

SLIPPERY SLOPE

by Janet Ruth

We rattle up poorly paved roads, crammed into jeeps. Sometimes the winding road is in India, sometimes Nepal. Our view ahead obscured by fog rising from deep valleys, or clouds sinking from mountain peaks. Somewhere, the trackers have found our target and we are going to find it.

Arriving, we ask where it is and the trackers point over the edge—a steep pitch down which my stomach drops—it’s at least 45 degrees. I’m pretty sure my hiking pole will not stop me if I start sliding down the mountain. But, standing prepared to assist are the guys I’ve come to think of as “the young guns”—or my new best friends. Down we go—300 meters, foot-by-foot. One holds my hand, the other jams a boot into the leaf litter to slow my momentum. They smile and make encouraging sounds, sometimes in a language I don’t understand. I smile back nervously, try to keep camera and binoculars from getting in the way. There, amid the thrashing sounds of fellow seekers, tripping over vines and fallen logs. There, struggling for a foothold, I look up along the guide’s pointing finger. . . .

high in the mist
a red panda’s face
my ragged breath

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