

PANTHERA

Joel Hans

“Keep your feet planted like this,” their mother said, and took on a wide, manly stance the ten-year-old twin girls had trouble mimicking. Their knees just didn’t lock that low, and Myla felt uncomfortable, the way the wind swept up her skirt. Their mother growled. “Now, hold the gun out in front of you, like this, with your finger along the side of the trigger, not up against it. That’s called discipline. Forget your discipline, and you’ll kill your sister. Spray her brains out all over the place. Now, you reach out with your thumb. That’s the safety. You only turn that down when you’re ready to fire your weapon, and you’re only ready to fire your weapon when you’re sure you want to kill.”

The girls tried their best to duplicate their mother’s subtle movements, but Myla was distracted by the animal sounds coming from the three dozen cages surrounding her, scattered across their stepfather’s expansive Ohio

property. The white Bengal tiger paced its small property, making frustrated, hungry noises. The lions and the monkeys chattered and the pack of silver-coated wolves all panted like a chorus in their confinements. All of this made Myla's hand knock as she tried to hold the heavy gun out straight on the end of a tired arm, and she needed to pee. She fondled the cool metal of the gun, just like her mother had said, fumbled for the safety with her finger. She tried to pull it, but could find no leverage, so she put all her effort into this one small action. She was squeezing the trigger without even knowing, so that as soon as the safety unhinged the gun cracked in her hand. Thirty feet away, one of the target Coke bottles exploded, pieces of glass slumping into the weeds. Myla laughed at her sudden success—*so, that was easy*—but her mother rushed toward her and landed the back of her hand—her knuckles and the rock of her engagement ring—across Myla's smiling teeth. The girl reached a finger between her lips and swished the iron taste around in her mouth and found a newly-emerged adult tooth chipped down its hemisphere, a rough edge against her skin.

“Pick it up and hold it right, you stupid shit,” their mother said.

Myla looked at Ambyr and imagined her twin's brains—which might as well have been her own—splattered out over the ground. Once more, Myla assumed the stance and readied herself, this time with more confidence under her mother's watch. The white tiger was watching her, too. Her

mother had once bragged that the girls' stepfather held the biggest collection of exotic animals in the country, outside of a zoo, but it was always the white tiger—the female Bengal tiger from halfway around the world—that Myla was most intrigued with. She bared her teeth like the tiger, and she spat, blood and spit trailing out her mouth, like the albumen of an egg, before slinging its way down to the grass. Myla's tooth sang a vibrato of pain. Myla's tooth tasted like diamond.

Myla could hear birds calling out to the evening on the Dartmouth campus. She was waiting for her sister to join her so that they could take their customary walk down to Connecticut River in the dark. She called once on her iPhone but Ambyr didn't answer. The world was pale blue and mysteriously quiet, the air was cool and smelled like pine, like blood, like water. Myla stood in the falling darkness, the early autumn night, and she thought she could hear something whispering in the bushes a few dozen feet away, something dark and slinking and infinitely stealthy. Myla reached for the .45-caliber handgun looped into the front of her jeans, which she covered in her heavy Dartmouth hoodie. Twelve years had passed since that day with her mother and the Coke bottles but she still worked her feet across the grass until she was in that stance, her finger nudging the gun's safety.

Finally, Ambyr came and hugged Myla, and then together they walked across campus in silence, their elbows almost touching as their strides became singular. Myla wondered if their hearts beat, too, in the same time register. Myla led the way through the veil of tall grasses that masked a shoreline of small pebbles and errant beer cans. The water of the Connecticut River was quiet and glowed a kind of dead orange.

“Summer,” Ambyr said, and nothing else. They had both just finished taking their last exams of senior year, and now, more than any time in Myla’s life, she thought the entire world had yawned open to greet her, and it was not welcoming. She thought she should say something in return, but didn’t feel like it at all.

Myla stroked her hand through a thatch of cattails, watching them wave over and wobble back into position. Now the shuffling she had heard before was just a dozen steps away, somewhere in the density, the forest of thin brown stalks with bulbs shaking like silent bells. She reached for the gun again just as she was bombarded by a flash of movement, up and fast, and before Myla could register her instinct she had fired off a single round into the air above the Connecticut River at nothing more than a single red-winged black bird. The creature made the sound of a dying child and swung up into the air and then dove, close enough to Myla that she could feel the eddying air it left behind—a shockwave. Myla exhaled. She remembered

what her mother had once told her: that a bird might pluck her eyes right out of her skull, or slowly peck away at her skin until she was nothing more than piecemeal bones and a sorry heart. But those were her mother's lies. This was just another mother trying to protect her own, brandishing a fearlessness of death.

Ambyr screamed, her voice trembling as she begged Myla to put the gun away, and she raised up her arms wild and high into the sky. Myla imagined broadcasting the grasses with the brains of her twin sister. She transposed the ground with white matter and blood, and saw there, entrenched among the tall cattails, a haphazard collection of sticks and tufts of grass dead from last autumn's early freeze, pieces of wool and paper and Kleenex. Myla knelt down and thumbed into the nest's core and found three eggs, each no longer than her thumbnail. She picked one up between her fingers and held it to the setting sun, and it was transparent. From above, the bird mobbed her. The bird screamed. Something in the root of Myla's cracked tooth, deep below the gum and near the bone, drummed in pain.

When the twins were young, their mother would warn them about predation. The real dangers of the wild. There was one long afternoon where the twins trailed their mother through the incomprehensible openness of rural Ohio and were introduced to all the wild animals that their

stepfather had bought and kept caged. Their mother said, “You have to know what every animal is capable of. It’s the only way to stay safe in this world. These animals are caged, which makes you two lucky little girls, because you get to learn what the rest of the little girls like you never will. See that bear? It’s a black bear. If it wanted, it could take off your scalp in a single swipe, and then it would eat you, not because it was hungry, but because it was just plain mad for having to raise a paw.”

Ambyr pointed out a deer on the distant hill, its head turned toward their small party, ears on alert. Their mother said, “Deer are dangerous, too—don’t be fooled. Even prey animals can kick with the full running strength of their hind legs. That’s what I’ve been trying to say, girls. You have to be careful about everything and you have to keep each other safe.” Their mother had red hair that met in a million split ends. It had always reminded Myla of the charts of the human veins in her middle school science textbooks.

“If they’re all so dangerous, why does he have all of them here?” Ambyr asked.

The girls’ mother took each of their hands and hummed a satisfied little tune. *Hmm-hmm-hmm*. “Your stepfather is a particular kind of man,” their mother said. “He’s the kind of man who needs to know he’s on top. And trust me—I’ve known all kinds of men. I’ve been with a lot of them, so I

know what separates one from the other.”

“I don’t get it,” Ambyr said. The roar of the white tiger drifted over their patch of prairie and made them all stare out at the sunset for a minute.

“I’ve told you two all about the ways the world can kill you, haven’t I?” The two girls nodded eagerly. “Every animal has that power. Your stepfather knows about all of that. He knows that every time he steps into that tiger’s cage, he could be torn apart, eaten alive. But he isn’t. He’s never been harmed by any of them. And what does that mean?”

“We don’t know,” Ambyr said, although Myla secretly thought she did.

“It means that he’s the king of the animals. He’s conquered them all. Each and every one of them,” their mother said. “And that’s why I fell in love with him. And that’s why you two should respect him. He knows more than you can even imagine.”

“I thought you told us to stay away from men,” Myla said. “You told us all about how they were dangerous, how everyone was just waiting for his time to hurt us.”

“I’m not raising a pair of nuns. You just have to know the difference between something you want and something you’re given. Always settle on what you want, and don’t believe in anything you didn’t bring into the world yourself. Here. See these mountain lions? They’ve killed people in the hills out West. They’re silent. You’d never know one was falling toward you until

you felt its fur across the back of your neck. But your stepfather, he wants them, and so they're his. You can have that choice, too."

Ambyr clasped her hands together and stared off at the final crescent of the sun, which was dipping below the tree-filled skyline. She said, "Tell us a story about the mountain lions. I want to hear about what they can do."

Their mother's body went stiff. She said, "Story? I don't tell stories. I tell you what you need to survive."

Back at the apartment they shared together just outside the Dartmouth campus, Myla absconded to the bathroom, where she turned on the tap so that it might mask the sound of her crying. Now and then Ambyr knocked on the door, said it was all right to come out. Myla sat on the toilet, her shorts around her ankles, for nearly a half-hour, but nothing happened. Some time after 9 o'clock Myla decided she didn't want to spend the rest of her evening locked away. She wanted to dive into that celebratory bottle of wine. She waited for a silence to fall across the apartment, and then she sneaked from the bathroom, wiping away the last of her tears just a half-dozen paces from the kitchen.

"Caught you," Ambyr said. She had been hiding in the breakfast nook, just out of Myla's sight. She had already poured herself a glass of a white—Riesling, as always—but what Myla really noticed was that her twin sister

wasn't wearing a bra. Myla remembered the day their mother drove them down to Parkersburg, West Virginia, to take them to the Kohl's, so they could pick out their first pair of training bras, and how Ambyr cried and kicked as their mother pinned her to the changing room floor and strapped a baby blue bra across her chest. The way she moaned when it was laid across her skin. And, after that, Myla would not forget when their mother turned to her with the forest green A-cup and asked, "Are you going to put up a fight, too?"

"I needed a drink," Myla said. She pulled the cork on her Shiraz and poured it into one of the wide-bowl glasses they received from their mother's brother, who lived in California and often wrote letters about how the girls deserved better than being raised up in that way. She pulled up a stool to the counter opposite Ambyr and reveled in the first sip, a sudden rush of having nothing to look forward to. She relished in the fact that their mother would have never let them leave Ohio for college, and now they had put all the credits behind them, and it was something her memory would never be able to steal back.

"You and me both." They touched their glasses together.

"You have to tell me about today," Ambyr said. "I've been worried this whole time that a SWAT team is going to come kicking through our door. That place isn't all that secluded, you know. Someone probably saw us."

“I’m sorry,” Myla said, because it was true and she didn’t have anything else to say.

“What did you think was happening?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yes, you do. You wouldn’t try to take down a bird otherwise,” Ambyr said. “Don’t pretend like I don’t know what you’re thinking. We’re the same person, you and I. We have the same DNA.” She said this with such conviction that Myla wondered if it wasn’t something their mother had once said.

“That’s what everyone keeps saying.”

Ambyr giggled, which confused Myla. Ambyr had always possessed a vivaciousness that Myla envied. *Vivacious*. A word their mother taught them at the age of eight, when she stood the girls side-by-side and tried to help them figure how they were different from each other. Myla was shy, so she was the one who always squinted as if unprovoked by the world’s charm. Ambyr was more vivacious, so she would naturally gather all the attention, for better or worse. Myla was easily jealous. Ambyr was ditsy. Myla was brooding. Their mother said that if they knew the flaws in each other, they would be able to protect each other as they went about their lives. “Girls always have to stick together.” That much they had always done. They had never lived apart or known what it was like to be alone.

Myla went to her purse and pulled out her .45 and stripped it, set all the parts out on the dining room table. She brought the bottle of red wine with her, poured out a second glass. Her movements were precise and practiced—her mother had taught her exactly how to make the gun newborn—even as the metal castings slipped through her fingers. Myla used the shadows beyond the open window to inspect the spiraled rifling inside of the barrel, and then bathed everything in a caustic solution and applied new lubricant. Ambyr came over and kissed Myla on the top of her head.

“I know what it was,” Ambyr said, holding her hands behind her back, smiling.

“Fuck you.”

“You’re thinking that, maybe, they didn’t get every last one of them.”

“It wasn’t that. It was nothing.” Myla wouldn’t admit that was exactly what it had been—a premonition of a shadow cast by a creature escaped more than a decade ago. A complete fabrication of childhood fear. She couldn’t admit that she had discharged her weapon in such a reckless fashion, completely free of real danger, so that she could not even guess as to where the bullet had landed—on the other side of the Connecticut River, probably. She imagined a little blonde-haired Vermonter boy with his brains adorning the sidewalk and blood thickened in the night like cooled lava.

“Say that one more time, come on. I just want to hear it,” Ambyr

challenged.

“I don’t want to tell you anything.”

“We’re supposed to tell each other everything. I feel the same way, too, sometimes. I want to know that I’m not alone.”

“You’re my twin. You’re not me. Don’t try to turn your problems into mine.”

Myla tried to twist herself out of her chair to get away from Ambyr, her wine glass perched in a loose fist, but Ambyr had always been faster. They met right next to the dining room table. Myla’s tooth rang hollow but heavy as Ambyr struck her across the face. Her wine glass tipped, sending out a single Shiraz loop onto the white carpeting. Myla didn’t want to strike back, but these were the lessons their mother had taught, and the sound was so satisfying, like the crack of a bullet leaving its chamber. On the follow-through, Myla’s hand graced the neck of her unfinished wine bottle, sending it toppling to the floor. The girls stopped and stared at the two red abominations they had made. They were breathing in the same revolution. And Myla knew immediately what they were both thinking, because their minds had been forged out of the same materials and built by the same architect: This looked like a slaughter. And they both believed it was a kind of premonition, because that was the only way their lives had ever changed. Through blood and final breaths.

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Myla had pet the white tiger just once. Her stepfather popped into her bedroom on a Saturday afternoon as she read of a world wholly unlike southern Ohio and asked if she wanted to help feed it. The liquor on his breath felt strong enough to the young girl that it might wrinkle the pages of her book. She followed in his big footsteps as he cut across the yard, a long hunting knife firm in his right fist. They rounded a long, waist-high hedge and came upon the bloodied corpse of a white-tail deer, which her stepfather must have shot some time ago and left in the summer sun. Flies collected around a single red orifice in the animal's chest, and Myla imagined their little tongues on the blood, vomiting up their acids and sucking up the slurry with long proboscises. With the hunting knife, he removed the deer's head with a few careful saws, the knife sliding into the notches in the deer's vertebrae. The spinal cord leaked something clear and completely unlike blood.

"Why did you take its head off?" Myla asked.

"Because I know what I'm doing, honey."

Myla watched intently as her stepfather tied a long piece of twine around all four of the deer's legs, looping the remainder over his shoulder. Blood jumped out of the severed neck as he began to pull. Myla's stepfather walked that carcass all the way to the white tiger's cage, and even when

they were a few dozen feet away, the mud-stained cat made a loud noise, something between a roar and a groan. A hungry plea to be set free. The tiger paced its pen, big eyes tracking Myla's stepfather as he reached through the vertical bars and hooked a large chain to the tiger's collar and then pried open the lock with a key that dangled from a gold loop around his neck. The tiger backed up and laid down as Myla's stepfather pulled the deer into the cage. The tiger's muscles were thick and fibrous, and she could see them rippling even under its layer of fur.

"You can go on and touch it, you know," her stepfather said. "This girl's as tame as a cow. Plus, it helps her remember who's boss."

"Boss," Myla repeated, as though it was a concept that had been lost on her. She stepped into the cage and smelled acidic tiger piss and blood of old meals among the straw. The tiger raised its head and watched her approach. She put out her hand toward it, and she could see the sides of its nose flare at the smell of her.

Her stepfather put out an arm to stop her. He made a fist in front of her face. He said, "Like this. That way, if she bites, she'll just gnaw on your knuckles instead of taking the whole hand off."

Myla made a fist and touched the tiger on the top of its head. She spread out her fingers and ran them into the tiger's fur as it watched her stepfather gut the deer with his long knife. The tiger cowered under her

touch. She reached out with her other hand and the tiger squinted, afraid. She looped her fingers around its calloused ears and down the sides of its face, and it just laid there, waiting for its meal, waiting to be set free, waiting to die.

The next morning, Myla woke to Ambyr crawling onto her bed, slipping beneath the sheets, sliding up alongside her and wrapping her in a thin arm. Ambyr slipped her hand up the bottom of Myla's shirt and rested it on her belly. Ambyr said, "Sometimes, I dream about you being pregnant. And then I wonder what kind of mothers we'd be."

Myla laughed, her abdominals clenching hard under she light touch of Ambyr's fingers. She took a minute to dream about that possibility—of being pregnant—as though it had never occurred to her before. Their mother had not taught them much in terms of sex, other than that men were like beasts—they tried to take what they wanted. In college, they had learned little more. She said, "Me? Pregnant? How would that even happen? Who would even make that happen?"

"I don't know," Ambyr said. Myla could hear the disappointment in her sister's voice, because it was the inflection they shared, a formula they had developed together years ago in the feeble art of making their mother feel guilt. "It's just something that I've thought about. I've always wondered if I

would be able to feel your baby, too, somehow. Feel it growing or kicking in me.”

“I don’t think it would be a good idea for someone like me to bring a baby into the world.” Myla felt Ambyr’s hand shrink from the flat patch of skin around her navel.

“I don’t ever dream about me being pregnant, though,” Ambyr said, her voice now dropping into a whisper. “I’m worried that no matter what I do, I’ll be just like she was, and nothing will be any better. But I like to think about how it must feel. Knowing that something is inside you, growing. And you’re a vessel to its existence. Everything you do, it does. And all of your memories get put into it somehow. They don’t remember the same things you do, but it shapes them. I think that’s what happened with Mom and us. And then, you have that choice, of letting it stay and grow or having it taken out,” Ambyr said, and as if that was not enough, she added: “By force, you know.”

“Jesus, Ambyr.”

“I’m serious. There’s real power in that.”

Myla started to think about the night before, and how she had thought she heard the sound of a slithering mass in the bushes. From an instinctual source she had come to believe the white tiger coming for her, having stalked her out for a decade. Returned to pay its revenge. Even after the bird

had taken to the air, she knew it was all her imagination, but she was wracked with chaos, and believed that shooting the little flighty mother might make her feel safer. She wondered if, when she and Ambyr were still unborn, their mother might have felt that same fear, somehow transcribed this universal fear in the twins' still-forming brains. Myla thought she could hear the sound again, now in the kitchen, just beyond her closed bedroom door.

"I want to go back," Myla said. "Just to see it again."

"There's nothing to go back to. It's all gone," Ambyr said. "They burned it. The house and the cages," Ambyr said. "They were worried that whoever lived there next could get sick."

"I know. I think I just need to see the place."

"There's always the zoo," Ambyr said.

"Maybe it's time."

Ambyr pulled herself even closer, and Myla felt her fingers run around the subtle ridges where Myla's abs wrestled with the skin of her stomach. Myla felt her sister push her nose into the back of her neck and might have heard the sound of crying. Myla remembered back to the only day the girls saw their mother cry. They had woken up in the middle of the night to painful cries peeling across the night-swept property. After watching out the window for some time, they saw their mother slowly walking back from the

barn a quarter-mile down the road, her shoulders low, her face messy with snot and tears, her chest and stomach all impregnated with blood. The girls crept downstairs, hoping to spy on their mother as she lay on the living room couch, but she was already waiting for them. Their mother tried to clear her high cheeks of glowing teardrops but only defiled her face with two long streaks of dead blood. Ambyr said she wanted to know what happened, and so she followed their mother back outside, with Myla trailing behind, feeling like she was being weighed down by darkness with every breath. In the barn, their mother revealed to the little girls a lioness prone in the hay, an incredible amount of blood spilled out from between its back legs and a collection of eight viscera-coated babies, silent and impossibly small. Their mother said, "I tried everything to protect them." She picked up one of the little lions and held it up to the nearest incandescent coil, and the infant was almost translucent. "This is what happens," their mother said, but Myla ran before she could hear the remainder of her mother's message. Ambyr followed behind, screaming so loud it rustled up the entire makeshift zoo. The girls hid together in Myla's bed and cried each other to sleep as the monkeys chattered with the wolves until morning. Now, in their apartment, Myla noticed that Ambyr had taken on the same configuration as they had that day, such a long time ago. Ambyr wiped away a tear. Myla thought her sister was remembering that same moment, and that made sense, because

they were each other. They were little clear lions, dead before ever living.

Without warning, the girls' stepfather decided to set all of his animals free. The same animals that he'd previously guarded and loved like they were his own children, blood of his blood. He walked through the complex with a long pair of bolt cutters and a bottle of gin and snapped the locks, swung open the heavy doors. The little twin girls—just twelve at the time—watched from Ambyr's bedroom window as the black bear stepped out of its cage, its nose searching the air, its eyes dark and drunk with freedom. They watched as two mountain lions touched their paws to new soil and then took off into the Ohio wilderness, the color of their coats blending with the tall gold grasses. The girls watched as their stepfather entered the white tiger's cage and reached out with his fingers straight. They watched as the tiger seemed to swallow his whole arm, down past the elbow, and could see the blood that streamed from his skin when it finally released. The tiger bit into his neck and their stepfather's face went red, purple, and then white as the tiger carried him out to the front yard, laid down to take a nap in the sun.

Their mother went stomping through the house, locking windows and doors. Myla knew that the animals, once the novelty of freedom had faded, would train their noses back toward this tall brown box that had, for years, been smoked in the smells of her mother's cooking. The pantry had just been

stocked. Their mother came up into the girls' shared bedroom, where they were watching, and she closed the blinds, told them to stare up at the ceiling no matter what happened. She told them to dream of whatever they wanted—no rules. Their mother said, "You have to stay right here. From right now until I come back, and knock on this door three times, you live in fiction." She nearly left the room but paused, turned back to deliver a single heavy kiss on each girl's forehead as they lay tucked in their little beds.

They tried to do as their mother said. Myla tried to dream about being in a place without animals, where only humans were allowed, where one would walk forever in a straight line and always be safe. Where she wouldn't have to carry a .22 in her the front pocket of her overalls. Soon enough, she moved into Ambyr's bed and together they chattered in fear. Ten minutes later, by the pink clock on Ambyr's nightstand, they were rattled by a single gunshot—their mother's .38—ringing out across the lonely property. This was followed by a low scream—no, more like a moan, not of terror but something Myla had not yet learned. They scrambled for the window, and what they found beyond was a bleeding tiger and their dead mother.

Two days after their final exams their girls left Dartmouth and drove toward Ohio. They spent long hours trading off at the wheel and drinking too-large cups of fountain soda and peeing in unkempt gas station

bathrooms. They ate fast food from the front seats of the '02 Altima they bought with their stepfather's life insurance payout, which they were given when they turned eighteen. They clocked five hundred miles in the first day, and they spent a hundred dollars on gas that they should have saved, because their twin Ivy League tuitions had devastated that quickly-dwindling inheritance.

Myla took over the wheel as day transitioned into night, as they drove toward the setting sun. Ambyr only lasted a half-hour until she was completely asleep, snoring in the passenger's seat, her mouth open, her head knocking against the window on every pothole. Myla tried to play a game to keep herself awake, but after another hour she found her eyes closing, her brain starting to spool down. There was only so much landscape she could fathom in a single day. In her half-dream state, the quickly passing mile markers transformed into the reflection in a tiger's eyes as it ran parallel to the car at impossible interstate speeds, through the tall grasses where it could not be seen, but only heard and felt. Myla thought she could see the tiger's teeth glimmering there, just beyond the windows. That one cracked canine.

There was a flash a few hundred feet ahead, the impossibly fast movement of what Myla thought, in the fast-moving interstate backdrop, to be the tiger sprinting from one roadside darkness to another. Myla had no

choice but to push heavily on the brakes. She pulled left on the wheel, and then right, but the car's wheels had lost their purchase on the blacktop, slid sideways, and Myla felt everything she cared about being set free—the locks snapped, the gates plunged wide open. Ambyr woke as her head swung toward the car's center and then whiplashed against her window, and she screamed just like their mother had the day she died.

The car stopped in the middle of the interstate, turned completely around, so that they were pointed northeast—back toward the only home they now knew—not southwest, toward the one that had been severed from them as children. Ambyr was holding her head, which was rich with blood, and her window, too, bore the signs of violence. Myla's hands shook. Her vision fizzled. She looked out over the headlights, down the road a hundred feet, and saw the low slinking of a beast. It had turned toward her fully, as it had the day she delivered the deer to its cage.

“God damn,” Ambyr said.

“I'm sorry,” Myla said. She broke her attention on the road. “Oh, you're bleeding.”

“We'll need to stop at a gas station. Anywhere with a mirror.” Ambyr sucked in air through pursed lips as she blotted the impact gash beneath her hair.

When Myla turned her eyes back to the road, the tiger was gone.

Vanished into the night. Still she felt its presence in the woods beyond the darkness, and she knew it was going to still stalk her all the way past Erie, straight into Ohio, wherever she thought to go. She twisted the wheel and turned the Altima back around and slowly pushed on the accelerator, never eased up, even as the engine began to whine in its tallest gear. Into the night she drove too fast—twenty, thirty above the speed limit—hoping that the tiger might not be able to keep up. Maybe she could escape it, maybe she would be safe.

Ambyr wiped blood into her jeans. “Fucking deer,” she said. “I swear, they want you to hit them.”

Veterinarians and zookeepers fumbled toward the girls’ house in the hours after the escape, hoping to stop the slaughter of escaped animals. They brandished tranquilizer guns and hung from the thin shells of helicopters or crept through tall grasses in pursuit of rescue, their eyes arrowed down long scopes that trained on wild hearts. Myla would later hear stories from adrenaline-withdrawn cops that the Bengal tiger had wandered out onto the blacktop, circled around the double yellow stripes for some time before stopping, staring down the contingent of sixteen officers, who had just as many little-used assault rifles trained toward its white-and-black stripes. A veterinarian told them to hold their fire, loaded a

single pink-tailed dart into his rifle. He dropped the barrel on a fence post and sailed that dart into the tiger's thigh. The beast took time to try and knead out a comfortable place to sleep on the two-lane highway. And sleep it did.

From Ambyr's bedroom window, the twins could see wary police officers circling the tiger's murmuring body. And after a few minutes of cautious observation, the officers turned their eyes to the second-story window that featured nothing within but darkness and two small white faces, the barrel of a Remington 870, which Myla held in her arms, twin buckshot shells resting on the windowsill.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell rang, and so Myla went downstairs to answer the door, the shotgun's barrel barely held up above her waist. The officer had stepped back onto the small staircase leading up to the front porch, and when he saw the gun, he took off his hat and lifted his hands like he was a criminal. "Hold on there, sweetie," the officer said. "I'm not here to cause you any harm. We just wanted to be sure that you're all right. You are all right, aren't you? And you, too, little darling?"

"He let everything go, didn't he?" Myla asked.

The officer coughed into his hat. Myla hadn't lowered the shotgun any, but she swung it away from the officer in a small showing of camaraderie. "I'm afraid so. You two are sure you're all right, then? There's nothing in that

house that could do you or any of us any harm?”

“We kept it closed,” Myla said. “It’s ours.”

“No one said it wasn’t. Nobody said a word like that. Maybe you ought to put that gun down now?” He pointed his hat toward Myla. “There’s no more danger to you now.”

“They’re all dead or asleep?” Myla asked.

“I think the tiger was the last of them. There were a lot of them running around. A lot of wolves, especially. Almost too many,” the officer said slowly, with a kind of reverence for the hunt. Myla hoped, at least, they were given fair deaths. Quick, effortless ones, because none of this was their fault. Myla looked over to where her mother lay, and she could see blood etching out rivers in the dirt. If they were all as quick as her mother’s, she would have been content. She thought about asking. She thought about a lot of things just then.

“I need to see it,” Myla said. Ambyr nodded in agreement and reached out for Myla’s elbow, as though to completely give herself over being guided.

“See what, darling?”

“The tiger. I need to see it again.”

“Now, I’m not sure if that’s such a good idea,” the officer said. He had sweat running through his tan uniform, and Myla could read his heartbeat

through distended veins on his forehead. “And before we do anything else, I’d surely appreciate it if you put down that shotgun, just so none of the people over there get the wrong idea of what you’re thinking.”

“But you’ll take me, then?” Myla asked.

The officer nodded slowly, reached for the porch railing and got down on one knee, wrapped his arm around a baluster like a man praying or ready to die. He took off his hat and placed it on the worn pale lavender paint of the porch’s woodwork, the planks of which the girls’ mother had laid herself one late September day some years before. Even then Myla could remember the smoke of cellulose in the air, the nose burning from the paint. Myla flipped open the shotgun and pulled the two shells from their homes and dropped them to the porch. She put the gun down next to them and looked at the officer, who exhaled heavily, then lowered his head.

Myla led Ambyr across the lawn, circling wide around their mother’s body, and down the road. A news helicopter whirred overhead, and another one, dotted with police decals, swooped in low and came down to land in a field across the road. Ambyr cried on Myla’s shoulder. They tacked out the front gate, which had been snapped open by the bumper of a squad car, and onto the road, their bare feet cooked against the blacktop. Together they hopped, arm in arm, as the huddle of officers gazed on them with drawn-out looks. Myla knelt down beside the tiger and put her ear up close. The beast

breathed slowly and deep, like it had gravel in its lungs.

Just as she had before, Myla reached down with a closed fist, let it slowly spread out across the tiger's forehead. She grazed its ears and let a finger slip down the contrail between its eyes, to where its wide flat nose turned black and warm. Blood came from the tiger's mouth, where their mother's .38 bullet entered, and a matching trail slipped from its shoulder, where the bullet had exited after a mission down its throat. Myla dipped her hand completely into the tiger's mouth, feeling through the blood and bits of coagulate. There she felt a broken tooth, its ragged edge sharp like a piece of freshly-cracked shale. Myla thought if the bullet had not deflected off the canine—if her mother's shot had been better—it might have severed the spinal column or ruptured a necessary artery. Myla ran her finger across the plateau that remained, across the root, the severed nerve. The tiger groaned in its sleep. Myla could feel the muscles of its jaw actuating. She pulled out her hand just as the tiger raised its heavy head and opened its eyes right to her and loosened a contemptible roar, moist and wild. Myla felt her mother's presence on its breath, as though it had consumed more than a fatty chunk of her flesh. All those unsaid lessons, washing out through the tiger's bloody mouth. Myla ran, even as the tiger fell back into a toxin sleep, with Ambyr giving chase and shouting that everything was all right, that she was safe.

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From their dwindling fund, the girls paid seven dollars to park and fifteen dollars each for admission. They wandered the zoo for some time, taking care to observe each of the animals, even those who hid beneath tree stumps and blended into their false natural habitats. All the animals their mother had warned them about were present: penguins and rhinos, orangutans and koalas. From vast distances Myla reminded herself of all the ways these creatures could kill her: claws and teeth roughened by the bones of earlier prey. The girls watched elephants tanning themselves in dust with their thick deadly trunks from behind tall steel barriers. They watched bison stare unhappily off into the confines of their fake prairie existence and swat flies away from their asses, their horns hacked into flat bases, impotent. The girls wandered inside and looked at thumbnail-sized poisonous frogs through Plexiglas. An obese Burmese python lay curled around its enclosure, flattened, as though it was no longer capable of compressing a victim, snapping ribs and capturing windpipes.

By two in the afternoon, they had circled back around to the zoo's entrance, taken a small break to eat the food they had packed in Ambyr's large coral-tinted purse—a menagerie of gas station confections and salty snacks in foil—on a small bench beneath a wide oak tree. Myla watched as Ambyr scanned the area, as though she was looking for familiar faces.

“We should go there, shouldn’t we?” Myla asked.

Ambyr nodded slowly. “Isn’t that why we came?”

“I hope so,” Myla said.

Their free map directed them straight across the zoo, toward a region they had intentionally passed by. The Bengal tiger exhibit. The landscape behind the tall, barbed wire-topped fences was an array of rocks and drying grasses, not unlike the girls’ childhood yard. They stood at the edge of the exhibit for some time, scanning each of the tigers, some of them sprawled out just like house cats on the large rocks, others pacing. Myla looked until there, far off in the corner, she saw it: the tiger that had killed their mother, in the penumbra of a tree’s shadow, its eyes dark, its body unmoving. Myla ran off to another edge of the exhibit, where the only thing that separated them from the tiger was a thick sheet of glass. She tapped lightly with her fingers, beat out a rhythm with her fist. She whistled like she used to when she was young. She watched the tiger raise its heavy head and rise up on arthritic knees, lumber in her direction. Its fur was matted and worn thin by its armpits and grayed over by sun.

“Says here these Bengal tigers only live for around 14 years,” Ambyr said.

Myla nodded. “It was just a baby when stepdad bought it.”

“It’s almost dead, then.”

The tiger silently pawed its way toward them, down a trodden path in the weeds it must have habitually carved over the last decade. When it was no more than a foot from Myla's hand, the tiger dipped its head and considered her with its left eye, and it unveiled its teeth, along with the still-broken canine, the bullet's searing path still visible on its gum. Myla watched, with her palm against the glass, as the tiger swung its body around to consider the girls with its cataract-scarred right eye. Myla could almost, very nearly, feel the tiger's fur as it slowly forked on its front paw and pushed its body into the glass, so heavy it rocked the installation. The tiger's open mouth and tongue and snot-lacquered nose marked a clear bubbly line as the beast slowly relaxed and slid down against this thin barrier and whined a little roar and maybe died. The girls didn't know. They couldn't see it breathe for quite some time.

Joel Hans earns his living as an editor. He received his BA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and since then, his work has been published in *Word Riot* and *The Lindenwood Review*, and is forthcoming in *The Ampersand Review*, *Emprise Review*, and others. For now, he still lives in Madison, Wisconsin.