



## The View From Heifer Hill—September 2019

# Violet

Normally, I dedicate this space to sharing what I have learned from the wildlife of this region. Because these are not normal times, I will take you, instead, to a distant place and time—the Amazon thirty years ago. Then a recent college grad, I was eager to experience a part of the world where nature reached its height of exuberance.

On the second week on my month-long trip, I stayed at a remote primitive lodge. One day, the local guide took a couple of new-comers out for a walk and returned with two sloths, a mother with a baby clinging to her neck. The guide had shaken them out of a tree to show the guests and then brought them back to the lodge to keep on display. The mother had a bloody nose and hung, dejectedly, from a pole. Algae grew on her long coarse fur, the better to blend with the foliage in her arboreal world.

The next morning, the cook informed me that the mother had been “sent to a doctor to get her bloody nose fixed.” When it became clear that none of the three members of the lodge staff had any idea how to care for a baby sloth, they gratefully handed her over to me. Violet, as I named her, had a shiny brown leather muzzle stuck onto a plush round face. If she had rounded ears, she’d have looked like a teddy bear. Like other baby mammals deprived of their mother, this one was quick to accept a surrogate. Soon she was lapping tinned milk from a dish. When Violet finished her first dish of milk, she hoisted herself up to my face and licked my lips—a kiss of gratitude? Somewhere in my pre-trip reading

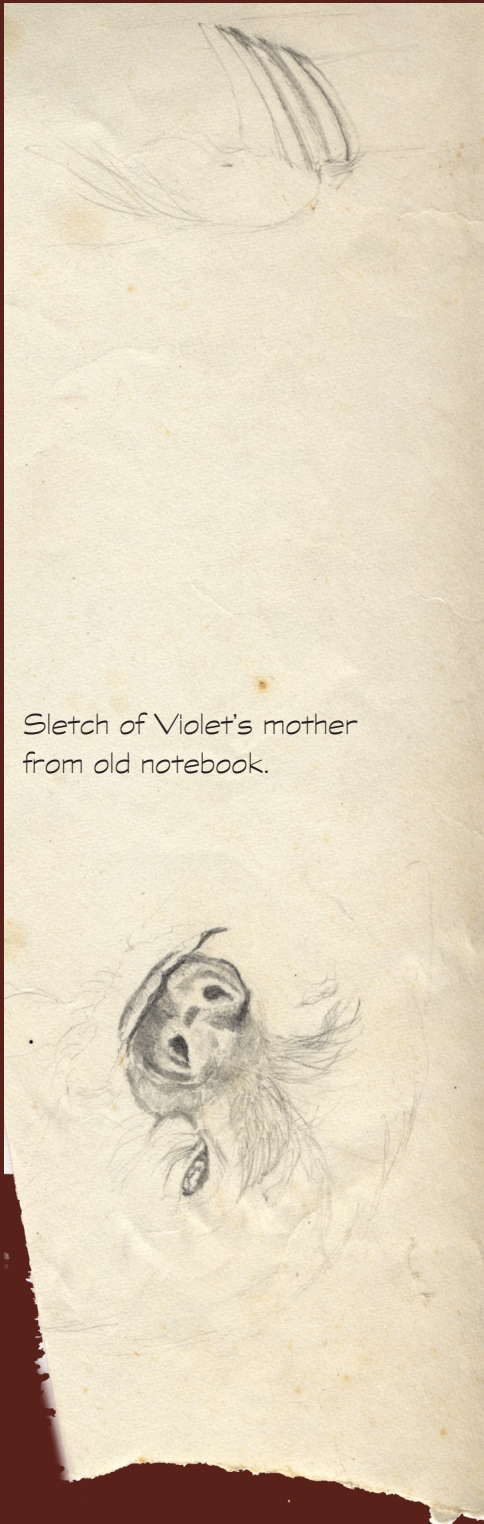
about rainforests I learned that baby sloths get the microflora they need to digest leaves by licking their mothers’ lips. I suppose that I shouldn’t have been too surprised when she then took to sharing my meals of rice, fruits, and vegetables.

Rice is no sort of diet for a sloth. There was a small tree with low spreading branches growing in the clearing by the lodge, and I would sometimes hang the little sloth there to give her a chance to eat some leaves. In very little time, she would have forgotten me entirely and would attempt to defend herself against me when I came back to get her. When I extended my hand to pick her up, she would hook one of my fingers in her claws and try to pull it (slowly) into her mouth to bite it. Baby two-toed sloths have just a few peg-like teeth. I did not find this very frightening. Once I scooped her up, she remembered me.

Caring for a baby sloth during the day proved to be reasonably straightforward. I rigged up a sling and carried the sleepy sloth everywhere I went. Nights were a different story. When I tried to leave Violet in a cozy nest box, she mewled pitifully. What’s a mother sloth to do? She quieted right away when I brought her under the mosquito netting with me. Sloths, it turns out, are nocturnal. The little creature dragged herself up and down the narrow bed and over its diurnal occupant all night.

Another important thing I learned about sloths is that they defecate only about once a week and urinate only about once a day. Like most young





Sketch of Violet's mother  
from old notebook.

animals, they have learned not to foul their nests. I quickly learned to hold her at arm's length when she started wriggling.

I spent two weeks with Violet before I found a way to get her to a wildlife center that prepares confiscated wild animals for life in the wild. I like to think she lived a long and relaxing slow-motion life in the canopy of the rainforest.

While the sloths' superpowers may seem modest— the ability to digest nearly indigestible leaves and to pass for a lump of mossy vegetation—these creatures thrive in the complex melee of the jungle. These abilities do not serve them well in a fire. The fires in the Amazon have been making headlines for the past month. Max Fisher outlined the most worrisome aspect in an August 30 article in the *New York Times*, *'It's Really Close': How the Amazon Rainforest Could Self-Destruct*. In the article, he describes the dynamics that could lead to a wide-scale transformation of the rainforest to a grassland-savannah. In a nutshell, roads and expanding agricultural lands increase the amount of drier forest edge. During the dry season, fires started to create or maintain pastures and croplands blaze through the forests, and invasive grasses come up in the freshly burned areas. These grasses cause fires in the next season to burn hotter, killing more trees and native vegetation. Because rainforests create much of their rain, the loss of forest will lead to a more extended dry season and increase the extent of fire-prone regions. Experts fear this transformation could happen quickly and irreversibly once burned areas reach a tipping point.

Sloths will not be able to survive in a dry savannah. Neither will the vast majority of the species that populate the Amazon. Given the amount of carbon that will be released by its burning, such a transformation would trigger a cascade of worldwide ecosystem collapses. The habitat of the moose disappears when the habitat of the sloth disappears. What can we do? Actions are being planned around the UN Climate Summit in New York on September 23, beginning with a Global Climate Strike on Friday, September 20. A Brattleboro strike rally will take place at noon at Pliny Park. For the sake of all we cherish, I hope to see you there.