

The Blue Tiger

When Sheila learned her boyfriend had stolen a rare blue tiger from the exotic animal sanctuary in the town forty-five minutes away from her own, she had not been overly surprised. True, she had no premonition that her boyfriend was going to steal a rare, endangered animal. But it was the kind of thing that she would accept, could not deny that it sounded like something Kai would do. In fact, she was slightly relieved because she thought all of her unanswered texts and voice mail messages were because he was cheating on her, which would have truly been the end of the world.

Finally, at midnight, the phone in her house rang, the landline, and she ran to find the cordless.

“It’s too damn late for a phone call,” her mother said from the sofa in the living room. “Your boyfriend should know that.” She was watching TV, eating macaroni and cheese. Sheila, who was twenty, hated her, but she didn’t have enough money to live on her own yet. And Kai said it would feel too much like they were married if she moved in with him.

“Hello?” she said, breathless.

“Are you alone?” Kai said.

“Yes, well, I mean my mom is here,” Sheila replied.

“But no cops or anything?” he asked.

“No. Jesus, Kai. What’s going on? Where are you?”

She could hear traffic rushing over the line. Somebody was talking to Kai, probably his roommate and cousin, Donnie, but she couldn’t make out what they were saying. “Yeah, yeah,” Kai said to the other person. Then he refocused and spoke to Sheila. “I’m using a pay phone so the cops can’t trace it. It took for-fucking-ever to find a pay phone. You wouldn’t believe, Sheila.”

“Trace what?” Sheila shouted.

“Lower your voice!” her mother shouted. “I can’t hear the TV.”

Sheila ran into her room and slammed the door behind her. “What did you do?”

“We stole that tiger,” Kai said.

“What?” she replied, confused. “What tiger? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“God, Sheila, the blue tiger? The rare tiger from the animal sanctuary? You have to know what I’m talking about.”

“Oh, OK,” Sheila said, remembering. “Why did you do that?”

“Listen,” Kai replied, ignoring her question. “We can’t go home until we know that no one is at the house. Can you drive over there and make sure it’s OK?”

“It’s midnight, Kai,” Sheila said.

“What do you think the punishment is for stealing an endangered animal, Sheila? Do you want me to go to prison? For life? The electric chair?”

“You won’t get the electric chair for stealing a tiger,” Sheila said. Sometimes she worried that Kai was so much dumber than she was. He was ten years older but seemed so childlike at times. It sucked that he always made all the important decisions, since she was the one who had the good ideas, like getting good jobs, having a baby, living in a house with a pool in the back.

“Sheila, fuck, just go check, OK?” Kai shouted.

“OK, OK,” Sheila said, “but you have to say it.”

“I love you, Sheila-baby,” he said, and she could hear Donnie yelling at him.

“I love you, Kai-baby,” she said. He had already hung up the phone, the line dead, and Sheila put on some clothes and found her car keys.

“Where do you think you’re going?” her mom asked.

“Kai needs a ride,” Sheila said.

“He can’t get a taxi back from the whorehouse?” her mom said, laughing.

“This is why I don’t tell you anything about me and Kai,” Sheila said. “Because you want it to fail so bad.” It was that kind of attitude that kept Sheila from telling her mother that she was three months pregnant. She still hadn’t told Kai either. It never felt like the right time, and now with the stolen tiger, she wondered if there would ever be a good time.

Sheila ran to the car and pulled onto the street, driving five miles under the speed limit just in case the cops were indeed watching her. Kai was dumb, but he wasn’t always wrong.

When she pulled into the driveway of the house, it was clear: no police cars, no signs of activity. She got out of the car and walked around the house, then peered through the windows. Nothing. It was so cold outside, and she’d forgotten to put on her coat. She got the hidden key, went inside the house, and called out. When there was no response, she went back to the car for her cell phone and called Kai, who answered on the first ring.

“Yeah?” he asked.

“It’s fine,” Sheila said. “Nobody is here.”

There was a brief pause, this odd silence, and then Kai said, “Are you lying, Sheila?”

“What? No. Kai, why would I lie?”

“For immunity,” he replied. “If they got to you, flipped you, and now you’re leading us right to the cops—”

“Kai,” Sheila said, “maybe just take the tiger back to the sanctuary. You’re going crazy already, and it hasn’t even been a few hours.”

“We can’t do that,” he said, his voice hitting that exact pitch that became a whine. “We already have a guy who wants to buy it. If we backed out, he’d be so fucking angry. He’s a bad dude, I think. He’d mess us up.”

“How much is he giving you?” she asked.

“Fifty grand,” Kai told her.

“OK,” she said, feeling dizzy, her body electric. “Come on. It’s clear.” Fifty grand. Half of that would be Kai’s. Twenty-five grand. They could put a down payment on a house. They could move to the city, get out of this town. If it meant stealing a tiger, selling it to some shady dude, then so be it. It was already happening, Sheila figured. Why not let it happen? Why not let that new life come to them?

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes,” he told her. “Listen to me. Here’s what I need you to do.”

“Let me get a pen and paper,” she said, now an accomplice. Which was fine. If Kai went to prison, she wouldn’t want to be free either.

Sheila closed the blinds to every window in the house. She defrosted four giant rib eye steaks and cut up some carrots. She put some blankets on the floor in the spare bedroom. There was nothing left to do but wait. She had once seen a picture of the tiger on the internet, but it had looked photoshopped, its fur such a shiny light blue that it looked like CGI on a network TV fantasy show. Apparently, it was really just a kind of Siberian tiger, but so rare that it was one of only four in the entire world.

The man who owned the animal sanctuary had made millions in real estate in New York City and then moved to Coalfield and purchased nearly two hundred acres and filled it with emus and marmosets and Brazilian tapirs and something called a zonkey, which was a zebra/donkey mix. And camels, hundreds of camels, which Sheila had seen during a class field trip when she was eight. One of the camels had bit a girl that she hated, and it had made Sheila so happy. That girl was now going to college somewhere in Oregon, on a full scholarship.

Sheila saw the headlights as the van pulled into the driveway and then turned around so that it could back up right to the edge of the front porch. She came outside, now suddenly terrified. There were so many things that she had to stay away from now that she was pregnant, this huge list with stuff like deli meat and paint and high heels and hot tubs. The list didn’t even mention tigers because who in their right mind, pregnant or not, would open their door to such a creature? And, once again, Sheila felt so stupid, the way

she let herself walk into situations that kept her from the life that she wanted. She tried to focus on the money, what it could do for them. She reasoned that maybe it was OK to do a small bad thing, if it allowed for many good things to follow. But she knew that this wasn't true. She knew that, really, it was just easier to do a small bad thing because, if you tried to fight it, to do the right thing, there would be all these other bad things that would come your way.

Kai and Donnie jumped out of the van, moving quickly, their bodies vibrating and jerky from the comedown of having stolen such a thing.

"C'mon, man, c'mon," Kai whisper-shouted at Donnie, who told him to fuck off. Kai didn't even seem to notice that Sheila was there, until he finally turned to her and said, "We might need you to help us carry this thing."

Heavy lifting was one of the things she had to avoid, but if she said that, then she'd have to say more, things she wasn't ready to say yet, not until she and Kai were on steadier ground.

"Why do you have to lift it?" she asked. "Can you just lead it into the house?"

Kai looked at her, dumbfounded. "Are you serious?" he asked. "Do you think we just put a leash on this tiger and it walked into the van? We had to drug it. We drugged the shit out of it. And then we had to carry this fucking thing to the van, and, even though it's only like a year and a half old, it weighs two hundred pounds. It took way fucking longer than we had planned. I don't know how we didn't get caught. The camels kept making these weird fucking grunt sounds, and it was freaking me out."

"I have to get the fucking van back to the shop," Donnie said, impatient. "We have to move."

"OK, stay back for a second," Kai said to Sheila, and, maybe even a day ago, this would have touched her, his concern for her well-being. But now, as she watched him open the back of the van, she felt this bubbling anger, this certainty that she should leave him. But she wouldn't. She also knew that with certainty.

The tiger looked so dead. Its tongue was hanging out of its mouth, and it was hard to see if the animal was even breathing. It looked like a rug.

"How much did you drug it?" Sheila asked.

Donnie said, "There's no website you can go to and see how much to give a tiger to knock it out. We just kind of guesstimated."

"I think it's dead, Kai," Sheila said.

Kai climbed into the van and ran his hand across the fur of the tiger. "No," he said, "it's breathing. It's just real sleepy."

He moved behind the tiger and grabbed one end of a kind of stretcher-like apparatus made of synthetic netting, and Donnie stepped up and grabbed the front end. They grunted

and cursed, but they got the tiger out of the van. Donnie was a huge man, not muscular but solid, but Kai was skinny, and he was having trouble carrying his end. So Sheila ran to him and grabbed one edge of the blanket. God, it was heavy, but she managed it. He smiled at her. “Thanks,” he said. And she leaned over and kissed him.

They waddled and waddled, sometimes putting the tiger down to rest, and finally got it into the spare room. They all sat on the floor around the animal as they tried to catch their breath, flexing their hands because their fingers were so achy and stiff.

Finally, in the light of the room, Sheila could truly look at the tiger, and it took her breath away. In person, this close, the animal shimmered. The blue looked like that cotton candy you get at the circus, a fairy tale. It was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen in her life. She wanted to touch the animal, and because all of this felt like such a dream, she reached out and touched its fur, which was maybe the softest thing she’d ever felt in her life. She felt its heartbeat, even in its drugged state, thrumming through its entire body. Its muscles were such that it was so easy to see the violence it could create with the slightest movement. It was thrilling, honestly. She wanted to curl up with the animal, wrap her arms around it, but she pulled away. She looked around the crummy room, and it seemed like a cruel thing to have the tiger here. It was wrong. She wished it was back in the sanctuary. Or, no, she wished it was free, roaming the plains, or tundra, or wherever the hell a tiger naturally lived. She thought of where it would end up, probably in a cage in the mansion of some drug dealer. It made her want to cry.

“How long do you have to keep it?” she asked.

“The man is picking it up tomorrow afternoon,” Kai said. “His guys have a cage and everything, a real smooth operation. Just a little while longer and we’ll be rich.”

Sheila thought about the money, fifty grand, and now that she looked at the tiger, she realized just how cheap this was. The tiger was probably worth millions, at least a few hundred thousand. And she wasn’t angry because Kai was being ripped off, that he’d taken on so much risk in the service of so little. She was angry because the animal’s beauty should have protected it from this kind of indignity. But she understood the world, or she understood some parts of it, even though she’d experienced so little of it. She knew it didn’t matter.

“You need to go home,” Kai said, shaking Sheila out of her dream. Donnie stood and went to take back the van, which he’d borrowed from his work. It was now just Kai and Sheila. And the tiger. Of course, yes, also the tiger.

“Can’t I stay with you?” she asked.

“You know your mom would pitch a fit, come looking for you. She hates me, Sheila. She’d see the tiger, fuck up everything. Plus, I have to stay alert, keep it drugged up so it doesn’t go crazy. Go home. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“What will we do with that money?” she asked him.

“I don’t know yet,” he told her. “Maybe buy a nice car, drive you all over town.”

“A car?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s just a thought.”

“I’m pregnant, Kai,” she said, surprising even herself.

“No shit?” he said, not smiling or frowning.

“Really,” she told him.

“I wish you hadn’t told me that, Sheila,” he said. “Not tonight. I have too much on my mind.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just couldn’t keep it to myself anymore.”

“Shit,” he said. “A baby? That’s a big deal.”

“That money,” Sheila said. “From the tiger. It will help us.”

“I can’t talk about this right now,” he said, turning away from her, going back to check on the tiger. She just stood there. She wished she could take it back, had waited for the right time. When Kai returned, he said, “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“I love you, Kai,” she said.

“OK,” he said. “I know.”

“And you love me?” she asked, and she was angry with herself because she knew, had known for some time, that he didn’t. Not really. Not the way that she deserved to be loved.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, OK?”

“You’ll call me?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “Go on home.”

In the car, she sat in the driveway, not ready to go home. Her mom would probably be waiting up for her, not because she was worried about Sheila, but because Sheila was inconveniencing her, and she couldn’t go to sleep until she’d made Sheila aware of this. She had to work tomorrow night at the diner, had to write a paper for the one class she was taking at the community college, and she hadn’t even started reading the book yet. But she couldn’t quite leave, wanted to stay close to the tiger. By tomorrow, it would be gone, like none of this had ever happened, and she’d return to her regular life. That money, if Kai even shared it with her, wasn’t enough to change their lives, or not in the way that she wanted, without the prospect of more. And there were no prospects. It was just her, and maybe Kai, and maybe this baby. She was so tired. She pulled out of the driveway and headed home.

Her mother was already in bed, all the lights out, when Sheila got home. She drank some milk and then changed into her pajamas. She looked into her mom’s bedroom, saw her mother lying there, the covers shoved off of her. Sheila crawled into bed. She tried to

remember when she and her mother had gotten along. It hadn't been that long ago, but it felt like it.

"What's happened?" her mother asked, groggy, still half asleep.

Sheila started to cry. "I'm pregnant," she told her, and this woke her mother up.

"You're pregnant?" her mother asked, now sitting up on one arm, looking at Sheila with amazement. Sheila, sobbing, could only nod.

"Oh, sweetie," her mother said, pulling Sheila closer to her. It wasn't anger in her mother's voice, but it wasn't kindness. *What was it*, Sheila wondered. "Oh, my sweetie," her mother said again, and Sheila could hear it, the resignation. But her mother was holding her for the first time in years, and so Sheila closed her eyes and let it happen.

In the morning, her mother was already gone to work, no mention of the baby, and Sheila sat in the living room and read the novel for class, highlighting anything that looked important or didn't make sense, which was a good portion of the book. She had decided that she wouldn't call Kai, but by eleven o'clock, she couldn't resist. It went straight to voice mail once again, and Sheila said, "Kai? I'm worried sick. Please call me. We need to talk."

An hour later, still no word from Kai, she got in her car and drove to his house. His car was in the driveway. She had planned out what she was going to say. She was going to tell him that, if he loved her, he was going to take care of this baby. He was going to have to be responsible, to get a real job. They were going to have to get a place of their own. And get married, sometime before the baby was born. She was going to give him this list of things, and she was going to see what she could get, what he would allow. And then, once she knew how things were, she'd have to decide if she could live with it.

She knocked on the door, but there was no movement on the other side. She sat on the porch and called Kai again, but it still went to voice mail. "Kai," she said. "I'm right outside. Let me in, OK?" She waited for a few minutes, and when no one came, she got the key from under the mat and let herself inside.

"Kai?" she called out. She waited for a response that didn't come. "Donnie?"

She started walking toward the hallway and saw blood. Blood was everywhere. She didn't even scream. She didn't even move. She just stared at the blood, which went all the way up the wall. There were specks of blood on the ceiling, even. The door to the tiger's room was busted wide open, the hinges like some kind of stupid joke, pieces of the door everywhere.

Finally, she said, "Kai?" even though she knew there would be no answer. And then she heard a low growl, deep and rumbling, and it made Sheila's heart evaporate inside her chest. It turned her insides to liquid.

The blue tiger came out of Donnie's bedroom. Its face was covered in blood, the red turning the blue fur a kind of dark purple. The tiger looked at her with those eyes, hypnotic

and so deep, endless. Sheila did not move, could not move. She thought of the baby that was assembling itself inside of her, and she promised that she would be a good mother, that she would keep her baby safe, if only she got out of this situation alive. The tiger was coming closer, growled again, the sound coming from somewhere deep inside of the animal.

The tiger was now right next to her. If she reached out, she could touch the tiger's snout. It sniffed at her, its body so long, so much bigger than it had seemed the night before. It was a beautiful thing, maybe even more beautiful because it could destroy her, could turn out the lights, and this would be her life, all that she'd lived of it.

And then the tiger simply brushed past her, out the open door. And, before she could stop herself, Sheila reached out, let her hand graze the animal's blue fur, and she closed her eyes, tried to remember this feeling, how soft it was, so she could explain it to her child.

Once the animal was outside, down the steps of the porch, walking down the sidewalk, Sheila turned and watched the animal go. Its movement was pure grace, so assured, like it would no doubt find the place where it was going. It would walk through this entire town, right past the sanctuary, into the mountains at the edge of the county, and it would disappear. And it would never die.

And Sheila kept watching, waiting for that moment when the tiger, the wildness inside of it, simply faded from view, disappeared. And when that moment happened, when it was finally gone, Sheila knew that her life would truly begin.