

THE LAST TIGERS OUT OF AUSTIN, TEXAS

God knows why, but the last thing I looted out of Austin was an old school tape player, just a black box really, with one cassette spool inside it.

I guess maybe I hoped for some memory music for company, maybe something from across the buried state lines, something sugar sweet from Nashville, or bitter comedown music from my first daddy's favourite, Hank Williams.

While I fiddled with the player, I tuned up my cracked voice, and sang some words of consolation to the hot, baked sky.

As we journey along, on life's wicked road,

So selfish are we, for silver and gold,

You can treasure your wealth, your diamonds and gold,

But my friends it won't save, your poor wicked soul.

I always loved that song.

*

When I pressed for play, though, there were no songs, just news.

What I got first was this item.

There are more tigers kept as pets in Texas than now remain in their natural habitats.

The voice was female, robotic, and decidedly Fox News.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘what else you got to tell me?’

There are more tigers...

Shit, I thought, but it was too late now to return the player.

I was ten miles out of Austin already.

Over and over and over again, it played, on some kind of crazy loop.

I couldn’t seem to stop it.

*

I tried and I tried, every which way, I tried, but I could not get that item of news out of my head.

Even crooning Hank Williams songs couldn’t turn the trick.

I’m a rolling stone all alone and lost

For a life of sin I have paid the cost.

My throat was parched and my voice was cracked.

When I pass by all the people say

Just another guy on the lost highway.

I thought about my daddy, the one who died, like Hank, of drink. He was the one who taught me chords on his big old guitar.

I thought about my ma, my real ma, the one who taught me about Jesus, but even the Son of God didn’t know shit about tigers.

I guess he didn’t know much about Texas either.

Or fucking Fox News.

I gave up.

I buried the tape deep in the sand, but still that news kept looping and jiggling in my mind.

Fuck it, I thought, I'm dreaming about tigers, and I'm not even asleep.

*

I was tracking the course of the former Colorado River for no better reason than it seemed to be taking me deeper into the desert.

And I liked the idea of that.

I was heading into the morning sun towards what used to be the Gulf.

And I was thinking about what might have happened to all those fucking tigers.

*

I was still singing, though.

Like a bird that's lost its mate in flight

I'm alone and oh, so blue tonight

Like a piece of driftwood on the sea

May you never be alone like me.

Okay, so it wasn't night-time, but I was sure as hell as lonely as that bird.

I worked hard at fixing my memory, but that was as fucked as my singing voice.

There was someone once, someone special, and I know I buried her somewhere in the sand that buried Austin, but I can't remember why.

Maybe, one of those tigers escaped and mauled her to death.

Or maybe she was unfaithful and I killed her.

I really didn't know.

I carried on walking, bare feet shuffling through time and sand, singing as best I could, as I went.

Six more miles to the graveyard,

Six more miles, long and sad,

Six more miles and leave my darlin

Leave the best friend I ever had.

That one was a cheerful song, but I was feeling cheerful, so what the hell.

It was a long time since I gave up on *that* kind of loving.

The sun was too fucking hot.

And, somewhere out there were all those tigers prowling around, escaped from their back porch cages.

*

Before I stole the tape player, I had picked up some food and drink from an Austin store in what used to be Jefferson Street.

If you burrowed real deep and scabbled down there in the dark, there was plenty of provisions left over.

I had decided, though, that would be my last trip to the old shopping mall.

What was the point in the mere prolongation of life?

I had been thinking a lot about the past – what I could recall – mostly about my first daddy and his bottles of Jim Beam and his Martin guitar – but there was no mileage living in it any more.

Maybe it was the tape player and its bizarre message that tipped me over the edge.

Maybe it was the tigers calling me.

It seemed like no big deal to leave the desert that was Austin and walk out of town into the desert that was not Austin.

*

After burying the tape player, I decided I would walk south east until I could walk no more and, when the water ran out, I would throw the rest of the food to the big black birds, and sit some, meditate on the meaning of life, or maybe the lack of it, and wait for some kind of ending, whatever it would be.

I also decided some more things.

However desperate things got to be, I would not start counting grains of sand.

And I would stop worrying about the tigers.

And why the hell I went back and dug up the tape player and why I'm now bothering to record these final words.

*

Maybe it's the same reason Hank Williams sang his songs.

Maybe it's the same reason Texan head bangers kept tigers in cages in their back gardens.

Maybe it's the same reason I want to tell you my name.

*

It's Madison.

Troy Madison, out of Austin, Texas, and proud to greet you.

'Hi, Troy,' the girls used to say, when I was a trucker, before the sands came.

*

I don't think I've been too bad a guy, all things considered, with the start I had in life, and all of that shit.

Weird, maybe, I'll admit to that, liking old time music, and being interested in spiritual things.

My real ma, she used to say, 'Jesus died for your sins, Troy.'

I said, 'Well, hell, he didn't have to do that, Ma.'

I know, though, what Hank Williams said, just before he died, just before the morphine and the other shit claimed him, he said, 'Every time I close my eyes, I see Jesus.'

I shut my eyes tight a lot after hearing that, but all I could see was red spots.

Sometimes, the girls in the back of the truck, they might say something like, ‘Troy, you are just the weirdest,’ but then they would say, ‘but you’re pretty hot in the sack too.’

That made it okay, I guess.

‘See you next time, Troy,’ those girls would always say.

*

Well, that was one area of my life I guess I wanted to consider – you know, the bit about the girls out back of my truck – while I was sitting there, in the desert sun, outside of Austin, waiting for whatever would happen next.

I thought I would sing one more song and that maybe my first daddy up in heaven might hear me, and think to himself, well done, my son.

Now you’re lookin at a man that’s gettin kinda mad

I had a lot of luck but it’s all been bad

No matter how I struggle and strive

I’ll never get out of this world alive.

Each word I sang was like a dry stone chipped from a rock.

Still, I did my best, and I thought that would have to be my last song, and I hoped Hank up there in the skies might hear it too.

I wondered whether everyone went to heaven.

Maybe even those truck stop girls.

It sure would be nice to see some of them again when I died.

*

My ma, the real one, brought me up Catholic, and I went to confession with Fr Andrew, who was fat as a fucking pig.

He said once, 'Troy, when you grow up, don't go with girls, especially those ones out on the highways looking for truckers.'

He never said nothing about tigers, though, as far as I can recall.

I think he was just like Jesus in that respect, in that he just never thought much about them, never had the need to deal in tigers.

*

Since I grew up, I never went once to church.

But I still loved Jesus, and I liked his saints, and I guess I wanted to be a bit like them one day, you know, and maybe do one good thing, before I died.

I liked the martyrs best.

You know, like the ones that were burned at the stake in Europe, just because they wouldn't sign papers saying they wasn't Catholic any more. I guess they might have done bad things, like me, but there comes a time in everyone's life when they have to stop doing the bad, and do one good thing, like dying bravely maybe.

I studied the sea of sand around me.

Austin was behind me – dead and buried beneath the horizon – and the sun was in front of me.

I wondered whether Hank Williams or my first daddy might be saints.

According to the coroner, Hank died of an *insufficiency of the right ventricle of the heart*, and that sounds good enough to me for a free ticket to heaven, especially after all that pain he had to live through.

And after he refused any more to sign up to all that Grand Ole Opry shit.

As for my daddy, he just got drunk, and drunk again, and again, and he hit my real ma on the side of her face but, before he passed away, he told me he loved me, which was nice, and maybe one good thing.

I surveyed the skies, and wondered whether tigers got to heaven too.

I tried to listen to the Fox News item one more time to see if there were any clues there about the fate of dead tigers, but I guess my recording of this story of mine must have cleaned out that female robot's metallic voice from my life forever.

I was sad about that.

I tried to sing, *I Can't Get You Off Of My Mind*, but my voice was as lost as the newsreader's.

I hummed the tune instead, and my lips were pressed tight and dry against one another.

I guessed there was not much time left for me to be a saint.

Nor much opportunity out here neither.

*

How far, and for how long, I walked, I had no idea, and I know you might not care to believe me, especially after I admitted to the weird part of my character, the God bit, I mean, the wanting to be good, but I really did see those tigers.

There they were, on the horizon, way over near where the old International Airport used to be.

I had to look twice, and pinch myself, but they were still there, moving west in the shimmering haze of heat.

How did I know for sure they were tigers?

One, because they had fucking stripes.

And, two, because they had left one behind, and she was lying there, sheltering from the blast of the afternoon sun, in the lee of a dune, just a man's dying breath away from me.

*

I nearly missed her, I would have done if I hadn't been thinking about tigers again. I would have thought her cry of pain was from one of the scavenging black birds that had followed me all the way from Austin.

When I saw her, she was looking pickled, shriven and wrinkled, ribs so prominent, flesh so sunken, she looked inside out.

Two black crows were attacking her eyes while her resistance had shrunk to a slow shift of her head from side to side.

Once, this wretched creature, I was going to say, was magnificent, but maybe she was just broken in a different kind of way, living in a cage in Austin, Texas, I mean.

It must have been a big cage, though, big enough at any rate for you know what two tigers might get up to, because there were two skinny runts of baby tigers pulling for their lives at her dry dugs.

Or maybe this lady tiger had an admirer from a different backyard who visited her occasionally.

I guess you wouldn't need so much space for that.

Hell, some of those truck girls could bend their backs so they could fit in some of the smallest spaces.

*

The babies were dying too, cubs, I think I should call them.

Even in the slight shade of the dune, the temperature must have been around a hundred plus. The sun was creeping round, too, and I thought about taking off my hat and positioning it so that the runt of a tiger cub, whose lifeless legs were baking in the direct line of fire, might have some last relief from the searing light and heat. I decided that was a stupid idea.

Something more was needed.

I shooed away the birds.

There were six crows I counted, and they didn't move far.

There were vultures in the skies, too, circling, like the planes used to while waiting to land at Austin-Bergstrom, all those death planes for the military at the USAF base, the ones that killed us all in the end.

I didn't want to think about that.

Except maybe Hank and my first daddy did good to get out of this life when they did.

The crows came back, but I kicked sand in their faces, and they flew off, screeching like banshees.

That was a start, but I knew it was just the easy part.

The mother tiger looked at me through her one remaining glassy eye.

I imagined that we understood one another, two creatures suffering, both at the end of our games, though she, of course, was further gone than me.

I thought she was accepting of her fate, as if she had always known it would come to this, and her only regrets were the kids, and, maybe, how she might have taken more pleasure from the visits of her admirer back in Austin.

*

The problem was I had already thrown the remains of my food to the birds.

That was maybe an hour away now.

I recalled kicking out at the vultures, driving them back for a few short seconds, so that the crows and the magpies could catch the few, desultory crusts I had not eaten. I thought, at the time, that all those vultures would have their revenge in good time, and that it would be these scrawny and efficient birds that

would pick my bones clean and leave them to shine through the desert nights, until the winds buried them deep beneath the sands.

I was wrong.

*

For some reason, for this reason, I guess, I had kept the knife I had used to open tin cans and to cut cheese.

I figured if I could help this mother tiger just a little bit, it would make me feel better about myself, might help God, and Jesus too, to feel better about me.

‘Go to confession,’ said Fr Andrew, ‘that’s what you gotta do, Troy.’

It was easy for him, with his disembodied voice in my head.

I looked, honest to God, I did, but there were no confession boxes here in the desert.

Still, I said it, ‘Bless me, Father, for I have sinned,’ but there was no response save for the desert wind whipping sand in my face.

‘I’m sorry about those girls in the backs of my trucks,’ I said.

The sun still shone, though, and was as silent as Jesus.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, to the tigers, ‘about all this, I mean.’

I shrugged my shoulders.

What else could I say to them? Jesus loves you? That’s what my real ma would have told them and, who knows but the tigers might have been comforted just a touch?

Then, I remembered my knife, and I slid the blade across my left wrist.

*

That was it.

That was *all* I was *intending* to do.

‘Good intentions, Troy, that’s what really matters.’

Fr Andrew’s voice was at it again.

‘Jesus knows what’s in a boy’s heart,’

I think the blade had been blunted by all those tin cans, but still I managed to draw a trickle of blood, and it dripped onto the sand right in front of the tiger’s mouth.

The desert, though, swallowed it greedily.

‘Troy Madison today had good intentions...’

‘For fuck’s sake,’ I said, ‘it’s that damn Fox robot again.’

‘...but good intentions were not enough to save the tigers escaped from out of Austin, Texas.’

The mother tiger’s one remaining eye was awake now, though.

Her cubs had been shrugged aside and they lay shrivelling in the late afternoon sun. I don’t think that rag and bone tiger had any thought for herself, though, as she sniffed at the place where the blood had dripped.

I’m sure she was all for her cubs.

If only she could eat, or even drink, she could make more milk for her little ones.

But her good intentions were not enough either.

And I was thinking the same.

*

None of it was enough.

We both knew that, the tiger and me, in our hearts.

Even when I gave her the knife blade smeared in my blood to lick.

I watched as her tongue fell lazily from her mouth and as her one eye caught sight of her cubs in the sun.

I flicked away the black birds that were attacking the sores on her body.

*

I was dying, too, so it wasn't really very much, what I decided to do.

I could hear my real daddy's patched up voice.

His head with its shaggy white snowstorm of hair was on a hospital pillow.

When my work here is o'er

And trials come no more

On that great day I'm going home

To live forever more, just o'er on heaven's shore...

At some point, during his last song, my first daddy's voice became that of his angel, and Hank Williams himself, I swear he was singing.

...when my life here is o'er, I'm going home.

How could I ever have doubted that my real ma, and daddy, and Hank, would all be there waiting for me.

How could I have forgotten for so long that my first daddy sang that song for me, before he told me he loved me, before he went straight on to die right afterwards?

I knew then what I had to do.

*

I smiled at that mother tiger and said, 'It's gonna be alright.'

I took off all my clothes – I didn't want her choking on my cotton and leather – and lay down right in front of her.

I was shivering in spite of the heat.

I was holding that old tape machine in my left hand, speaking these words into it, letting it devour my life story, just like it was some dying tiger.

I guess I must have pressed the wrong button.

It was what I really needed and just when I needed it.

That old stolen tape machine started right out singing at me with Hank's own blessed voice.

When God comes and gathers his jewels...

And I knew that's what we are, all of us, truck stop girls, tigers, and sinners like me, we're all His jewels.

I could feel the mother cat's hot breath on my face.

She was just one of the last tigers out of Austin, Texas, and she had two cubs to feed.

STORY ENDS