

Téa Obreht

The Tiger's Wife

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Téa Obreht was born in 1985 in the former Yugoslavia, and was raised in Belgrade.

In 1992, her family moved to Cyprus, and then to Egypt, where she learned to speak English, eventually emigrating to the United States in 1997. After graduating from the University of Southern California, Téa received her M.F.A. in Fiction from the Creative Writing Program at Cornell University in 2009.

She was the youngest author on *The New Yorker's* Top 20 Writers under 40 List, and the only author on that list yet to be published. In 2009, she was one of the youngest authors ever to be extracted in the *The New Yorker* magazine. The extract was later selected for the 2010 Best American Nonrequired Reading, edited by Dave Eggers.

She is also one of the National Book Foundation's 5 Under 35 authors, as selected by National Book Award winner Colum McCann. Rights to *The Tiger's Wife* have been sold in 15 countries.

Téa's short fiction has been published to great acclaim. Her short story *The Laugh* debuted in *The Atlantic Fiction Issue* and was then chosen for The Best American Short Stories 2010, while *The Sentry* appeared in the *Guardian Summer Fiction Issue* alongside stories by Hilary Mantel, Barbara Trapido, Roddy Doyle and David Mitchell. Her short story *The Space Elephant* was featured in *Zoetrope*, while her journalism has appeared in *Harper's Magazine*.

She lives in Ithaca, New York, where she is a lecturer at Cornell University.

The Tiger's Wife

*In my earliest memory, my grandfather is bald as a stone and he takes me to see the tigers. He puts on his hat, his big-buttoned raincoat, and I wear my lacquered shoes and velvet dress. It is autumn, and I am four years old. The certainty of this process: my grandfather's hand, the bright hiss of the trolley, the dampness of the morning, the crowded walk up the hill to the citadel park. Always in my grandfather's breast pocket: *The Jungle Book*, with its gold-leaf cover and old yellow pages. I am not allowed to hold it, but it will stay open on his knee all afternoon while he recites the passages to me. Even though my grandfather is not wearing his stethoscope or white coat, the lady at the ticket counter in the entrance shed calls him "Doctor."*

Then there is the popcorn cart, the umbrella stand, a small kiosk with postcards and pictures. Down the stairs and past the aviary where the sharp-eared owls sleep, through the garden that runs the length of the citadel wall, framed with cages. Once there was a king here, a sultan, his Janissaries. Now the cannon windows facing the street hold blocked-off troughs filled with tepid water. The cage bars curve out, rusted orange. In his free hand, my grandfather is carrying the blue bag my grandma has prepared for us. In it: six-day-old cabbage heads for the hippopotamus, carrots and celery for the sheep and deer and the bull moose, who is a kind of phenomenon. In his pocket, my grandfather has hidden some sugar cubes for the pony that pulls the park carriage. I will not remember this as sentimentality, but as greatness.

The tigers live in the outer moat of the fortress. We climb the castle stairs, past the waterbirds and the sweating windows of the monkey house, past the wolf growing his winter coat. We pass the bearded vultures and then the bears, asleep all day, smelling of damp earth and the death of something. My grandfather picks me up and props my feet against the handrail so I can look down and see the tigers in the moat.

My grandfather never refers to the tiger's wife by name. His arm is around me and my feet are on the handrail, and my grandfather might say, "I once knew a girl who loved tigers so much she almost became one herself." Because I am little, and my love of tigers comes directly from him, I believe he is talking about me, offering me a fairy tale in which I can imagine myself—and will, for years and years.

The cages face a courtyard, and we go down the stairs and walk slowly from cage to cage. There is a panther, too, ghost spots paling his oil-slick coat; a sleepy, bloated lion from Africa. But the tigers are awake and livid, bright with rancor. Stripe-lashed shoulders rolling, they flank one another up and down the narrow causeway of rock, and the smell of them is sour and warm and fills everything. It will stay with me the whole day, even after I have had my bath and gone to bed, and will return at random times: at school, at a friend's

birthday party, even years later, at the pathology lab, or on the drive home from Galina.

I THE TIGER

Having sifted through everything I now know about the tiger's wife, I can tell you that this much is fact: in 1941, in late spring, without declaration or warning, German bombs started falling on the city and did not stop for three days.

The tiger did not know that they were bombs. He did not know anything beyond the hiss and screech of the fighters passing overhead, missiles falling, the sound of bears bellowing in another part of the fortress, the sudden silence of birds. There was smoke and terrible warmth, a gray sun rising and falling in what seemed like a matter of minutes, and the tiger, frenzied, dry-tongued, ran back and forth across the span of the rusted bars, lowing like an ox. He was alone and hungry, and that hunger, coupled with the thunderous noise of bombardment, had burned in him a kind of awareness of his own death, an imminent and innate knowledge he could neither dismiss nor succumb to. He did not know what to do with it. His water had dried up, and he rolled and rolled in the stone bed of his trough, in the uneaten bones lying in a corner of the cage, making that long sad sound that tigers make.

After two days of pacing, his legs gave out, and he was reduced to a contraction of limbs lying in his own waste. He had lost the ability to move, to produce sound, to react in any way. When a stray bomb hit the south wall of the citadel—sending up a choking cloud of smoke and ash and shattering bits of rubble into the skin of his head and flank, bits that would gnaw at his flesh for weeks until he got used to the grainy ache of them when he rolled onto his side or scratched himself against trees—his heart should have stopped. The iridescent air and the feeling of his fur folding back like paper in the heat, and then the long hours during which he crouched at the back of his pen, watching the ruptured flank of the citadel wall. All of these things should have killed him. But something, some flickering of the blood, forced him to his feet and through the gap in the wall. The strength of that drive. (He was not the only one: years later they would write about wolves running down the street, a polar bear standing in the river. They would write about how flights of parrots were seen for weeks above the city, how a prominent engineer and his family lived an entire month off a zebra carcass.)

The tiger's route through the city that night took him north to the waterfront behind the citadel, where the remains of the merchants' port and Jewish quarter spread in flattened piles of brick down the bank and into the waters of the Danube. The river was lit by fires, and those who had gone into it were washing back against the bank where the tiger stood. He considered the possibility of swimming across, and under optimal circumstances he might have attempted it, but the smell rising off the bodies turned the tiger around,

sent him back past the citadel hill and into the ruined city.

People must have seen him, but in the wake of bombardment he was anything but a tiger to them: a joke, an insanity, a religious hallucination. He drifted, enormous and silent, down the alleys of Old Town, past the smashed-in doors of coffeehouses and bakeries, past motorcars flung through shopwindows. He went down the tramway, up and over fallen trolleys in his path, beneath lines of electric cable that ran through the city and now hung broken and black as jungle creeper.

By the time he reached Knez Petrova, looters were already swarming the Boulevard. Men were walking by him, past him, alongside him, men with fur coats and bags of flour, with sacks of sugar and ceiling fixtures, with faucets, tables, chair legs, upholstery ripped from the walls of ancient Turkish houses that had fallen in the raid. He ignored them all.

Some hours before sunrise, the tiger found himself in the abandoned market at Kalinia, two blocks up from where my grandfather and my grandma would buy their first apartment fifteen years later. Here, the scent of death that clung to the wind drifting in from the north separated from the pools of rich stench that ran between the cobbles of the market square. He walked with his head down, savoring the spectrum of unrecognizable aromas—splattered tomatoes and spinach that stuck to the grooves in the road, broken eggs, bits of fish, the clotted fat leavings on the sides of the butchers' stands, the thick smell smeared around the cheese counter. His thirst insane, the tiger lapped up pools from the leaky fountain where the flower women filled their buckets, and then put his nose into the face of a sleeping child who had been left, wrapped in blankets, under the pancake stand.

Finally, up through the sleepless neighborhoods of the lower city, with the sound of the second river in his ears, the tiger began to climb the trail into the king's forest. I like to think that he went along our old carriage trail. I like to imagine his big-cat paw prints in the gravel, his exhausted, square-shouldered walk along my childhood paths, years before I was even born—but in reality, the way through the undergrowth was faster, the moss easier on paws he had shredded on city rubble. The cooling feel of the trees bending down to him as he pushed up the hill, until at last he reached the top, the burning city far behind him.

The tiger spent the rest of the night in the graveyard and left the city at dawn. He did not go by unobserved. He was seen first by the grave digger, a man who was almost blind, and who did not trust his eyes to tell him that a tiger, braced on its hind legs, was rummaging through the churchyard garbage heap, mouthing thistles in the early morning sunlight. He was seen next by a small girl, riding in the back of her family's wagon, who noticed him between the trees and thought he was a dream. He was noticed, too, by the city's tank commander, who would go on to shoot himself three days later, and who mentioned the tiger in his last letter to his betrothed—*I have never seen so strange a thing as a tiger in a wheat field, he wrote, even though, today, I pulled*

a woman's black breasts and stomach out of the pond at the Convent of Sveta Maria. The last person to see the tiger was a farmer on a small plot of land two miles south of the city, who was burying his son in the garden, and who threw rocks when the tiger got too close.

The tiger had no destination, only the constant tug of self-preservation in the pit of his stomach, some vague, inborn sense of what he was looking for, which carried him onward. For days, then weeks, there were long, parched fields and stretches of marshland clogged with the dead. Bodies lay in piles by the roadside and hung like pods, split open and drying, from the branches of trees. The tiger waited below for them to fall, then scavenged them until he got mange, lost two teeth, and moved on. He followed the river upstream, through the flooded bowl of the foothills swollen with April rain, sleeping in empty riverboats while the sun, pale in the blue mist of the river, grew dimmer. He skirted human habitations, small farms where the sound of cattle drew him out of the bracken; but the openness of the sky and the prospect of human noise terrified him, and he did not stay long.

At some bend in the river, he came across an abandoned church, half a bell tower overgrown with ivy, crowded with the hushed shuffling of pigeons. It kept the rain off him for a few weeks, but there was no food for him there, all the corpses in the churchyard having decomposed long ago, nothing for him but the eggs of waterbirds and the occasional beached catfish, and eventually he moved on. By early autumn, he had spent four months in the swamps, gnawing on decaying carcasses that drifted by, snatching frogs and salamanders along the creek bed. He had become a host for leeches, and dozens of them stood like eyes in the fur of his legs and sides.

One morning, in the grip of an early frost, he came across a boar. Brown and bloated, the hog was distracted with acorns, and for the first time in his life, the tiger gave chase. It was loud and poorly calculated. He came on with his head up and his breath blaring like a foghorn, and the hog, without even turning to look at its pursuer, disappeared into the autumn brush.

The tiger did not succeed, but it was something, at least. He had been born in a box of hay in a gypsy circus, and had spent his life feeding on fat white columns of spine in the citadel cage. For the first time, the impulse that made him flex his claws in sleep, the compulsion that led him to drag his meat to the corner of the cage he occupied alone, was articulated into something other than frustration. Necessity drew him slowly out of his domesticated clumsiness. It strengthened and reinforced the building blocks of his nature, honed his languid, feline reflexes; and the long-lost Siberian instinct pulled him north, into the cold.

II THE VILLAGE

I'm told that the tiger was first sighted on the Galina ridge, above town, during a snowstorm at the end of December. Who knows how long he had already been there, hiding in the hollows of fallen trees; but, on that particular day, the herdsman Vladiša lost a calf in the blizzard and went up the mountain to retrieve it. In a thicket of saplings, he came across the tiger, yellow-eyed and bright as a blood moon, with the calf, already dead, hanging in its jaws. A tiger. What did that mean to a man like Vladiša? I knew *tiger* because my grandfather took me to the citadel every week and pointed to show me, *tiger*; because the labels in the taxidermy museum where we sometimes spent quiet afternoons read *tiger*, because *tiger* crawled, in intricate Chinese patterns, all over the lid of my grandma's knee-balm tin. *Tiger* was India, and lazy yellow afternoons; the sambar, eyes wide, neck broken, twisting in the mangroves while Kipling's jungle creepers bent low to mark the killer's back. But in my grandfather's village, in those days, a tiger—what did that even mean? A bear, a wolf, yes. But tiger? How fear came.

People did not believe poor Vladiša, even when they saw him running down the hill, white as a ghost, arms in the air, no calf. They did not believe him when he collapsed in the village square, breathless with exhaustion and terror, and managed to stutter out that they were done for, that the devil had come to Galina, and call the priest quick. They did not believe him because they didn't know what to believe—what was this orange thing, back and shoulders scorched with fire? They would have been better equipped to react if he had told them he had met Baba Roga, and if, that same instant, her skull-and-bones hut on its one chicken leg had come tearing down the hillside after him.

My grandfather and Mother Vera were among those who were summoned to the square by the sound of Vladiša's shouting. The tiger's wife must have been there, too, but they didn't know it at the time. My grandfather ran out of the house quickly, without his coat on, and Mother Vera came out after him with his coat in her hands and gave him a cuff across the ear as she forced him into the sleeves. Then they stood there, the two of them, while the blacksmith and the fishmonger and the man who sold buttons propped Vladiša up in the snow and gave him water.

Vladiša was saying: "The devil I tell you! The devil has come for us all!"

To my grandfather, the devil was many things. The devil was Leši, the hobgoblin, whom you met in the pasture, and who asked you for coins—deny him, and he would turn the forest around and upside down and you would be lost forever. The devil was Crnobog, the horned god, who summoned darkness. You were sent to the devil by your elders if you misbehaved; you were allowed to send other people to the devil, but only if you were much, much older. The devil was Night, Baba Roga's second son, who rode a black horse through the woods. Sometimes, the devil was Death, on foot, waiting for you at the crossroads, or

behind some door you had been repeatedly warned against opening. But as my grandfather listened to Vladiša, who was sobbing about orange fur and stripes, it became clearer and clearer to him that this particular thing in the woods was not the devil, and not a devil, but perhaps something else, something he maybe knew a little bit about, and his eyes must have lit up when he said: "But that's Shere Khan."

My grandfather was a thin child, with blond hair and large eyes—I have seen pictures of him, black-and-white photographs with scalloped edges, in which he looks sternly at the camera with his schoolboy socks pulled all the way up, and his hands in his pockets. It must have been strange, his calmness, his level voice, and the fishmonger and the blacksmith and several other people who had come running from the village all looked at him, puzzled.

The apothecary, however, was there too. "You may be right," the apothecary said. "Where's that book I gave you?" My grandfather ran inside to get it, and as he came back out, he was flipping through the pages frantically so that, by the time he reached the sprawled-out form of Vladiša, he had reached the plate with his favorite picture, the one with Mowgli and Shere Khan. He held it out to the terrified cowherd. Vladiša took one look at it and fainted, and that was how the village found out about the tiger.

III THE MEAT

If the tiger had been a different sort of tiger, a hunter from the beginning, he probably would have come down to the village sooner. His long journey from the city had brought him as far as the ridge, and even he could not be certain why he had chosen to remain there. I could argue now that the wind and deep snows were no obstacle to him, that he might have pressed on all winter and arrived at some other village, with some other church, maybe some. If the tiger had been a different sort of tiger, a hunter from the beginning, he probably would have come down to the village sooner. His long journey from the city had brought him as far as the ridge, and even he could not be certain why he had chosen to remain there. I could argue now that the wind and deep snows were no obstacle to him, that he might have pressed on all winter and arrived at some other village, with some other church, maybe some place with some less superstitious people where some matter-of-fact farmer might have shot him and strung him up, as empty as a bag, above the fireplace. But the ridge—with its bowed saplings and deadfall underfoot, the steep flank of the mountain studded with caves, the wild game wide-eyed and reckless with the starvation of winter—trapped him between his new, broadening senses and the vaguely familiar smell of the village below.

All day long, he walked up and down the length of the ridge, letting the smells drift up to him, puzzled by the feeling that they weren't entirely new. He had not forgotten his time at the citadel, but his memory was heavily veiled by his final days there and the days afterward, his arduous trek, burrs and

splinters and glass stinging his paws, the dense, watery taste of the bloated dead. By now, he had only an indistinct sense, in another layer of his mind, that, long, long ago, someone had thrown him fresh meat twice a day and sprayed him with water when the heat grew too unbearable. The smells from below meant something related to that, and they made him restless and agitated as he wandered the woods, instinctively sprinting after every rabbit and squirrel he saw. The smells were pleasant and distinct, entirely separate from one another: the thick, woolly smell of sheep and goats; the smell of fire, tar, wax; the interesting reek of the outhouses; paper, iron, the individual smells of people; the savory smells of stew and goulash, the grease of baking pies. The smells also made him more and more aware of his hunger, his lack of success as a hunter, of the length of time since his last meal, the calf that had blundered into him that bitter afternoon when he'd seen the man turn and run. The taste of the calf had been familiar; the shape of the man had been familiar.

That night, he had come halfway down the mountain. Stopped at a precipice here the tree line curved around the bottom of a frozen waterfall, and looked and looked at the burning windows and snow-topped roofs below him in the valley.

And some nights later, there was a new smell. He had sensed it here and there in the past—the momentary aroma of salt and wood smoke, rich with blood. The smell fell into his stomach, made him long for the calf, reduced him to rolling onto his back, head pressed into the snow, and calling for it until the birds shuddered free of their nests. The smell came up to him almost every night, in darkness, and he stood there in the newly fallen snow, with the trees arching in low around him, breathing it in and out. One night, half a mile from his clearing, he watched a lone stag—whose imminent death the tiger had been waiting on, had sensed days before it happened—buckle under the weight of starvation and old age and the bitter cold. The tiger watched him kneel and fold over, watched the stag's one remaining antler snap off. Later, as he ripped the belly open, even the spreading warmth of the stag's entrails couldn't drown out the smell from the village.

One night, he went down to the valley and stood at the pasture fence. Across the field, the silent houses, past the barn and the empty pigpen, past the house with its snow-packed porch, stood the smokehouse. There was the smell, almost close enough. The tiger rubbed his chin up and down the fence posts. He did not return for two days, but when he did he found the meat. Someone had been there in his absence. One of the fence planks had been ripped down, and the meat lay under it, dry and tough, but full of the smell that frenzied him. He dug it up and carried it back to the woods, where he gnawed on it for a long time.

Two nights later, he had to venture closer to find the next piece; it was waiting for him under a broken barrel that had been left out in the field, just yards from the smokehouse door. A cautious return some nights later to the same place, a bigger piece. Then two pieces, then three, and, eventually, a

whole shoulder right at the threshold of the smokehouse.

The following night, the tiger came up the smokehouse ramp and put his shoulders in the doorway, which was thrown wide open for the first time. He could hear the sheep bleating in the stable, some distance away, terrified by his presence; the dogs, fenced up, barking furiously. The tiger sniffed the air: there was the smell of the meat, but also the thick, overwhelming smell of the person inside, the person whose scent he had found on and around the meat before, and whom he could see now, sitting in the back of the smokehouse, a piece of meat in her hands.

IV MY GRANDFATHER

For a while, there was no trace of the tiger. They almost managed to convince themselves that it had all been a joke, that Vladiša had seen a personal ghost of some kind, or perhaps had some kind of seizure up there in the mountains; that the stag had been dispatched by a bear or wolf. But the village dogs—sheepdogs and boarhounds, thick-coated hunting dogs with yellow eyes who belonged to everybody and nobody at once—knew for certain that he was up there, and reminded the village. The dogs could smell him, the big-cat stink of him, and it drove them crazy. They were restless, and bayed at him and pulled at their tethers. They filled the night with a hollow sound, and the villagers, swaddled in their nightshirts and woolen socks, shook in their beds and slept fitfully.

But my grandfather still walked to the village well every morning, and laid out quail traps every night. It was his responsibility to ensure that he and Mother Vera had something to eat—and, besides, he was hoping, all the time hoping, for a glimpse of the tiger. He carried his brown volume with the picture of Shere Khan everywhere he went; and, while he never went far that particular winter, it must have been tangible, the excitement of a nine-year-old boy, because it brought him to the attention of the deaf-mute girl.

She was a girl of about sixteen, who lived on the edge of town in the butcher's house and helped with the shop. My grandfather, probably not the most observant boy, had seen her occasionally, on market days and festival days, but he never noticed her with any particular interest until, that winter, some days before the Christmas celebration in January, she shyly blocked his path as he was heading to the baker's in the early morning and took his book out of the top breast pocket of his coat, where he had kept it since the tiger had come.

My grandfather would remember the girl all his life. He would remember her dark hair and large eyes, interested, expressive eyes, and he would remember the cleft in her chin when she smiled as she opened the book to the dog-eared page with Shere Khan. My grandfather had his gray woolen cap down around his ears, and in the muted hush of his own head, he heard himself say: "That's what the tiger looks like." And he pointed to the mountain above the smoking

chimneys of the village.

The girl did not say anything, but she studied the picture carefully. She had only one glove, and the cold had turned the fingers of her bare hand an odd shade of purple. Her nose was slightly runny, and this made my grandfather wipe his own nose with the back of his coat sleeve, as discreetly as possible. The girl still hadn't said anything, and it occurred to him that she might be embarrassed because she couldn't read—so he launched into an explanation of Shere Khan, and his complicated relationship with Mowgli, and how my grandfather himself found it strange that in one chapter Mowgli skinned the tiger and draped the tiger-skin over Council Rock, but later on Shere Khan was whole again. He talked very quickly, gulping down pockets of cold air, and the girl, who still didn't say a thing, looked at him patiently and then, after a few minutes, handed the book back to him and went on her way.

In particular, my grandfather remembered his own embarrassment, when, after talking at her about tigers and asking her questions to which she did not reply, he went home confused and asked Mother Vera about her. He remembered how bright his own ears felt when she cuffed him and said: "Don't bother her, that's Luka's wife. That girl's a deaf-mute, and Mohammedan besides—you stay away from her."

Luka was the town butcher, who owned the pasture and smokehouse on the edge of town. He was a tall man with curly brown hair and thick, red hands, and he wore an apron that was almost perpetually soaked in blood. Something about that apron made the townspeople uncomfortable. They were, in one capacity or another, all butchers themselves, and they didn't understand why, if he had to make his money cutting up meat and selling it at Gorchevo, he didn't at least change to conduct his business transactions, didn't do his best to smell like something other than the sour insides of cows and sheep. In the nine years of his life at the time, my grandfather had met Luka only once, but the encounter was clear in his memory. Two years before, during a brief but cold winter storm, Mother Vera had sent my grandfather out to the butcher's shop to buy a leg of lamb because the cold had tightened her hands with pain. The front room of the butcher's house was filled with the smell of meat, and my grandfather had stood and looked around at the smoked hams and sausages hanging from the rafters, soup bones and square bacon slabs in the cold vitrine, the skinned red lamb with its sharp little teeth lying on the block while Luka, his glasses hanging around his neck, cleaved the bone of the leg away. My grandfather was leaning in to look at jars full of something brined and white and lumpy behind the counter when the butcher smiled at him and said: "Pigs' feet. Delicious. They're a lot like children's feet, actually."

My grandfather couldn't remember whether he had seen the girl when he had gone to the butcher's shop; perhaps she hadn't been married to Luka then. And he would not see her again until the day before Christmas Eve, when the pain in Mother Vera's hands was so agonizing that she groaned in her sleep, and, overwhelmed by his own inability to help her, he went out to bring back

water for her bath.

My grandfather wore his wool coat and hat, and carried the empty bucket to the well. Like so much of the village, the well had been erected during Ottoman times. It is still there today, but has been empty for many decades. That night, its pointed roof was dusted with snow, and snow-laden gusts of wind snaked all around it as my grandfather made his way across the village square. He was keenly aware of the moonless cold, the faint fires in the windows he passed, the desolate sound of his own feet shuffling along.

He had just put the bucket down and grabbed the rope when he looked up and saw a thin light at the edge of the pasture. My grandfather stood with the rope frozen in his hands, and tried to see through the darkness. He could see the butcher's house, with the fire dying inside, which meant that Luka was probably fast asleep, but the light was not that; nor was it the barn where the butcher kept his livestock. It was the smokehouse: the door was open, and there was light inside.

My grandfather did not go there looking for trouble; it merely occurred to him that some traveler or gypsy had found shelter for the night and that Luka might be angry, or they might come across the tiger. It was the latter thought that drove him to pick up his bucket and press on to the smokehouse, partly because he wanted to warn the intruder about the tiger, partly because he was filled with a frantic, inexplicable jealousy at the thought of some drifter seeing his tiger first. Carefully, he crossed the empty fold, and picked his way through the pasture.

The chimney was going, and the smell of smoked meat hung in the air. He thought, for a moment, about whether he could get Luka to smoke the Christmas quail he hoped to find in the trap tomorrow. Then he crept up to the ramp, put his hands on it and hoisted himself up. He picked up the bucket. He stood in the doorway and looked in.

There was a lot less light than he had initially supposed. He could hardly see inside, where the hollowed-out hogs and cattle hung in rows, to the little front room in the corner, where the butcher's block stood. The smell was wonderful, and he suddenly felt hungry, but then there was a different smell he hadn't noticed before, a thick, dark musk, and just as he realized this the light went out. In the sudden darkness, he heard a low, heavy sound, like breath all around him, a single deep rumble that strung his veins together and trembled in his lungs. The sound spread around his skull for a moment, making room for itself. Then he dove into the little butchering room and crawled under a tarp in the corner and sat in a shuddering heap with the bucket still in his hands.

It seemed to my grandfather that the sound was still in the air, as sure and constant as his own crazy heartbeat, which could drown out everything except the sound. The smell was there too, everywhere, lingering—the smell of wild things, fox or badger, but bigger, so much more of it, like nothing he could place but something he could identify in so many other things. He thought of the plate in his book, in bed, at home, which seemed infinitely far now, not just

twenty seconds of solid running past the houses of people he knew.

Something in the darkness moved, and the butcher's hooks, hanging in rows along the rafters, clinked against one another, and my grandfather knew that it was the tiger. The tiger was walking. He could not make out the individual footfalls, the great velvet paws landing, one in front of the other; just the overall sound of it, a soft, traveling thump. He tried to quiet his own breathing, but found that he couldn't. He was panting under the tarp and the tarp kept drawing in around him, rustling insanely, pointing him out. He could feel the tiger just beside him, through the wooden planks, the big, red heart clenching and unclenching under the ribs, the weight of it groaning through the floor. My grandfather's chest was jolting, and he could already picture the tiger bearing down on him, but he thought of *The Jungle Book*—the way Mowgli had taunted Shere Khan at Council Rock, torch in hand, grabbing the Lame Tiger under the chin to subdue him—and he put his hand out through the tarp and touched the coarse hairs passing by him.

And, just like that, the tiger was gone. My grandfather felt the big, hot, rushing heart brush past and then vanish. He broke out in a sweat, sitting there with the bucket between his knees. He heard the sound of footsteps, and moments later the deaf-mute girl was kneeling at his side in the little room with the butcher's table, digging him out of his tarp, brushing the hair from his forehead with worry in her eyes. Her hands, sweeping over his face, carried the heavy smell of the tiger, of snow and pine trees and blood.

And then, Mother Vera's voice, screaming in the distance: "My child! The devil has taken my child!"

My grandfather eventually learned that Mother Vera, sensing that he had been gone a long time, had stepped out, and from the stairs of their little house, had seen the tiger leave the smokehouse and take off across the field. She was still screaming when the doors of the houses around the square opened, one by one, and the men spilled out into the streets and gave chase to the edge of the pasture. Loud voices, and then light and men filling the doorway, even Luka the butcher, looking furious in his nightshirt and slippers, a cleaver in his hand. The deaf-mute girl helped my grandfather to his feet, and led him to the door. From the smokehouse ramp, he could see the dark, empty field, swimming with shadows: the villagers, the snowdrifts, the fence, but not the tiger. The tiger was already gone.

"He's here, here he is," my grandfather heard someone say, and suddenly Mother Vera was clutching at him with cold hands, out of breath and stuttering.

Outside, in the snow, were footprints. Big, round, springy footprints, the even, loping prints of a cat. My grandfather watched as the grocer Jovo, who had once killed a badger with his bare hands, knelt down in the snow and pressed his hand into one of them. The tracks were the size of dinner plates, and they ran—matter-of-factly and without pause—down from the woods and across the field, into the smokehouse and back.

"I heard something in the smokehouse," my grandfather was telling everyone. "I thought one of the animals had escaped. But it was the tiger." Nearby, Luka stood looking out through the smokehouse door, holding on to the arm of the deaf-mute, whose skin had gone white around his grip. She was looking at my grandfather and smiling.

He appealed to the deaf-mute. "You came out because you heard him, too, didn't you?"

"The bitch is deaf, she didn't hear anything," Luka told him, before he led her across the field into the house and closed the door.