioned him to remember the diagram I had drawn him of the position of the vitals and to make sure that he didn't shoot too far forward or too high. He seemed very excited and I told him to take a few deep breaths and take it smoothly. I then peered out of my shooting port through my binoculars.

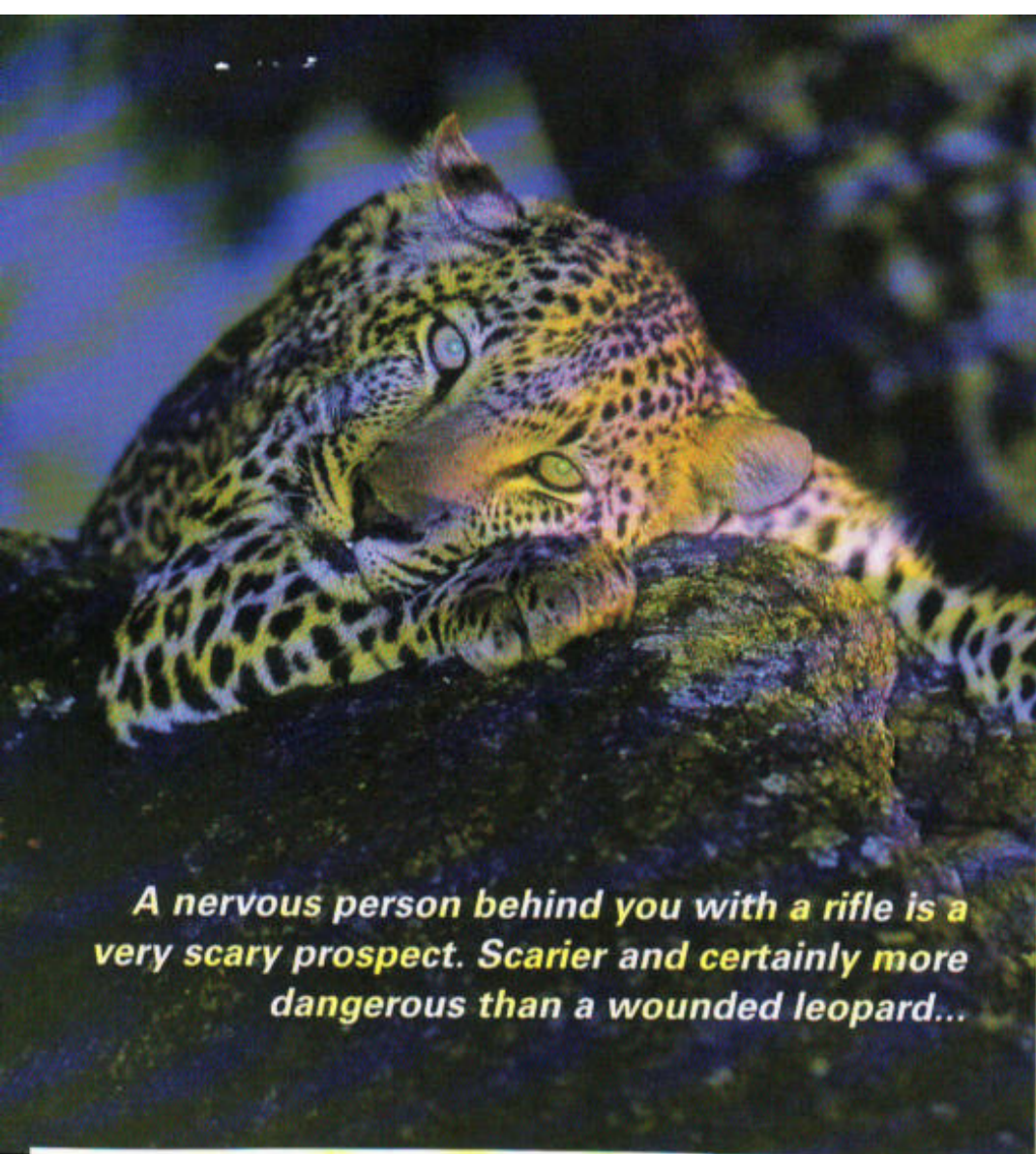
The shot tore through the leopards front leg and threw a chunk of bait up into its face, and an instant later it was leaping out of the tree towards the jess. "I was shaking like a leaf" my client chipped in, "so I'm not sure where I hit him" @\$#! I thought, then you shouldn't have fired! Leaving the client with the Game Scout, I moved forward cautiously, rifle at the ready, but the blood led straight into the jess. It was now getting dark quickly and even with my torch I couldn't see far, let alone through the tangle of brush that lay ahead. Suddenly my hands were sweating so much that I could barely hold my torch and the rifle's fore end in my left hand and I desperately needed a drink. It felt like no water had passed my lips all day. There were also a good few butterflies starting to flit around my stomach. Damn! But it is not the done thing to leave a wounded animal without making a reasonable attempt at a follow up. This one was not badly hit, but even so, if it got caught on the ground by hyaenas or lions there would be only scraps of skin left to present to my client in the morning.

I had only gone about twenty yards into the jess when the Game Scout called that I should come back. He explained that it was now officially dark and I should wait until morning. I knew the law referred only to unshot animals but the Game Scout's other comments made sense as well. Come back, prepared, with a tracker and do the job properly in daylight. Also bring the camp first aid box. As I turned back the dryness in my mouth stopped, my palms dried up but a desperate weariness replaced them.

I now sat reviewing all that I had heard about following up a wounded leopard. General advice was to use a shotgun, but a few old pros, whom I respected immensely, discounted this and said one should stick to one's rifle. All recommended wearing some sort of heavy protective clothing and at least one fellow I knew of issued his tracker and other camp attendants with shields and got them to walk in front. Indeed, I had asked my Matebele tracker to bring his shield and spear with him, but that was only one man and not a wall of shields and spears ahead. Always wear a cricket box, make sure your neck is well protected, make sure ... all sorts of advice, but none of those men would be at my side at 05:30 the next morning. I had to do this my way, alone. Also Silas was new to me and I was not sure of him, and equally he was not sure of me. That relationship between hunter and tracker only develops with time and success. I had never seen a leopard charge but knew it to be fast. The "Gwayi Five" had recently been mauled and the leopard nearly got away to brag about it. Another friend had been given a tummy tuck only a fortnight earlier and if that leopard had got either of its back legs a couple of centimetres closer towards the centerline of its victim he would be only half the man he currently is. All thoughts that did nothing to paint a rosier picture. And just to make matters worse this was one of the biggest leopards I had ever seen.

I didn't own a shotgun, so that simplified the choice of weaponry down to my .375 H&H or my battered issue S.L.R. rifle that I had brought along in case we met poachers. I decided on the S.L.R. since I had done a vast amount of practice with it and could snap shoot it far better than my .375, which was a relatively new rifle to me. Also I had a bayonet for it, which proved a superb general purpose camp knife but I had never before considered fitting it to the rifle. I had a few rounds of good .308 soft point ammo for use when shooting rations, which I figured would be more effective stopping rounds than military ball.





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other. Where possible, I stayed level with him and a pace or so to his right. I didn't want it to appear I was putting him in the firing line, didn't want Silas to knock me over if the leopard charged and he decided to run for it, and I also didn't want him to mask a shot. The client stayed close behind me and the Game Scout brought up a very distant rear.

Going through that jess was a nightmare. It was so thick that you had to follow in single file, and often had to crawl. If 'Jaws' had waited for us the victory would almost certainly have been his. After about the longest 50 yards in the world, we emerged from the jess into some more open woodland. A large spreading Albida tree stood nearby and the spoor lead towards its base. Silas and I inched forward, trying to see through the tree, around its base and into the bush beyond. As we moved under the canopy hyaena spoor obliterated the cat tracks. Damn! The hyaenas had got to it after all. We moved forward looking for pug marks amongst the dog like prints of two or three hyaena. Nothing at the base of the tree. A few

more steps, still only hyaena. Silas began casting around to see which way the leopard had gone, for although it looked like there had been a fight, the leopard hadn't died here. Something made me look up. I had scanned that tree hard during our approach and seen nothing, but now I felt the hair on my back rising. As I looked up I caught a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye. I spun towards it and poked the rifle out ahead of me. I was just in time to see the leopard in full dive hurtling towards me. My S.L.R. went off almost on its own and the cat seemed to buckle in mid air as the bullet struck, but the momentum of the dive carried it onwards. The bayonet caught it in the throat as I leaped aside trying to haul the leopard away from me. Silas had turned at the shot (it was so quick that I didn't have time to shout) and as the leopard crashed into the ground he lunged forward and sank his spear through its ribs. My S.L.R. seemed to have jammed for although I kept trying to fire it would not go off. It turned out that there was nothing wrong with the rifle, it was simply that I had

As for protective clothing, I didn't have much. Only a light bush jacket and perhaps a towel to wrap around my neck.

It was nearly midnight when I turned in for a restless sleep and 04:30 when the cook came to wake the client and I, so we could be at the blind by first light. The client insisted he come along. It was his leopard and he had wounded it, so he felt that it was his duty to be there at the end. I was not happy with this at all but he was insistent. A nervous person behind you with a rifle is a very scary prospect. Scarier and certainly more dangerous than a wounded leopard, a fact which I pointed out to him in no uncertain terms.

Dawn found us at the blind, ready to begin. I made sure that the Game Scout's AK rifle was unloaded, the client's rifle firmly on safe and my S.L.R. positively loaded with 20 rounds of softs in the magazine, and its six inch bayonet clipped to the end. I knew that the wounded leopard was unlikely to be far away so we proceeded from the outset with much care. My tracker on the spoor, shield in one hand and a short stabbing assegai in the

not released the trigger far enough for the mechanism to reset, i.e. a case of trigger freeze. At this point the client barged into the occasion and sent a .375 soft point crashing into the leopard's skull. He must have missed Silas by only a few inches and was a good ten yards behind when he fired. In the words of a local bard, "I cursed him in English and I cursed him in Dutch, and I cursed him in Shona overly much".

The leopard was very dead and at 8'1" certainly qualified for the title of 'Jaws'. Pity we could never measure the skull. I had learnt first hand just how quick spots really is, but had also had it reaffirmed that man, the hunter, has a sixth sense as well developed as any other animal in a hostile world where you aren't quite at the top of the food chain.

Suddenly the bush was alive with birdcalls and the air itself had taken on a pleasant fragrance of the jess in flower. Funny how I hadn't noticed that before. Life was very good and it seemed like the perfect day to give up smoking.