

The Indolent Sloth

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

I've heard that hard work never killed anyone, but I say why take the chance?
Ronald Reagan

Aiai was a three-toed sloth that lived high on the canopy of a South American forest. He was difficult to see, either from the ground or the skies, because his body was hanging from a branch by his strong front limbs or perched in a fork of a tree with feet bunched together into a ball.

Another factor that disguised Aiai was his appearance. The shaggy, brown hairs that covered his body were interspersed with strands of symbiotic algae whose greenish hue served to camouflage him. The only distinctive part of Aiai's body was a bare patch in the middle of the back that revealed the underfur, which stood out due to its orange tinge.

Aiai moved slowly and only when necessary. He stayed motionless on his branch most of the time and went down to the ground only once a week to defecate. He was almost helpless on the ground, where he only could drag himself along with his claws.

He had a capacious stomach, which he kept constantly filled, its contents making up over one third of Aiai's weight. He was corpulent and had a commanding presence, much larger than that of his peers.

The sloths that dwelt in this forest feared Aiai, for he was very loud (his resonant cries were amplified by the woods); he could also strike out furiously with his foreclaws if provoked. The other male sloths ultimately offered to let him be their leader and have his choice of females if he would protect the group from predators, should any approach their territory. Aiai agreed to become the group's master and protector on those terms. He then took advantage of his status by pursuing females relentlessly, mating in the trees with one after another. He soon had sired two dozen infants from consenting or coerced females.

Late one afternoon, after a copious repast of *Cecropia* leaves, Aiai had the uncomfortable sensation that his stomach was replete. He realized he could eat no more until he made room in his belly and went gingerly down his tree and, upon reaching the forest floor, began digging with his sharp claws to create a hollow into which to defecate. He was releasing his dung when he noticed a pair of large round eyes staring at him a few feet away. It was a margay, a hunting wildcat, black rosettes contrasting sharply with its white fur.

Aiai was almost the same size as the predator and his claws provided effective weapons to defend himself. He stopped pooping, squared himself up, and prepared to defend against an assault from the cat. He was surprised when the margay spoke into his mind: "*Why fight? I would probably kill you but you could hurt me in the process. Let's make a deal.*"

Aiai replied dubiously: "*What kind of deal?*"

"Well, if I climbed this tree after you and you revealed to me where others of your kind were hiding, I could dispatch them and, after I ate one or two, I would go down to digest them and leave you alone."

Aiai vacillated between fighting and dealing. He thought he could perhaps beat his adversary and honor the commitment he had made to protect his neighbors. On the other hand, fighting the margay would require a lot of physical effort and the waste of more energy in a few minutes than he was used to spending in a turn of the moon. Why should he go through all that effort?

What were the risks? The cat could go back on his word, but the treetops were Aiai's domain and there he was most likely to be able to overcome the cat.

Could he just try to outrun the margay and reach the treetop before his enemy? He was an experienced climber, but he had never observed how fast these cats moved and he might be seized from behind and devoured. Fleeing was the least safe option.

"What is in it for me?" he countered. "I understand what you would gain from the deal, but how would I benefit?"

The margay narrowed his eyes. *"I would offer to share the meat of one of my catches with you, but you only seem to feast on leaves."*

Aiai then realized that his now relieved stomach was empty and signaling the onset of hunger. He responded: *"I've never eaten meat, but there is always a first time for anything. I'll agree to your bargain."*

They followed each other up the tree. Aiai was surprised as to how quickly the cat could climb. The margay's hind ankles rotated widely, which gave him a strong grip; his paws had sharp, fully retractable claws that dug deeply into bark, and his long tail acted as a counterbalance. When he got to the top, his slender body allowed him to move easily along the branches.

Aiai started pointing out the hidden bodies of his neighbors and the margay pivoted on his powerful hind legs, leaping vertically from one tree to another without hesitation. In a matter of minutes, the margay captured and slain a sloth and brought the corpse back to the branch where Aiai sat.

“There, have a taste” he invited, beckoning Aiai to bite into the bloody cadaver. Aiai complied; however, his mouth was designed to chew on leaves, not to cut and tear away flesh: he had small, peg-like teeth, lacking incisors or canines, and the molars were meant only to grind through leaf tissue. Thus, he became totally engaged in attempting to chew the flesh offered to him.

The margay had been watching attentively and, as the sloth became distracted, jumped on Aiai’s back and, holding the body with his claws, bit deeply above the orange patch of exposed underfur and, with a mighty twist, broke Aiai’s neck.

The dying sloth felt no remorse about having betrayed his kind, but lamented: *“I was just much too lazy. But at least I did not have to exert myself fighting the bastard.”*

END