

THE SLOTH AND THE SLOTH MOTH

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Imagine a hairy, brown creature with long arms and legs - like a cross between a little bear and a monkey. The whole animal is covered in a shaggy pelt of coarse grey and brown hair. Three really long, slightly scary claws poke out of its hands and feet. They are longer than the whole of your hand. Yet when you see its face, the animal looks like the world's sweetest teddy bear. It has dark shiny beady eyes, a little black snout and a mouth that always seems to be smiling. The animal you are imagining is called a sloth.

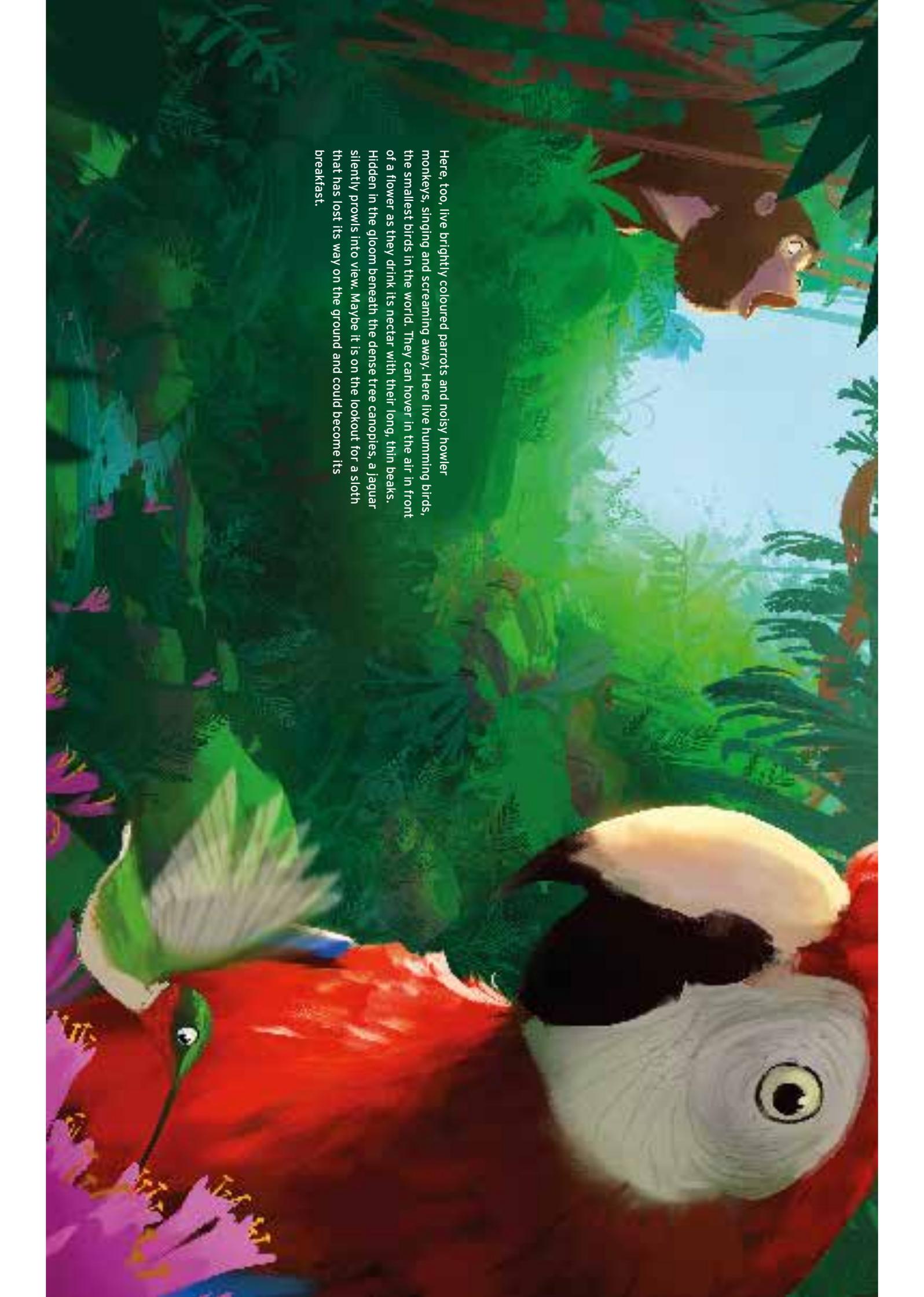


Sloths live in south and central America. They live in the hot, humid jungle, where they love to hang from a branch, as still as can be - so still that you almost can't see them. But all around them, the jungle teems with life. Bugs and snakes, frogs and birds also have their home here. Not all of them are so easy to spot, but you can hear them buzzing and humming and croaking and shrieking. Especially at night and in the morning.





Most life here is tiny. Tiny-weeny. Insects chewing leaves, slurping nectar from flowers or eating other bugs. Many of the insects live out their lives hidden from our sight. They drill into rotten trees or nibble away at green leaves high in the canopies of the trees.



Here, too, live brightly coloured parrots and noisy howler monkeys, singing and screaming away. Here live humming birds, the smallest birds in the world. They can hover in the air in front of a flower as they drink its nectar with their long, thin beaks. Hidden in the gloom beneath the dense tree canopies, a jaguar silently prowls into view. Maybe it is on the lookout for a sloth that has lost its way on the ground and could become its breakfast.



It is so humid here that the air feels heavy. A bit like in a greenhouse. It also smells like a greenhouse: a thick, heavy scent of wet earth and rotting leaves, mingled with the strong, sweet aroma of flowers and fruits. This is the home of the sloth.

Sloths are mammals, just like you and me. Most mammals – like cats, dogs and people – live on the ground and use their legs for walking. But not the sloth. It just hangs and dangles beneath a branch. The long claws at the very ends of its arms and legs are great for gripping onto things. But they aren't so good for walking on the ground. Just imagine what would happen if you let your nails grow as long as your hand and then had to crawl around on the ground with them. You wouldn't walk very fast either.



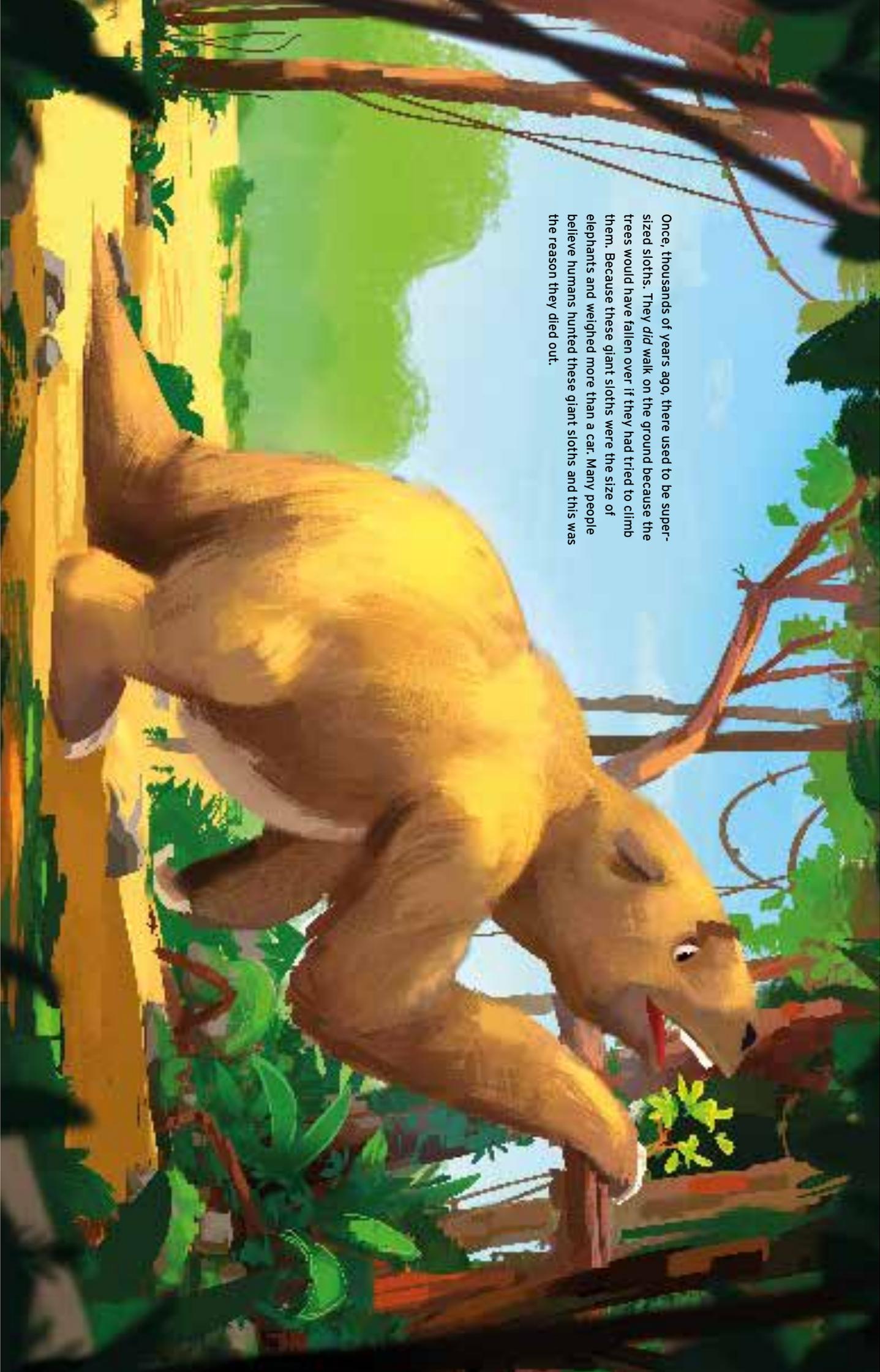


That's why the sloth mostly stays up in the canopy of the tree. It lives the whole of its life up there as it dangles upside down, hanging by its arms and legs. Its grip on the branch can be so firm that the sloth may stay dangling up there even after it dies. It eats upside down, sleeps upside down and gives birth upside down. Newborn sloths use their mum as a hammock, clinging onto her belly fur with their claws - until they are big enough to find a branch of their own to dangle from.

Even though sloths don't like it on the ground, they are actually good swimmers. When they need to move to a tree some way off, they sometimes wait for it to rain so much that there is a flood in the forest. Then they can release their grip, tumble into the water and swim across to a new tree. That way they avoid having to crawl across the ground.



Once, thousands of years ago, there used to be super-sized sloths. They *did* walk on the ground because the trees would have fallen over if they had tried to climb them. Because these giant sloths were the size of elephants and weighed more than a car. Many people believe humans hunted these giant sloths and this was the reason they died out.



These days, sloths aren't so heavy. They don't weigh much more than a small dog. This makes it easier for them to clamber out onto thin branches and find the leaves they like. Because sloths eat leaves for breakfast, leaves for lunch and leaves for tea. And only very special kinds of leaves from just a few types of trees.

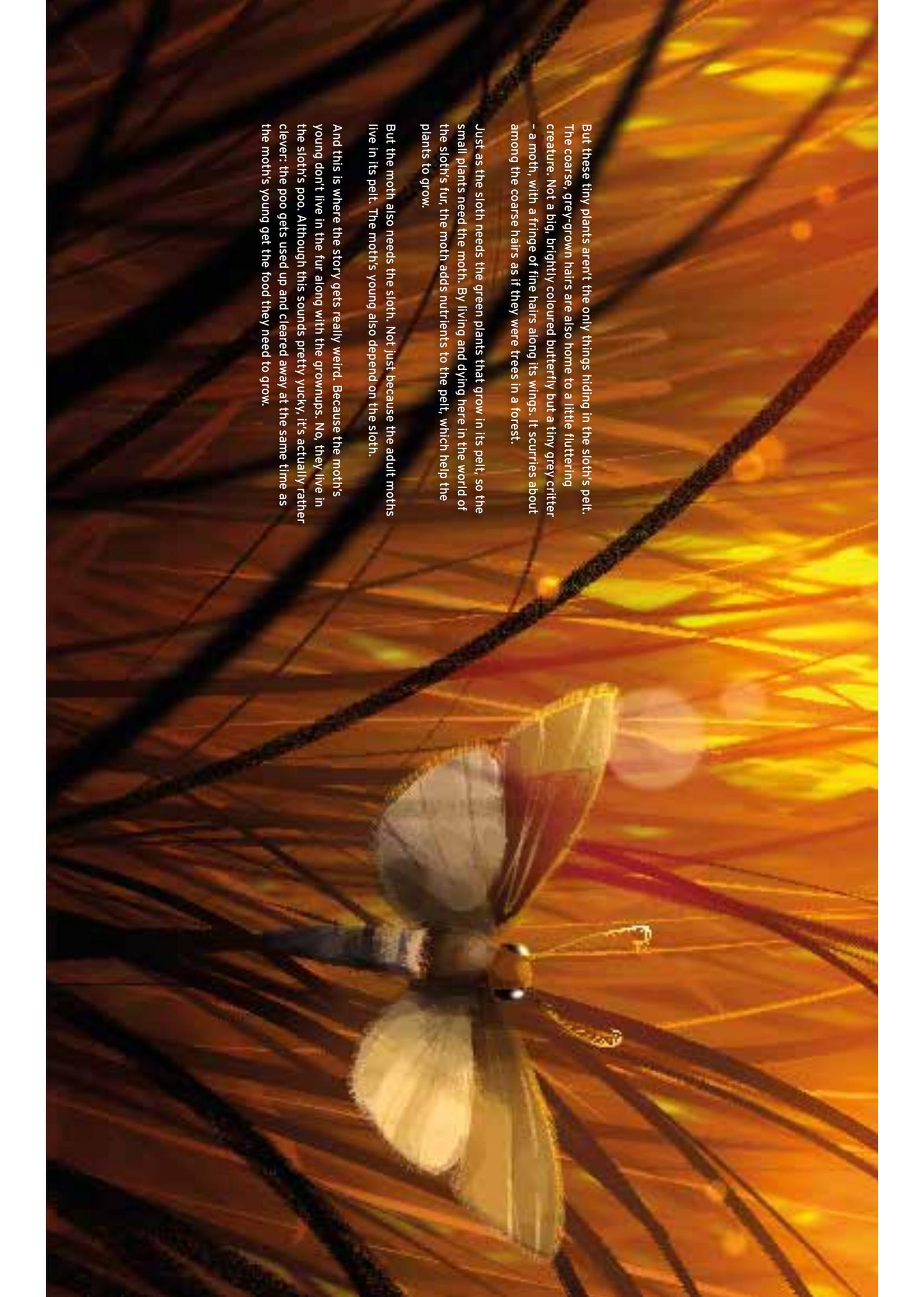
This is why the sloth is so slothful: the leaves sloths eat don't contain much nourishment and it takes a long time to digest them. In fact, it can take more than a month. And food like this doesn't give you much strength. That's why it's such slow going when they have to move.



A cartoon illustration of a sloth hanging from a tree branch in a lush green jungle. The sloth has a brown face with large, dark eyes and a small, dark nose. Its body is covered in long, shaggy yellow fur. It is hanging from a thick, brown tree branch with its arms and legs. The background is a dense, vibrant green forest with sunlight filtering through the leaves, creating a bokeh effect. The overall style is bright and colorful.

In fact, the sloth is so slow that moss seems to grow on it. A fine layer of green covers its fur. This comes from a type of algae, a minuscule plant that grows in its hair. It's actually pretty practical because it makes the sloth more difficult to spot. It's like a sort of invisibility cloak, because the most common colours in the jungle are green and brown: all the leaves are green, while tree-trunks and branches are brown.

The green growth on the sloth's pelt is useful in another way, too. By scraping it off or licking it, the sloth obtains important nourishment: it can't get from the leaves.



But these tiny plants aren't the only things hiding in the sloth's pelt. The coarse, grey-grown hairs are also home to a little fluttering creature. Not a big, brightly coloured butterfly but a tiny grey critter - a moth, with a fringe of fine hairs along its wings. It scurries about among the coarse hairs as if they were trees in a forest.

Just as the sloth needs the green plants that grow in its pelt, so the small plants need the moth. By living and dying here in the world of the sloth's fur, the moth adds nutrients to the pelt, which help the plants to grow.

But the moth also needs the sloth. Not just because the adult moths live in its pelt. The moth's young also depend on the sloth.

And this is where the story gets really weird. Because the moth's young don't live in the fur along with the grownups. No, they live in the sloth's poo. Although this sounds pretty yucky, it's actually rather clever: the poo gets used up and cleared away at the same time as the moth's young get the food they need to grow.



Once a week, the sloth has eaten so many green leaves that its tummy is full to bursting. Then - slowly, slowly - it climbs down from the tree. It is a huge effort. And it is also dangerous for the sloth down there. It doesn't have much to defend itself with if it meets hungry predators on the ground.

Why can't the sloth just poo from the treetops? It must be because there are some advantages to pooping on the ground that make the long trip worthwhile. Perhaps the collaboration with the moth is so important that a dangerous trek on the ground is worth the risk.

Once down, the sloth finds a good place on the ground where it digs a hole with its tail stump. As it poos, a little cloud of moths flies out of its pelt. They lay eggs in the poo before flying back to the safety of its fur.



After a while, the eggs hatch into teeny pale larvae. These are the moth's young, even though they look very different from their mum and dad. The larvae eat their way through the poo until they have grown big enough to change bodies. Then they shut themselves up inside a shell.

When the shell cracks open, the larva has turned into an adult moth. Now it is ready to find a new place to live. The newly hatched moth flies up into the tree, where it finds a sloth and moves into its fur.



So a sloth isn't just a sloth. This strange creature that dangles peacefully in the jungle contains an entire circle of life inside its shaggy pelt.



FACTS ABOUT SLOTHS

What is a sloth?

- 🦥 Sloths live in the rainforests of South and Central America.
- 🦥 There are six different species of sloth. This story is about the brown-throated sloth.

Is the sloth slothful?

- 🦥 Slothful is another word for lazy. In Norwegian and other languages, the sloth is also known as “the lazy bear”. Actually, the sloth doesn’t spend much more time sleeping than you or me. But it does move veeeery slowly. In the time it takes you to eat a slice of bread, a sloth wouldn’t even manage to walk from the kitchen table to the fridge.

Are there many sloths?

- 🦥 The brown-throated sloth is still pretty common. But a sloth’s life isn’t always easy. Two species are at risk of extinction, which means there are so few of them left that they could disappear off the face of the Earth. Why? Mostly because we are chopping down the forests where the sloths live. We want to have fields or houses there instead. Other times, sloths are caught and eaten as food or sold illegally and kept in captivity.

Strange facts about sloths

- 🦥 The fur on the sloth’s face grows away from the tip of its nose towards the back of its head. That makes the water run away from its face when the sloth is hanging upside down in the rain. Because in a rainforest it rains hard and it rains often.
- 🦥 Some scientists think that the poo under the tree is like a kind of name badge. The smell of that particular poo tells other sloths who’s living up in the tree.
- 🦥 The brown-throated sloth can swivel its head almost all the way round so that it can look at its own bottom. Can you do that?







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