

## TIGER, BE STILL

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Agnes carefully pulled some popcorn out of the paper bag in her lap, gazing at the center ring through the dim of the giant tent that smelled of sweat, peanuts, animals and gunpowder. She popped the kernels into her mouth, being careful to avoid getting them stuck on her bright red lipstick or dropping them onto the front of her blue shirtwaist dress.

She had been waiting all night for the tigers, but was also beset with anxiety about seeing them. She never could bear the sight of them in cages. Beside her Paula chatted with a neatly-dressed mother and little girl sitting in the row in front of them. Agnes fiddled with a run in her stocking.

Agnes. That wasn't really her name.

The band blared the tigers' entrance, trumpets and cymbals shattering at the edges of her nerves. The fat bass drum thumped in her chest the way the cannon fire did when it tried to break through her black sleep. She had been so small when her parents fled the civil war, abandoning their farm near Chelyabinsk for the safety of America. She had been Anzhelika, then, and she had been seven, and afraid. But not anymore. She was grown, now. And she was Agnes.

Her stomach swam as she watched the tigers, pacing in their cages as they were wheeled out, their golden eyes feral and the muscles shifting and coiling beneath their orange and black fur. She fell very still, struck by a jumble of sensations echoing out of the past; a moment that was something more than a dream, but less than a memory— a sense of crouching in the snow in the woods, looking into the eyes of a tiger like the ones entering the ring.

She felt Paula's hand settle over hers.

“Are you all right, Agnes?”

“Oh, sure,” Agnes answered, too brightly. “I’m just a little scared of tigers, aren’t you?”

“I’m sure they won’t bother us back here.”

Agnes’s eyes were fixed on that center ring. She sought the assurance of her friend’s grip as they watched the trainer open the largest cage and beckon the tiger out.

From the moment the trainer opened the cage, the audience seemed to be holding its breath. The trainer was a large, beefy fellow in a red-spangled jacket, wielding a chair and a whip, working to get the crowd all lathered up, his jacket throwing pearls of light with every grand, glittering gesture. The tiger began to step forth, graceful and powerful. Then he looked at the trainer for a moment and balked, starting to step backwards into the cage. The trainer cracked the whip once against the ground.

“He’s not happy,” Agnes murmured. She was half there, half elsewhere, shivering in the branches of a larch tree while a tiger circled below it.

“The trainer?” Paula asked.

“The tiger.”

The tiger did not seem inspired to participate in the trainer's plans. After a few moments of coaxing and cajoling, prodding and whip-cracking, the tiger emerged fully, and butted his forehead against the ruddy-faced trainer's stomach, knocking him backwards. The crowd gasped. Agnes’s shoulder muscles tensed like a drawn bowstring.

After a brief stare down, the tiger took his place on his platform in the center of the ring.

"Perhaps it's part of the show?" Paula suggested.

Agnes sipped from the soda pop and passed it back to Paula. "I sure hope so."

Back then the snow had descended in the larches, in the dusk, in careful, slow flakes, and the tiger brought the carcass of a grey wolf to the foot of the tree. He tore it open and laid it there, then backed away, not unlike a tabby laying a mouse at his master's feet.

Agnes and Paula sat in the dark of the tent, their fingers knotted together, stone-still, watching the show, as the band played flourishes. Each time the trainer demanded a trick from the great beast, it balked, resisted, sometimes pushed back, before performing what was being demanded of it. Each time the trainer cracked his whip, Agnes twitched – she couldn't help it.

The darkness that pooled around the back of the tent weighed on her chest, hindered her breathing.

The trainer lit a hoop on fire, ostensibly for the tiger to jump through. The tiger stared into the flames, but would not jump.

The trainer cracked his whip against the floor. The tiger roared at him, and it rattled through Agnes like a passing subway train. This was a mighty beast and the trainer was a pushy piece of meat.

Anzhelika, cold and in the dark, separated from her family, and terrified of the soldiers roaming the woods at night, had climbed down from the tree, and hungrily eaten what the tiger had brought her. The tiger laid its great paw over her, and Anzhelika slept through the night there, sheltered by its muscle, bone and fur.

The crowd was on its feet now, immobilized in their fright like flies in amber.

The trainer cracked the whip again. The tiger's massive paw swiped across the portly trainer's stomach, tearing his sparkly jacket and white dress shirt, as well as the flesh underneath it. Bright red blood blossomed on his chest as he stumbled back.

The tiger roared again, and a few people began gasping and moving away from the ring.

The injured trainer reached into the back of his waistband and produced a small revolver, a .38 special, preparing to subdue the tiger with it. He was too slow. The tiger's massive jaws closed around his arm and shook him like a rag doll, and the gun clattered away. The crowd, after a moment of horror, began to stampede toward the exits.

Paula took hold of Agnes's arm, shouting above the sudden din, "Agnes, we've got to get out of here!"

But Agnes gazed at the ring, where the tiger was tearing the trainer to bloody pieces. She glanced out at the aisle, where people were getting trampled. She didn't want to run out with the herd.

"Agnes? Are you all right, Agnes?"

Anzhelika's parents had found her in the morning. She was only seven and could not make them understand. She had slept peacefully. They emptied four shells into the tiger.

Without answering, Agnes slipped lightly over the tops of the folding chairs toward the center ring. It was only ten rows after all, and she, a dancer, was light on her feet. She reached the edge of the ring, slipped one of her dress gloves on, and picked up the trainer's gun where it lay on the ground. Even in this moment, surrounded by the hysteria, with a man being torn apart in front of her, she was cool. Calm.

She knew that this tiger was going to die. There was no saving him after he'd mauled his trainer. "Tiger, be still," she called softly to it, barely audible beneath the screams of the trainer. The handlers would be coming into that tent soon enough, to finish what the trainer had started. The tiger released the trainer from his jaws and turned his head slowly to look at Agnes.

Even if the trainer's life could be saved, someone was going to come along and put a bolt between this tiger's eyes. Agnes knew. She had read about it; these circuses drugged the tigers,

beat them, made them submit. But look at this one, she thought, with everything that they've done to you, you're still a tiger. Still majestic, still dangerous. Slowly, she cocked the gun, staring into the animal's golden eyes, which were focused on her now.

She was not mawkish enough to think it understood her; it would just as easily devour her as the trainer, at this point. Still, she felt sure no one understood it as she did. No one else in the room had the right to end its life. She felt cold, cold as the snows of the Siberian woods, as she leveled the weapon at its face, and squeezed.