



TIGER

David C Jaundrell

Tiger

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Front Cover

The front cover of Tiger is a reproduction of a painting by Robert Oxley.

It is 36in x 36in and titled 'Ranthambore'.

Washington Green Fine Art Publishing very kindly gave me permission to reproduce it.

'Ranthambore' can be seen at <http://www.castlegalleries.com/art/ranthambore>

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'The Chain of Destruction' referred to in Tiger is, I believe, from 'The Destruction of the European Jews' by Raul Hilberg (1926 – 2007)

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CHAPTER 1

The Circus

The tiger cub slipped easily from its mother's womb and entered a brave new world. A few minutes later its mother, who should have been feeding it, left and didn't return for nearly an hour. When she did return, she was exhausted and lay down and slept. The cub whined, it needed sustenance, but his mother could not give it. After several hours the mother awoke and did her duty.

Day after day the mother left, to return, exhausted, stressed, shaking, and fell asleep immediately and then, in due course, to feed the cub with the pitiful amount of milk she had.

When the Circus Owner deemed the tiger cub had grown large enough, it was roughly manhandled and taken to a large room. Instinctively it moved to a corner, not knowing or understanding what was happening.

The men with long whips moved forward and started to lash the cub who howled in pain. It backed farther and farther into a corner that did not yield until the bars of the cage pushed into its flesh. The tiger's instinct told it to attack, but its momentary forward motion resulted in heavier, frenzied lashes that forced it back. Two men approached while one at the door held a gun, readied, to his shoulder.

The tiger growled a warning but several more biting lashes shut it up, and it cringed. Lying prone on the ground its fur shook as terror swept in waves through its body. The men stood by it, poking it, goading it, but the tiger did nothing, could do nothing; its anger held in check, buried, by the need to survive.

When the men were sure the tiger was in their control, they backed away and went through the door. After a few minutes the tiger, in much pain, dragged itself from the corner and, panting heavily, stood unsteadily and looked around. It was taking a deep lungful of air as the door burst open and the men rushed in with their whips held high. The tiger immediately went back to the corner and lay prone, shaking in terror. They gave it one dominant lash to make sure the tiger understood and then left.

Two weeks later, it was forced to jump through hoops. It wasn't sure what to do, but the sharp spike in its backside was a pointer, and after that it understood. Next, it had to sit on stools, jump over bars, jump through blazing hoops. Soon, its terror was replaced with a numbness that took it away from the world it was in and allowed it to do anything. And, as soon as it was ready, it was sent out to the main ring, where it did its tricks, the audience applauded and clapped with excitement, and then went home to tell their friends what a wonderful place the circus was.

CHAPTER 2

Little Girl

The circus was located near to a jungle on the edge of a port town. In the town, in a small, tidy kitchen, a mother, husband and their ten year old daughter were sitting down to have lunch.

‘Wasn’t that amazing,’ said Gerry, the father. ‘What we’ve just seen on the news. Ten rockets, full of people, on their way to Mars to join the others that are already there and prepared the way. Amazing.’ He waited for Sheena to add excited comments but she merely said, ‘They were talking at school yesterday about the circus.’

Surreptitiously, her parents looked at each other.

‘Come on, Sheena, you’ll be late for school,’ said Dorothy, her mother, with a smile.

‘We should go to the circus,’ said Sheena. ‘I’ve never been to a circus.’

‘Maybe when you are older,’ replied mother softly.

‘My classmates are going.’

‘Maybe next time it’s here.’

‘It doesn’t seem fair that my friends can go and I can’t.’

‘I don’t think you’d like it, Sheena,’ said Gerry, her father, gently.

‘You tell me I should make my own mind up about things. That’s how I will learn, that’s how I will grow.’

Father looked at Mother. 'And how do we get out of that?'

When they arrived, the Big Top was full. Aerial artists swooped overhead, and clowns on unicycles were entertaining the children with their antics. They took their seats with Sheena between them.

'I like this,' said Sheena.

'Good,' said Gerry with a smile that hid his fears.

The Ringmaster came out. 'And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we present the wonderful Tiger Troupe. They will amaze you with their breathtaking skills which they love doing for your enjoyment. So....' He held out his arm, and a drum roll hushes the crowd. 'The Tiger Troupe...'

The audience clapped as the tigers came down the tunnel into the arena, to be met by a man with a whip who cracked it loudly, and they went and sat on their respective chairs. A tiger's eyes looked around the audience and rested on Sheena, who was excited and laughing.

The tigers went through their routine to the delight of the audience. They jumped on high stools, jumped through hoops, did their tricks until it was near the end and the finale. The Ringmaster came back before the audience.

'And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, just for you.'

Another long drum roll and the hoops were lit, fire dancing from them, and the audience waited in anticipation. After a loud whip crack the tigers reluctantly jumped through the blazing hoops. The inexperienced Tiger, not as accomplished, held back, but the whip cracked by his face and he followed the other tigers and jumped through.

‘Why were they hitting him?’ asked Sheena, concern on her face.

‘I don’t think they are really hitting him, Sheena; it’s just pretend.’

‘But they don’t like jumping through the hoops! They don’t like it!’

Dorothy and Gerry looked at each other. This wasn’t so much the elephant in the room that they were so concerned about, it was the tiger.

‘Why are they making them do those things?’

‘It’s a circus, Sheena, it’s what they do,’ her father said, with as much enthusiasm as he could show.

‘But they shouldn’t.’

Sheena looked at the Troupe, and her eyes stopped at the tiger. He was looking at her and yet not seeing her, and she saw the hopelessness in his vacant eyes. For a fleeting second he saw the look of concern on Sheena’s face, and then his mind went back to some black place from which there was no escape.

After the show, the family walked home silently.

Sheena stopped and pulled them to a halt. ‘We have to go back and help them.’

‘There’s nothing we can do, Sheena,’ said mother softly.

‘There must be, there must be.’

Her father took a deep breath. ‘Unfortunately, Sheena, that’s the way it is, always has been..’

‘But why..?’

‘It’s difficult to explain, Sheena. But a long time ago man started using animals to help them do jobs, like ploughing the fields. Then they used them as pets for company. Then they used

them as....attractions, to give people entertainment and....' he paused, realising that his analysis was leading into dangerous waters, '...to make money.'

'But what if they don't want to do jobs, or be company, or entertain or make money for humans....?'

'It's not their decision, Sheena,' said her mother quietly, 'they don't have a choice.'

That evening, at dinner, the mood was sombre.

Sheena pointed to her parents. 'Why don't you do something?'

'What can we do, Sheena?' replied her father.

'There must be something.'

'Sheena, I know you want to help, and we would like to help, but there is nothing that can be done. Even if we helped the animals in this circus, there are thousands of circuses all over the world. And there are zoos, and aquariums, and dogs in kennels, birds in cages....'

Sheena started crying. 'It's not fair.'

Her mother put her arm round her. 'No, it's not, Sheena, no, it's not.'

'We have to do *something*....' pleaded Sheena. 'We have to...'

When the world was asleep, at least her part of the world, Sheena hugged the shadows of the Big Top until, at last, she found the tiger's cage. Her tiger's cage.

'Tiger,' she whispered.

The tiger didn't move.

'Tiger,' she whispered more insistently, but it took no notice.

She took the pin out of the cage door and moved away. From a safe distance, she watched and waited for the tiger to escape. But it did nothing. Just lay there....doing nothing. She took a meat

sandwich out of her pocket and silently went and placed it on the floor outside the unlocked door of the caged tiger. After a few moments, he sniffed the air, paced around the cage several times.... then lay down.

Sheena moved to the cage of the huge tiger, stood by the door, opened it and held it there. Like a concierge. He watched the child then slunk to the back of the cage where he cowered.

‘Come on,’ said Sheena.

He just watched her, warily.

‘Come on,’ she said, coaxing it with her soft voice.

Nothing. The child went into the cage and stood before the tiger. She raised her hand, and he growled menacingly but, remembering the pain from when they hit him, shrunk farther back, anticipating what was coming. But the little girl spoke softly, soothingly, and moved a little closer. He held up a massive paw to warn her off, growled and bared his teeth. Slowly, the little girl continued forwards and gently stroked the tiger.

‘It’s ok,’ she whispered, ‘you are safe with me.’

She nuzzled his massive head and stroked his ruff. His whole being understood she meant no harm, was there to help him, and he relaxed....a little.

‘Come on,’ she said, leading the tiger out into the night, hugging the shadows, and to the nearby jungle.

‘You can go now, you are safe. Go in there, into the jungle, and you will be safe.’

The tiger looked vacantly at her.

‘In there,’ she pointed, ‘you can go in there and be free.’

He looked at her, and at that moment in space and time, they were both the same. Two animals of different species, both

innocent, both trying to make sense of the world that was not of their making...

‘I don’t know what you want me to do?’ said the tiger.

‘In there they will not hurt you and will not make you do tricks. Keep going that way,’ she said, ‘far away from the circus, and you will have a better life.’

The tiger tried to understand, but it was a bit beyond him as all he knew was a circus. ‘Go,’ she said, ‘be happy.’ And gently pushed him in the direction of the jungle.

‘Do you have a name?’ asked the tiger.

‘Sheena.’

‘Sheee...Sheeeen....I will call you Little Girl.’

‘And you?’

‘I am Devida, son of Nidia.’

‘I will call you....Tiger.’

She stroked him once, kissed him, and then turned and ran for home before she was missed. He watched her until she was out of sight.

For a while, he sat there and felt....

..... alone.

But Little Girl had said he would be safe in a jungle. A part of him, buried deep within his DNA, said he should be at home in a jungle, but no one had told him that an African jungle was not necessarily the same as an Indian jungle or those in the Far East.

CHAPTER 3

The Jungle

He went a little way in but was scared, and so he sat down, hoping Little Girl would return; but when she didn't, he went farther into the jungle. He walked aimlessly through the night and, at dawn, he sat, tired, on the trunk of a fallen tree. After a little while a few soldier ants, scouts, came across him.

'You ok?' the leader shouted.

Tiger looked at the tiny things in front of him. He was pensive, on guard. Usually, when someone spoke to him it was an order, but this was a question, and they were so tiny.....

'Fine, thanks. Although I'm not sure where I am, and I'm quite tired.'

'We can help you,' said the leader. 'If you lie down here and have a good sleep we will sit by you and make sure you are not woken and keep you safe. Then we can point you in the right direction.'

'That would be wonderful,' replied Tiger, lay by the trunk, settled comfortably and almost immediately went to sleep.

It was half an hour before he felt the pain from thousands of ants, summoned by the scouts, in his fur, his mouth, his eyes, trying to devour him. Thousands of little jaws trying to take just a little of him home for the Queen. He leapt up, shook himself wildly and ran as hard as he could from them, but with many still

hanging on by their jaws. Crashing through the undergrowth, he fell into a pool and stayed there, treading water, to make sure they were not following him. Any ants still alive grouped together and floated to the bank. The leader looked back at Tiger.

‘Next time,’ he shouted ominously.

When Tiger thought it was safe, he left the pool and started walking again and, in due course, his fur dried. But he was hungry, and he didn’t quite know what to do about that. Back at the circus, they fed him every day, although sometimes not quite as much as he would have liked.

Ah well....

Little Girl said this was where he should be, so he must carry on....

The next day he walked into a clearing where several baboons were eating an antelope. They watched him warily, on guard, as he approached.

‘I am sorry to bother you. Could you spare some food?’ enquired Tiger.

The Alpha male raised himself. ‘Why is a lion with stripes asking us for food?’

‘A what?’

‘You are asking us for food? A lion with stripes is asking the baboons for food?’

‘I don’t really know what you mean but, yes.’

The Alpha baboon opened his arms, welcoming Tiger. ‘Of course you can have some food.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Come, sit with us. Enjoy some meat.’

Tiger joined them as they sat in a semi-circle. A baboon gave him some meat and, just as he was about to eat, another baboon leapt on him from behind, sinking his fangs into Tiger's shoulder and knocking him to the ground. Tiger screamed with pain as other baboons joined in, biting and clawing, trying to kill him.

But tigers are big and powerful and Tiger fought back; his long claws slashed at them, leaving bloody troughs in their flesh, and his fangs bit deep. For just a moment they retreated, so Tiger took his chance and escaped, running as fast as he could. The baboons ran after him but they had missed their chance. The Alpha baboon was enraged and took his anger out on the others.

'Is that the best you can do? It doesn't get any better. A fresh meat delivery and he gets away....'

He shook his fist in anger and his head in despair at his useless compatriots.

After several days wandering the jungle, catching small animals and eating carrion he came upon a fork in his trail. Which way to go? He had no idea?

'You ok?' asked the snake basking on a nearby rock.

'I'm lost,' replied Tiger. 'I don't know which way to go?'

'Take the right trail,' said the snake.

'Why that one?' asked Tiger.

'Take the left then,' said the snake.

'Which one would be best?'

'Where do you want to go?' asked the snake.

'I don't know.'

'Then either is fine.'

There was a logic to the answer that threw Tiger. If you didn't know where to go, didn't know what to do, then any route,

anything, was acceptable. But it meant life would be....would be....meaningless. Tiger set off down the right fork, and when he was a few yards away the snake shouted, 'What's wrong with your coat, lion? Have you had an accident?'

'I'm not a lion, I'm a tiger.'

'I don't think you are,' said the snake, 'because, from what I remember, that's a river. And you look nothing like a river. And it's pronounced ni..ger. Not ti..ger. Think you've had a knock on the head, lion.'

Tiger walked many miles until he was exhausted through tiredness and hunger. And the confusion that swirled within tired him. Every moment his brain was trying to make sense of things that didn't make sense. And now, to cap it all...he was a river?

Two days later and all Tiger had eaten was a small bird that he had found lying on the floor. He was starving and exhausted.

And everything was going wrong.

Little Girl said he would be safe and happy and yet everyone was against him and he didn't know why? Everyone was trying to hurt him, and he didn't know why? Little Girl said he would be safe here, but she was wrong. Why was she wrong? It dawned on him that back at the circus they fed him, he was safe in his cage, and he had fun doing tricks.

So what was he doing here?

CHAPTER 4

The Circus wasn't so bad

Heading back to where he came from he eventually found the circus and went back to his empty cage. Getting in he lay down on the side next to his mother.

‘Where have you been, Devida, my son?’

‘In the jungle, Mother.’

She sighed. ‘I miss the jungle.’ For a moment she said nothing and was lost in thought and memories and then she said, ‘Why did you come back?’

‘It’s better here, and I can get some food.’

His mother looked at him incredulously. ‘It’s better *here*....?’

He waited to be fed, but when the men realised he was back, they beat him bloody with whips until the blood matted his fur and the pain overwhelmed him.

‘It’s better *here*....?’ his mother said forlornly to herself, as she watched what they were doing to her son.

When they left, Tiger huddled in a corner, shook with pain and cried long into the night.

The next day the men decided Tiger would pay for messing them about by leaving the act with a vacant seat; he would learn a new trick. He would sit on a small piece of wood on a high pole. It wasn’t easy to jump that high, it wasn’t easy to stay on the small

piece of wood, and it wasn't easy to sit on it for long periods. But he learned, and he had the scars, hidden beneath his beautiful striped coat, to prove it.

Life was an endless misery, and the thought of the jungle seemed like heaven. But there was no escape, and he found himself doing the same things, day in, day out, that he had longed to escape from.

And yet he had returned?

In the times when Tiger had a mind to think with, he wondered about that? Why would anyone come back to this? It wasn't any worse than when he left. How worse could it be?

And yet he had returned?

He had returned....?

'Why?' his mother had asked, 'have you come back?'

'It's better here,' he had answered.

'It's better *here*....?'

And he had seen the look on her face but had not understood it.

Why the hell, she was thinking, is it better here? Surely, out there, it can't be worse than this?

His mother *knew* it was far better out there. Once she roamed free, but then along came the poachers with their guns and their sleep-inducing darts, and here she was, and here she would remain, forever. A magnificent three hundred pound female Bengal tiger who once roamed free and was now imprisoned in a tiny cage for life....

CHAPTER 5

Escape

One day, Tiger's keeper had too much to drink and forgot to lock the cage, so Tiger took his opportunity and, in the dead of night, fled the circus, fled the city and headed back to the safety of the jungle. This time he was equipped. Older tigers had talked wistfully about hunting for food, and so he tried to put it into practice. There was always something lame, infirm, had a heart attack or was about to die that he could scoff. And practice makes perfect-ish.

Tiger's life got a little better. He was eating and had put on weight. His fur was clean and shone when it met the rays of the sun. He was lonely, but he wasn't in pain. Life wasn't good as such, but it wasn't bad.

At a fork in the road, Tiger saw a Sloth dangling from a tree.

'Excuse me,' said Tiger, pointing down one track, 'where does this go?'

The Sloth blinked slowly. 'Mmmm? That's difficult really. On the one hand, it takes you where you want to go...and on the other, it doesn't.'

'And the other track?'

‘Mmmm? That’s difficult really. On the one foot it takes you where you want to go...and on the other, it doesn’t.’

‘That doesn’t make any sense,’ said Tiger, exasperated.

‘It does to me. The fact that you don’t understand may just mean your imagination is limited by your experiences. In which case, much of what we could discuss would be beyond you.’

‘Pardon?’ said Tiger.

‘See?’ said Sloth.

Tiger sat down. ‘I’m lost,’ he said forlornly.

‘No, you’re not,’ replied Sloth, ‘you know exactly where you are.’

‘Where am I?’

‘Here.’

‘Where is here?’

‘Here is where you don’t want to be.’

‘Where do I want to be?’

‘Somewhere else.’

‘Where is that?’ asked Tiger. ‘Where do I want to be?’

The Sloth smiled. ‘It’s not about *where* you are....’

‘What does that mean?’ implored Tiger.

‘Go home, Tiger,’ said the Sloth, waved and very slowly moved away.

‘Home?’ asked Tiger. ‘Where is home? Here in the jungle? Back at the circus? With Little Girl? Where.....?’

He took the right, or wrong, path and in due course, two lionesses came out of the jungle and crossed in front of him. They stopped and warily eyed him up and down. ‘Well, hello,’ said one, ‘you are a different kind of lion. But,’ she eyed him all over, as he was now fully grown, ‘a rather handsome one.’

‘Who are you?’ said the other, pushing past her friend.

‘I’ll tell you who he is,’ said the first. ‘He’s mine.’

Several other females arrived and milled around him. Admiring him, smelling him, nuzzling him. Tiger felt a peculiar sensation run through him, but he had no idea what it was or why it was happening?

‘Very nice,’ said one.

A loud roar invaded the throng, and the pride turned to see a large male standing aggressively, teeth bared. The lion, there to keep his females from others, was wary as Tiger was a funny colour and also, which was a nuisance, larger. But they were his females to do with what he liked when he liked, and this aberration in front of him was not going to spoil that.

‘Go away,’ roared the lion, ‘you are not wanted here.’

‘I wouldn’t say that,’ giggled one of the females, but a massive paw hit the side of her head and she cowered and whimpered, and they all moved a little farther away, the jollity gone.

‘Go away,’ repeated the lion, ‘you are not wanted here.’

‘I’m just trying to find home,’ said Tiger. ‘Could you tell me where that is, please?’

The male lion sensed weakness and knew this was the right time to show his females his prowess. He rushed at Tiger who was unprepared and the two coming together knocked Tiger over. The Lion stood over him.

‘Shall I kill you?’ he roared as mightily as he could. He looked around to see who was adoring him, and those that weren’t would be dealt with later.

Every fibre in Tiger’s body screamed at him to attack this thing in front of him. Every natural instinct demanded he attack or at least defend. But he did nothing. He was too scared of what

may happen next? If he attacked and failed, he would be severely hurt. 'Why would you do that?' asked a confused Tiger. 'What have I done?'

The lion was still a bit wary. He had no idea what this thing in front of him could do so it was better to accept Tiger's defeat such as it was than take it farther and who knows what may happen?

'Good,' said Lion, 'and don't come back again.'

He walked haughtily away, and the pride followed at a suitable distance. One turned back, smiled a secret smile and carried on.

Tiger dusted himself off and looked at the point where the lions had departed. As he watched, a lioness came back into view and very slowly sashayed towards him, her face coyly facing down. She came to Tiger and nuzzled him, but then an angry roar rent the air.

'Shame,' she whispered to Tiger, and turned and left...

Tiger wondered what had happened? What had happened was what always happened. He had annoyed someone else. Why did he always annoy others? What was it about him that so annoyed others and made them want to hurt him? It was beyond him....

Tiger wandered aimlessly until he had no idea what he was doing, where he was going, why he was doing this...?

A large ape approached him.

'You alright?' enquired the ape, with concern in his voice.

'Not really. I am far from home, in a strange world that I don't understand and, to be honest, I am quite scared.'

'Come, come,' said the great ape. 'I'm sure everything is fine. Perhaps it's just the way you are looking at it?'

‘Not really. No matter where I go, who I meet, they all seem to want to hurt me.’

‘Ah, I see,’ said the wise, old great ape. ‘I think what you see as anger and hate are actually happiness and love. They are easily confused if you are in a different world.’

‘Really?’ said Tiger, perking up. ‘I got it wrong? Really? I have been confused? All this time? That would put all this in an entirely new light. That’s such a relief.’

‘I’m sure that’s the case,’ said the great ape as he stroked Tiger affectionately and picked at his fur. ‘I’ll tell you what, why don’t you come with me, to where we gather, and I am sure you will be most welcome.’

‘That’s so kind of you,’ said Tiger. ‘I would really appreciate that.’

And, happier now, he walked with the great ape, side by side, as friends do, until they reached the gathering. The others were sitting in a semi-circle in the midst of which a fire glowed. Over the fire, a lion was trussed and being slowly turned.

‘What’s that?’ asked Tiger.

‘Oh, nothing really. We are known for helping others, and the lion was ill and quite cold, so we are warming it.’

‘That’s nice,’ said Tiger. ‘I like that.’

‘Come,’ said Ape, ‘let’s take you in here, and you can meet some others.’

In the makeshift hut built from large, broad leaves, Tiger met ape’s friends. They were quite nice and stroked him affectionately, eyeing him up and down to make sure he was ok, and then offered him a drink.

‘Thank you,’ said Tiger. ‘I am quite thirsty.’

He raised the liquid to his lips. 'It's a funny smell,' he said, as he put his head down to drink, 'what is it?'

'It's good for you. It will relax you.'

'Good,' said Tiger. 'It seems a long time since I was relaxed.'

He started to drink. 'It's a funny taste. What did you say it was?'

'Just drink it,' said one a bit curtly, but shut up quickly after a quick glare from Tiger's friend.

'Ok,' said Tiger, but as he started to drink again, he sneezed and dropped the container.

'Here,' said Ape, 'we'll help you.'

They grabbed him, pulled him to the floor and held him tight while one tried to prise open his mouth to pour in the liquid. They didn't want Tiger dead; they wanted him alive and drugged so that they could rip pieces off bit by bit with their powerful jaws. Tiger, terrified, frenzied, bit the ape and severed his hand and then lashed out with a mighty paw and ripped the face of another. For a second they let go, and Tiger slashed one more face, ripping out an eye, and then leapt up and ran for the opening. As he ran, he saw lion but he couldn't help lion. Lion, he now realised, was dead.

Tiger realised it wasn't working. 'It' meaning life. Nothing he did worked or worked out right. He was living, of a sort, but he didn't belong. He didn't know why, but he didn't belong. But at the moment there was no alternative, and so he had to carry on....

CHAPTER 6

The Chain of Destruction

One day he came to a clearing where many animals were gathered, listening to an Elephant who was addressing them.

‘So you see,’ said the Elephant, ‘we could be heading for a crisis. The jungle is only so big, and there are too many animals fighting for resources. Now don’t get me wrong, I am not addressing the animals that have always lived here, I am talking about immigrants, interlopers, chancers, scavengers. Animals from other jungles that think they can just come here and they own the place.’

He scanned the crowd and saw Tiger. He pointed. ‘Animals like him!’

The crowd looked as one at Tiger.

‘Hello,’ said Tiger, smiling, ‘pleased to meet you.’

‘And there you have it,’ boomed the Elephant. ‘Complete indifference to our plight. A condescending manner that suggests he doesn’t care and a laugh of derision in our faces.’

The Elephant fished in his pocket for a small book. ‘This book, *The Chain of Destruction*, tells us what should be done to these scum, these barbarians, these killers.

‘One, identification. Who is causing the problem?’

He looked at Tiger. ‘Stripes..... on a lion...in Africa?’

They all looked again at Tiger.

‘Two. Ostracism. Get them gone from us. Separate them.

‘Three. Confiscation. Take their possessions if they have any. And any Rights they have acquired or stolen.’

His voice was rising ever higher, his trunk reaching to the heavens for effect.

‘Four,’ he trumpeted. ‘Concentration and Isolation. Put them to work; but for us.

‘Five. Annihilation. Let them die!’

He stopped. His chest was heaving from the exhortation. Inwardly he congratulated himself for his oratory. He thought this could have been a difficult one, but they had listened quite well. He wondered how much they had taken in....?

The intellectuals amongst them thought about this.

The five stages of destruction?

It was an interesting moral and philosophical concept of some importance. On the one hand are we not all brothers under the stars, no matter our colour or shape? On the other hand, there had to be an order, a hierarchy, an understanding of where one stood in the overall scheme of things. And in that scheme there did have to be rules or, if not, then surely disorder? And then, of course, there was, there had to be, metaphysical and philosophical considerations

As they mulled this over the animals that were more intellectually challenged, ignored the first four rules of destruction and ran at Tiger screaming, ‘Die, die, die, die....’

Tiger turned and ran for his life.

CHAPTER 7

Confusion

Tiger lost them after ten minutes but kept running for thirty. Better safe than sorry. But, sorry for what? He had done nothing wrong and yet had been punished one way or another by most that he had met.

This last episode had really scared him. He could understand, to a degree, why individual animals did not like him. Why should they? They had no loyalty to him, as another animal. They were just doing what they did to survive. But the elephant was exhorting *all* animals to hate him. Why? Why should all animals hate him?

He sat down, put his head on his paws and cried. He was lonely, he was confused, he was scared.

Tiger wandered the jungle aimlessly.

He had no home, no friends, and was in a world he didn't understand. He felt lost, confused, scared and knew he would not survive. That wasn't true. He could survive but did he really want to? For what reason did he want to survive? To be befriended, betrayed and cheated? To be hurt for someone else's pleasure? That was not a reason to survive.

He thought, for a moment, of the circus; and then shut it out again. But then it came back with a degree of affection. The food,

the warmth, the company. Being part of a family that may have had its ups and downs but it was generally ok and certainly better than his life now. And it seemed obvious, in retrospect, the men had to hurt him to make him do those things as it was for his own good. It allowed him to fit in. Yes, that was it, to help him fit in. If he fit in, he was part of a family.

Maybe he should go back?

There was nothing here for him except pain and despair, and his mum was back at the circus. That was funny, he hadn't thought about his mum after he had left. Why was that? Tiger didn't know, couldn't know, that the bond with Nidia, his mother, so necessary in the jungle for survival, had been severed by the cruelty of the men who had separated them by their cruelty.

CHAPTER 8

Fitting in

Slowly he headed back to the city and one moonless night, hugging the shadows, he found them.

He had it all mapped out in his mind as he had thought about it continually. He would, unseen, watch the show for a while, get up to date with the latest tricks to impress the men, and then explain that it was all his fault. Say hello to his mother and apologise for running away, again, then find a nice cage with new bedding, have a good meal and, for the first time in what seemed like ages, relax.

As he got nearer, he heard the clapping, the cheering, the laughter of the crowd. Through a small slit in the tent, he looked in. The crowd were on their feet, cheering away as the high wire act finished and, on nimble toes, ran out of the arena.

A quick change of scenery and equipment and the tigers came out to more applause. The cracking of the whip caught everyone's attention and the audience hushed as the animals leapt on to their seats where they would wait until they were summoned to do their tricks.

Tiger watched them perform, and the audience clap wildly, and noticed the difference. The animals did what they were told because they had to. Their eyes were blank, their movements robotic. A choreographed routine not based on skill, agility, and

enthusiasm, but fear, pain and repetition that overrode the only alternative; death. There was no escape; perform or die. If you looked into their eyes, if you looked deep into their soul they were already dead; their life, their joy, their being, already gone. Unfortunately for them, they had no means to end it altogether, to leave their life that meant nothing. And so they would carry on until injury or old age got them killed, and they went to a world without pain and suffering. Unfortunately, they would be dead and wouldn't know how lucky they were.

On the other hand, the enthusiastic audience were there of their own free will, and their enjoyment was in indirect proportion to the animals' suffering. The harder the trick, the more the pain that had gone into learning it, the more the crowd cheered.....

Tiger realised something that he had seen but not registered. Where was Nidia, his mother? When the act finished, and the animals caged he went silently to them. An old female had slumped, exhausted to the floor of the cage and was already dozing. 'Old lady,' whispered Tiger. She moaned a little but didn't respond. 'Old lady,' he said a little louder.

She opened one tired eye and looked at him.

'Old lady, where is Nidia?'

'Nidia?' repeated the old tigress slowly. 'Where is Nidia?'

'Yes, Nidia.'

She thought for a while about the whereabouts of Nidia. Her old, tired, permanently somnambulistic state not registering the fact that she was talking to another animal who was outside the cage.

'Nidia broke her leg, and helped feed the other animals.'

'So where is she?' asked Tiger. 'Where is she?'

‘Did you know,’ said the old one softly, ‘that Nidia was my sister? No?’

‘No, I’m sorry, I didn’t know that. I’ll tell her I met you.’

She looked at him with sorrow. ‘My sister helped feed the other animals,’ she murmured.

‘Yes, you said that, but where?’

The old female looked at him. In here you long ago learned to say but not say, to hear but not hear, to see but not see. He waited for the old female to speak but she was already starting to doze again so he slowly, hugging the shadows, went to a dark spot and tried to understand.

‘She helped feed the other animals,’ the old one had said. What did she mean? ‘She helped feed the other animals.’

He suddenly realised; his brain decoding the pleasantries for ‘death’ and the emptiness that was within him overwhelmed him.

His mother was dead. Dead..... He was already alone, but now his subconscious had nothing to cling on to, nothing to return home to.

Tiger slumped down and buried his head in his paws and cried. Everything he couldn’t cope with, had no skills to counter, enveloped him. Loneliness, isolation, abandonment, inadequacy, confusion; came at him in waves and he was desperate. Tiger was in another world.

Tiger was living the beatings and the pain and, although he didn’t know it, the loss of everything that being a cub should have offered. His tortured face, his closed eyes and huge open mouth screamed silently, angrily, at the world that had rejected him and he knew not why.

Tiger begged for help from a God who wasn’t listening, wasn’t seeing, and didn’t care.

CHAPTER 9

Little Girl

When a degree of strength returned to him, he made his way back to the outskirts of the jungle. To a no man's land; a jungle that didn't want him, and a circus that did. A living, dying hell in either direction.

As the sun rose in the sky, he climbed a large tree and lay on a branch looking out over the town in the distance. Slowly his head lowered and his eyes closed....

Several hours later the heat of the sun was too much, and he woke. He was hungry and thirsty, but he was, at the moment, free. He heard the freedom all around him as the animals sent out their calls and the birds chattered away continually. It was simple really, or should be; you live, you die. Two quite separate events, where one inexorably led to the other. But Tiger's life had not been like that. He had died to live. If he had not died inside, he would not have coped with the cruelty and the pain and would have gone mad. Or taken the anger at his plight out on his captors and they would have killed him.

So Tiger's inner death had saved him, had given him life, had helped him survive, but had not equipped him for an actual life;

for freedom. That was a whole new world he had to learn for himself; and quickly.

In the distance, he heard the faint sound of children playing. Their high-pitched little voices, laughing and giggling, reminded him of Little Girl. Little Girl, who had shown him kindness and cared about him even though she didn't know him. Little Girl, who had walked up to him, to an enormous, deadly Tiger and shown him affection. Little Girl would help him. If anyone could, Little Girl could... But how to find Little Girl? He had been with her only a short time but, but..... he did have a way of finding her.

He delved deep into his memory and found her scent. Letting it flood his senses until he was ready, he lifted his head and sniffed the air, but the wind was in the wrong direction, going towards the town. He would need it to turn a little for it to bring her scent. He stayed there, patiently waiting until the time was right and then he took in great lungfuls of air through his keen nose. Nearly an hour later he found her. Her scent was hardly there, but it was her.

As night fell he headed into town, hugging the shadows, avoiding people, continually sniffing the air. It was mid-evening when he reached the back door of the house, where her scent overwhelmed him with its memory.

The family was sitting around the kitchen table trying to complete a complicated jigsaw of the London Bridge in England when they heard a scratch at the door.

'Who would be using the back door?' Dorothy asked no one in particular as she got up and went to open it.

She found herself looking at a huge Tiger, sitting on its haunches like a dog waiting to be let in. She screamed and tried to shut the door but Tiger held out a massive paw, and it refused to close, so she ran back into the room. Father grabbed a bread knife off a work surface and was about to throw himself at the door when Sheena walked to it, to the waiting Tiger with the large open jaws.

‘No, Sheena,’ screamed father, but it was too late. He stopped, paralysed with fear as his little girl put her arms round the Tiger’s neck and clung to it.

‘It’s Tiger, from the circus,’ she said happily. ‘What are you doing here, Tiger? I helped you escape, why did you come back?’

Tiger’s huge tongue licked her face, and she giggled.

‘Oh, Tiger,’ and she clung on even tighter.

Mother and father were now in a world that had long passed surreal. They looked at each other, and their faces showed everything they were not saying. How? What? Where? When? Who? Why? An enormous tiger in our house? Being hugged by our little girl? What?

Father said the obvious thing first. ‘You helped a tiger escape from the circus? So the tiger we read about, that somehow escaped, was let loose by you, Sheena?’

‘Yes,’ she said innocently.

‘You could have been killed,’ croaked her distraught mother.

Sheena touched her nose to Tiger’s. ‘Tiger wouldn’t hurt me. Come on, Tiger, I bet you need a drink.’

She led him into the kitchen, with mother and father keeping out of his way.

‘Sheena, I’m not sure about.....’ but it was too late. Sheena took Tiger to the table where he sat as requested, while Sheena

filled a bowl with water and then put it down next to him. As he lapped, Dorothy raised her hands to Gerry in a 'what do we do?' sort of way.

Sheena held out her hand to indicate her parents should sit and then she said, 'If Tiger's here he must need my help, so we have to help Tiger.'

'We.....we.....helpTiger.....? He's a tiger,' said her mother and then, inexplicably, said 'Sorry' to Tiger.

'That's alright,' Tiger replied.

Mother stopped moving. She tried to talk but couldn't.

'Tiger can talk?' asked an incredulous father.

'If he wants to.'

'But how?'

'We are all the same, Mother.'

'The same?'

'Deep down we are all the same. Just because we look different does not change the fact that we started from the same place.'

'Err.....I didn't know,' said mother, quite missing the point that her ten year old child had taken control of a situation that involved a huge, talking tiger in their kitchen.

'What's wrong, Tiger?' asked Sheena. 'Why are you back?'

'Little Girl, I don't know where I belong. At the circus, they beat me and make me do tricks, but in the jungle, they try to kill me. Why? What have I done wrong? And they say I am a lion with stripes. What is a lion?'

'Dad,' said Sheena, 'you should take this.'

'I should?'

'Yes.'

‘Errr....right. Tiger, a lion is a big cat, like you, not quite as big, but they don’t have stripes.’

‘Why doesn’t it?’ asked Tiger.

‘Because lions are from Africa and don’t have stripes. And Tigers are from the Far East, like India, and do have stripes.’

‘So I am in Africa?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why aren’t I in a circus in India if that’s my home?’

No one said anything. What could they say?

‘Why?’ repeated Tiger.

Sheena stroked Tiger gently. ‘Tiger, you don’t understand, Tigers don’t live in circuses, they live in jungles.’

‘So why was I in a circus? Why were my mother and her sisters in a circus?’

Quiet descended again. Father thought of a quote he had once read by, he thought, George Bernard Shaw, ‘Death is the sound of distant thunder at a picnic.’

‘They were captured, taken from the wild.’

‘Why?’

‘To be taught how to do tricks.’

‘Why?’

Father was reluctant to go any farther and paused. ‘Tiger, this is very difficult.’

But Tiger’s voyage of discovery had started, and he meant to go on. ‘Why were they taught to do tricks in a circus?’

‘Tiger, it’s very complicated...’

‘Just explain, please.’

Father decided it was time for him to carry on. He looked at Sheena, wanting her to be shielded from all this, but he knew, of them all, she was the most in tune with Tiger’s plight. She, his

little girl, had instinctively known what everyone else refused to acknowledge.

‘Tiger, we are human, and you are a tiger. In your proper home, you are the kings of the jungle, and all animals bow before you. But a jungle is just a part of what we call earth. And humans rule the earth; all of it, including jungles and including tigers.’

Tiger thought about that for a moment. In many ways he hadn’t got a clue what they were talking about, such was his ignorance of the world due to his captivity.

‘But that doesn’t explain why we are put in circuses and made to do tricks?’

An embarrassed quiet descended again.

‘What they are trying to say,’ said Sheena, her face losing its softness, ‘is that we can treat any other species on earth in any way we want. We rule. If we want to cage you, hit you, make you do tricks, we can.’

Father and mother looked at each other. The brutality of the world summed up by a little girl in one sentence.

‘But why would you want to?’ persisted Tiger. ‘Why would humans make animals suffer for their own pleasure? Do animals do it to other animals?’

‘No,’ replied a subdued father.

‘So just humans are cruel?’

‘Essentially, yes.’

‘But if they rule the world why do they need to be cruel?’

Sheena looked at her parents. ‘They don’t...’

Mother looked at her watch. ‘I’m sorry, Tiger, but it’s time for Sheena to go to bed. Sheena, what should we do about Tiger?’

‘He can sleep with me.’

‘I’m not su...’

‘Come on, Tiger,’ and she led him out of the room.

Tiger sat by Sheena’s bed as she undressed and when she was comfortably in bed he lay down next to it. She lay close to the edge and stroked him.

‘Tiger, how did you find me?’

‘I sniffed the air.’ Tiger lifted his head and sniffed the air.

Sheena was starting to doze. ‘Tiger.....sniffed.....theair.....’ and she lifted her head and sniffed the air. ‘Little....girl.....sniffed.....the...air.’

She yawned. ‘Ni ni, Tiger.’

Her eyes closed and she went to sleep. Her one arm trailed over the side of the bed and Tiger put it gently in his mouth and placed it gently on the bed. For a few moments he sat looking at her and then he went and lay in the middle of her doorway where, quite soon, he slept.

The next morning Sheena and Tiger went down to breakfast and found father and mother already at the table. A cup of milk and a bowl of water were waiting for them. ‘Tiger, Dorothy and I had a long talk last night after you went to bed and we have decided you really should go home.’

‘Home?’

‘Yes, Tiger, home. India, perhaps West Bengal. Only there do you stand a chance of not just surviving, but being yourself.’

‘Being myself? What does that mean?’

‘Because of what they did to you in the circus, Tiger, you are not alive, you just exist. You belong nowhere, you have no pleasure, you have no stimulation. To all intents and purposes,

you are dead inside. The only thing that means anything to you isSheena.'

Tiger let out a deep purr and licked Sheena.

'So,' continued father, 'you have to go home, where you belong.'

'Is it far?'

'It's about four thousand miles.'

'How long will it take me to walk there?'

Sheena giggled. 'You can't walk there, Tiger, it's across the sea. How can he get there, Daddy?'

'Well, I have friends down at the Port, and there are always ships going all over the world, so I will see if someone will help us.'

Father made some calls, but the news was not good. 'No one is willing to take Tiger with them to India. Actually, one would but they wanted him caged in the hold, and I didn't think Tiger would like that.'

The effect on Tiger was immediate. He started trembling and backed away, until he was huddled in the corner. His mouth opened, his teeth bared and he let out a warning growl. Father and mother froze, both realising that this enormous animal could tear them apart and that they had lost sight of that. Father held Sheena but she squirmed away and went to Tiger.

'What did they do to you, Tiger? What did they do?'

She held him and stroked him and her parents were amazed when he put his huge head in her arms, like an injured child seeking comfort from a mother. They watched as his face changed as her love embraced him and he felt safe. Something he had hardly felt since the day he was born.

Gerry looked at his wife as tears fell down her cheeks.

When Dorothy, and Tiger, had recovered, and tea and a bowl of water had brought them back to the here, and now, Dorothy said, 'So what now?'

'Well, I know of one ship that is going to West Bengal, exactly where Tiger should be. If we could sneak him on board, and he hides, he could get there.'

'How long would it take?'

'I'm not sure exactly but about eight or ten days.'

'What do you think, Tiger?' asked Sheena.

'I want to go home, wherever that is...'

'Ok,' said father. 'West Bengal is getting another tiger....'

CHAPTER 10

The Voyage

They moved slowly through the black shadows on the dock until they reached the ship. Looking around, making sure they were not being watched, they hurried up the gangplank to the deck and then located a lifeboat.

‘This is it,’ said father, pulling back the protecting sheet. ‘All you have to do is get in there, keep quiet for a few days, and, just after dawn after the eighth night, you should see the coast. You will get quite close to it, so jump when you can and head for shore. After that, follow your nose.’

Mother looked at him with an ‘*all you have to do?*’ look.

Father went to shake Tiger’s hand before he realised what he was doing and so he stroked him.

‘Goodbye, Tiger, have a safe journey.’

‘Thank you, Father,’ said Tiger and licked him.

‘Goodbye, Tiger,’ said mother, trying hard to hold back tears, ‘have a good life,’ and then, with hardly a hesitation, she flung her arms around the enormous tiger that she had come to love.

‘Thank you, Mother,’ said Tiger and licked her.

Reluctantly pulling herself away, that just left Sheena.

‘I will miss you, Tiger.’

‘I will miss you more, Little Girl.’ He moved to her, walked around her, taking in huge lungfuls of air as he sniffed her scent.

‘Now I can never forget you...’

Three days into the voyage and Tiger was bored. Actually, he wasn’t really bored. Bored was what he was trying to convince himself he was, when actually he was quite scared. Every time he lifted the sheet a little all he could see was...sea. Nothing but the sea, which meant little to him. He had never seen an ocean before. There was nothing to use as a marker, nothing to estimate distance, nothing to estimate speed. All he had was day and night and father had said after the eighth night, so another five to go....

He settled back down to sleep. At least he would be rested when he got wherever he was going.

He was awoken by voices, and one he recognised; Little Girl! He peered out of his hideaway to see the Captain shouting at Little Girl as two men held her tightly.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded.

‘I was looking around, and I fell asleep, and so I hid until you got to a port and I could get off and go home.’

‘I’m supposed to believe that?’

He grabbed her roughly and shook her. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Sheena.’

‘What are you doing here? Why are you here? Who else is with you?’

‘It’s just me, I fell asleep, I did....’

‘Liar!’

The men looked past the Captain, their demeanour changed, and they started to back away. The Captain turned around and found himself facing the massive, open jaws of Tiger. His sharp teeth glinted in the sun, and his hot breath scorched the Captain. Tiger roared as loud as he could.

Sheena tore herself away and went to him. 'Tiger,' she said affectionately.

The Captain started to run away.

'Stop him, Tiger.'

With one bound Tiger was on his back and pinned him down.

'There is no need to be scared. Tiger will not harm you if you don't harm us. Tiger just wants to get to West Bengal, and then he will get off and go home.'

'Get a gun,' the Captain screamed at his men, but Tiger stood, one paw still on the Captain and let out a deep, low, deadly growl that stopped them in their tracks.

'Get a gun,' the Captain screamed again, but then his voice stopped as his head was enveloped by Tiger's mouth. As it slowly shut the 'no, no, no' of the Captain became fainter, and then it stopped, and his body went limp.

One of the men shouted at Sheena. 'Stop him! You have to stop him! If the Captain dies, we can't get home.'

'Is he still alive, Tiger?'

Tiger let out a low growl.

'Only the Captain can get us to port,' the man shouted again, his voice edgy with panic. 'But what happens if we let the Captain go? What then? You attack us again?'

The second man found his voice. 'No, you just want to get the tiger home, we understand that now.'

'Ok, Tiger.'

Tiger opened his mouth, and the Captain's head appeared, taking deep breaths and coughing and spluttering. He wiped his face with his shirt sleeve.

The second man darted to Sheena and held her tightly between him and Tiger.

‘Stupid girl, now you do what we say.’

Instantly, Tiger leapt high into the air, over Sheena and the man and, as he did, a heavy paw smashed down on the man’s head, and he reeled backwards. In seconds his shirt had been slashed to ribbons and blood ran down his chest. He fell to the ground, and Tiger moved over him, raised up, and readied to kill the man.

‘Tiger.’

Tiger stopped instantly but kept his position. He would be happy, very happy, to kill this man. In fact, he would like to kill all these humans. Not just kill them but make them suffer the most horrific pain as the men in the circus had made him suffer. For a moment he was overwhelmed with the feeling of revenge and pent-up anger and his paw, with the claws extended, started on its deathly arc to the man’s throat.

‘Tiger!’

His claws came to a halt at his throat.

‘Tiger.’

Tiger looked at her and his growl told her how much he wanted to do this. How much he had kept in all these years. How much he had kept himself in check. How easy it would have been to have let go and killed Little Girl’s parents. How difficult, initially, to distinguish between the fact that not all adult humans hurt you, abuse you, kill you. Only some....

She smiled at him and extended her arm. ‘Come here, Tiger, come to me.’

As Tiger got off the man, Sheena turned to speak to the Captain. As she did, Tiger turned back to the man and put his face next to his. He opened his jaws wide to let the man know what could have happened....

‘Sheena...’ implored the man weakly.

Sheena looked around and tried not to smile. Tiger was having fun. It wasn’t really funny, in fact, it was sadistic but, compared to what he was capable of, to Tiger it was fun.

‘Tiger....’ she chided.

Tiger looked at her and then his large tongue slobbered over the face of the man, licking him as though with affection. A soft growl directed to Little Girl said, ‘I’m only playing with the nice man....’

He got off the man again and moved towards Little Girl who was starting to talk to the Captain.

‘So, Captain, are you going to help us?’

‘We’ll assist you.’

‘And no more tricks.’

‘No. No more tricks.’

‘You do understand Tiger can kill any of you instantly.’

‘I’m quite aware of that without you having to tell me.’

‘Good.’

‘Now, as the man said, I have to be on the bridge and get this thing to port.’

‘We’ll go with you.’

With the men leading the way Tiger whispered to Little Girl, ‘Why did you stay?’

‘You needed me just a little longer.’

He pushed his head under her arm, and she hugged him.

Two days later and Captain was at the helm, Sheena sat by him and watched white horses in the vast ocean, while Tiger lay on the floor and snoozed. The phone rang, and Captain picked it up. Before he answered, he looked at Sheena, thought for a moment,

and then flicked a switch. His voice came through the bridge's speaker system.

'Captain here.'

'Hi, Jim, it's Yvonne, everything going ok? According to your GPS location it's fine, but I thought I'd just check...'

'Everything's good, Yvonne. A couple of things to report; we had one minor incident when the First Mate fell down the stairs and grazed himself quite badly, but he'll be fine....'

'Good. And the other?'

'We have adopted a cat we found on board.' He turned and winked to Little Girl.

'That's nice, I've got two. What kind of cat is it?'

'It's difficult to explain really. You know, the four legs type, furry, stripey, sharp teeth and claws...that type.'

'You've adopted a tiger, Jim,' she laughed. 'You sure it wasn't the tiger that caused the grazing when he tried to eat the First Mate?'

'Good one, Yvonne.....'

'Ok, Jim, well, bon voyage.'

'Thanks, Yvonne, see you in four days.' The Captain ended the connection and turned to Sheena and laughed.

'Thank you, Captain.'

'Sheena, I haven't done so before, so I will now. I want to apologise for treating you so badly. It was automatic. A little girl, a tiger, they don't fit in, and so we go to battle stations. We fight first and ask questions after. I'm sorry.....'

CHAPTER 11

The Coast

They watched the coast getting ever nearer. When it was close enough, the Captain took Sheena and Tiger to shore in a small outboard. He beached it on the sand, and Little Girl and Tiger left and walked towards the dense jungle that was only a hundred yards away.

‘It’s time, Tiger. You are home now. In there are other Tigers, not stripey lions, but proper Tigers.’

‘I don’t want to leave you.’

‘I know, but you have to have a life. And you have to find yourself, and where you belong in this world, your world. But remember, Tiger, although this is your world, all you have known is the circus, with their rules, their pain. You do not know your world. You are entering it like a new born baby, and you will have to learn as you go along. It may be difficult, at times it may be painful, and for a while, it will be lonely, but it is where you belong.’

She gave him a big hug. ‘Go, Tiger, find yourself.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You don’t have to thank me. I helped you because you are precious. You are very precious to me, and you should be precious to the world. Not the world of circuses and cages, but a world that allows you to be you.’

‘I will miss you so much, Little Girl.’

‘I may not be with you, Tiger, but you are never without me. I am always in here,’ she touched his heart, ‘and in here,’ she kissed his head. ‘And, if you ever need me, just sniff the air.’

They both put their noses in the air and sniffed.

‘Bye, Tiger, good luck.’

Sheena walked backwards to the boat, waving as she went. When it was a few yards offshore, Tiger sat at the water’s edge and stayed there until the cargo ship was out of sight and he could no longer see Little Girl waving goodbye...

He stared out to sea for another hour, trying hard to put off what he knew he had to do. Turn round and head into the jungle, and all that awaited him.

Mustering up his courage, he took a deep breath and started walking up the beach. A few yards before the jungle enveloped him he stopped. He didn’t want to go in there, he just didn’t. He sat down, and his body started to shake. He looked back at the ocean, and then he heard Little Girl’s voice.

‘It may be difficult, at times it may be painful, and for a while, it will be lonely, but it is where you belong.’

He continued walking into the jungle and the unknown.

CHAPTER 12

West Bengal

Tiger walked for a day, taking a trail here, a trail there and then came across several monkeys about to feast off a small pig-like animal they had killed or found. When they saw Tiger, they started screaming to warn him off, but he just carried on, so they ran away, screaming abuse, and Tiger tucked into his first meal.

He sat and decided it wasn't as bad as he had expected; in fact, it wasn't bad at all. And, for a moment, there was a part of him that felt he belonged here. He couldn't say why, it was just a feeling deep within him.

And then he stopped dead still as he realised something; there were no sounds. The birds weren't singing, monkeys not screeching, nothing. He listened, and then an enormous tiger leapt on him from the undergrowth and pinned him down.

'How dare you enter my territory?' he snarled. 'You know what happens when you enter my territory.'

His huge jaws opened, his teeth bared, and he readied for the bite that would not kill Tiger, but would cause considerable pain and allow Tiger to leave, knowing what would happen if he ever returned. But Tiger did not know that, and he thought he was going to die...

The tiger, whose name was Areky, started his descent into Tiger's flesh and was just about to inflict a painful wound when he stopped perfectly still.

'Do not move,' he roared and started to sniff Tiger.

'I wo.....' but the tiger cut him off with a vicious snarl to make his point.

He took in deep breaths of Tiger's scent until he said, 'Who is that smell? It's very faint but who is that smell? A female smell.'

'It's a little girl, a human.'

'No!'

'Then I don't know.'

'You must know!' he roared. 'You must, it's on you.'

Tiger tried hard to think if he knew any other females other than Little Girl? There was her mother, but the tiger, a few inches from his throat, would hardly know her. Who could it be? Who was this female he knew?

'It could be my mother, Nidia...?'

Areky looked intently at Tiger. His voice softened a little. 'Nidia....Nidia.... You are the son of Nidia?'

'Yes, I am Devida, son of Nidia.'

'Where is she?'

'Nid....my mother is dead.'

'Why is she dead?'

'The men at the circus killed her and fed her to the animals.'

'Stay there, don't move,' said Areky and he moved a few feet away.

'Killed by humans?'

'Yes.'

Areky rose up and let out a groan of pain and anguish. 'Nidia,' he roared to the heavens, 'Nidia....'

Tiger carefully got off the floor and sat still. When he thought Areky would talk to him, he said, 'You knew my mother?'

'I did. She was a lovely tigress. Warm, comforting, a good mother to her cubs.'

'I have other brothers and sisters?'

'Yes.'

'Where are they? Can I meet them?'

'I doubt it; they are spread far and wide. But, before we go any further, tell me about you. If you were in a circus, how are you here?'

'It's a long story.'

'I have a long life ahead of me,' and he settled down and waited.

'Ok. Well, as I mentioned, I was born in a circus, in Africa.....'

It was several hours before Tiger finished his tale, what with the questions from Areky who wanted lots more detail as he had never experienced what Tiger had. At the end Areky sat there, open-mouthed.

'Are you ok?' asked Tiger.

Areky looked at him intently. 'Not really. Just tell me if I've got this right, because I may have got confused somewhere? You grow up in a circus, a little girl rescues you and takes you to a jungle, you go back to the circus, you escape again, you go back, the little girl gets you on board a ship from Africa to West Bengal, the little girl is captured, you overpower her captors, who then bring you to a beach not far away, where she puts you ashore, and you find your way here....?'

'Yes.'

'Surely not...?'

‘Yes.’

‘No.’

‘Yes, why not?’

‘It’s fantastical.’

‘It may be, but it’s true.’

‘Ok, but if that’s the case, how were you going to survive?’

‘Survive?’

‘Yes.’

‘What do you mean, survive?’

‘Well, an example would be the fact that I could have killed you. You have to understand there are rules that we know and adhere to. If a tiger comes on my territory, I am expected to fight until he goes, or if he wins, I go. But we both understand the rules, and the rules generally are, we don’t kill each other. We both accept we have a right to life although, at that point, it may not seem so. But if one does not know the rules and does not act accordingly, then the other may assume their life is threatened and will therefore kill. You were very lucky I smelt Nidia on you, otherwise you could now be dead. And you’ve hardly just arrived....’

‘Mmm, that’s a point.’

‘And, if I’ve got this right, the only thing you are good at is jumping through hoops....’

‘Well, I wouldn’t....err....I.....yes.’

‘Through hoops...?’ repeated Areky disparagingly.

‘Yes.’

‘That’s not exactly a manual for survival in the jungle, is it? What are you going to do, find a deer and ask it to stop a moment so you can put a hoop in front of its face?’

‘No,’ said Tiger quietly.

‘How do you eat?’

‘I find things.’

‘You find *things*?’

‘Yes, you know, dead things. Things that have died and I find them.’

‘So hunting? No hunting?’

‘Well, sort of.’

‘Waiting for things to die isn’t hunting.’

‘Not really hunting then, no.’

‘So stalking? No stalking?’

‘Well...’

‘So, no hunting, no stalking. Perhaps if I could sum it up; unless you trip over something that has been kind enough to have a heart attack, you will starve to death.’

‘I wouldn’t put it like that.’

‘So you know nothing about the jungle?’

‘Not really.’

Areky groaned in despair.

‘You could teach me.’

‘What?’

‘Teach me.’

‘Me?’

‘You.’

‘Teach you?’

‘Yes.’

‘You do realise I am supposed to either scare the life out of you, so you leave my territory, or kill you as a message to other tigers who dare consider coming here?’

‘Be that as it may, you should help me.’

‘Why should I help you?’

‘You may be my dad.’

‘I may or may not be your father, but that is irrelevant.’

‘Not to me...Dad.’

‘I am not your dad.’

‘You may be.....’

Areky groaned again in despair.

‘And if you know my mother you must be my dad.’

‘Look, let me explain. Tigers, male tigers, me and....well, not you, are solitary animals. We have our own territory which we fiercely defend. Females also have their own territory, but they share it with their sisters and other females. Now, a female’s territory may infringe on to the territory of one, or several, males, which means any of those males could be your father.’

‘But you knew my mother, her loss affected you. You must have known her well.’

‘I did, but that doesn’t make me your father.’

‘Ok, but let’s assume you are.’

‘I....’

‘Once my mother is pregnant, then what? Then what happens?’

‘Well, the cub is brought up by the mother and the other tigresses until he is big enough to go out on his own.’

‘But he doesn’t have a territory?’

‘No, he doesn’t. But if he is lucky other males will let him move through the outskirts of theirs as long as he is not seen as dangerous or trying to usurp them...’

Tiger’s face took on a puzzled look.

‘Usurp. Take the territory by force.’

‘So when,’ said Tiger, ‘he is big enough, powerful enough, he takes another tiger’s territory...?’

‘Yes, everything has a cycle.’

‘So....if I stayed around here....’

‘In your dreams....’

‘Anyhow,’ continued Tiger, ‘it won’t take too long to teach me the rest.’

‘The rest of what?’

‘Well, you taught me about tigers and territories, so...’

Areky groaned again.

‘Is that a yes?’

Areky shook his head. How did he get into this? ‘Ok, but this is how it has to be. I will teach you everything you should have learned from your mother. Hunting and jungle craft. After that, you have to go out on your own.’

‘Ok, Dad.’

‘I am not your...’ He groaned again and gave up....

It was silent for a few minutes, and then Areky said, ‘Devida, tell me something; something I don’t understand... If it was so bad at the circus, once you had escaped, why did you go back? You were free, why did you go back?’

‘It’s difficult to explain, and I have struggled to understand it myself.’ He paused to try and marshal his thoughts. ‘In a way freedom was terrifying. All the animals I met hated me and wanted to hurt me, and I didn’t know why? I was alone, I was scared, I didn’t know what to do or who to trust. And I was so hungry. I forgot the pain at the circus and suddenly it appeared to be a better place than the one I had escaped to. So I went back. Better the devil you know.’

Areky didn’t quite understand, although he would think about it; but not now. It had been a long day, to say the least...

‘Let’s get some sleep,’ he said.

Tiger was happy with that. He was exhausted, and the mention of sleep made him realise how exhausted he was. He lay down and in minutes his eyes shut, and he slipped into a deep sleep. Areky watched him and inwardly worried for Tiger. What had he taken on? Moving to Tiger’s face, his mouth wide open, he roared as loud as he could. Tiger woke instantly and was terrified to see the enormous jaws and the bared fangs inches from his face.

‘First lesson. Sleep where it’s safe and,’ he said disparagingly, ‘usually in the day. Now follow me. I will show you where to sleep, and I will go hunting for food.’

‘Shall I come hunting with you?’

‘Only if we want to starve....’

Over the next few weeks Tiger watched and learned from Areky and, considering he knew nothing about jungles, stalking or hunting, he was a quick learner.

‘Always remember,’ whispered Areky as they padded softly through the long grass, ‘with stalking, keep very low. Only high enough so that you can see your prey. Very quiet, so they can’t hear you. Downwind so they can’t smell you.’

Tiger adjusted immediately.

‘You are learning quickly, Devida.’

One day Tiger and Areky were dozing in a secluded, shaded hollow. A fly settled on Areky’s nose and he twitched.

‘Areky?’

‘Yes?’ replied Areky sleepily.

‘Can I ask you something?’

‘Of course.’

‘It’s something that’s bothered me for a while now.’

Areky rose slightly and started to pay attention as Tiger's voice was...concerned. 'Go on.'

'You know when we hunt, separately or together.'

'Yes.'

'We kill the animals and then we eat them.....'

'Yes.'

'But sometimes, if I do not have a clean kill, the animal struggles and is in pain before it dies.'

Areky waited.

'So,' Tiger continued, 'how am I different from the men at the circus who hurt me?'

Areky thought for a moment as he went through the thought processes to allow him to explain and inform.

'I am proud of you, Devida. I am proud that you can question your actions, your motives and, indeed, their effect on those that we hunt. You see, Devida, we have to live, and to live we have to eat. That is common sense. Because we are big, we have the ability to hunt animals large and small, which we need to do because anything less and we would starve. And this is the way of all animals, all birds, all insects, which have to eat something else to survive. We are all, one way or another, both predator and prey. And we all accept that; that is the way in our world. Both predator and prey. We have to live, that's how we survive. And sometimes, when we are attacked, before we escape or die, there can be pain. It is unavoidable.'

As Tiger thought about that, Areky stood up and stretched. He was about to say something when a shot rang out and he fell to the floor.

'Areky,' screamed Tiger, going to him and nuzzling him. 'Areky!'

Hearing voices, Tiger raised his head slowly and saw men, humans, two white and five black, in the long grass a distance away. The white men had guns.

One of the white men shouted, 'Got him, wow, I got him.' He high-fived with another man, and they climbed in a Land Rover and headed towards Tiger.

'Areky, Areky, we have to go!'

Tiger tried to push Areky as he heard the vehicle getting closer, but Areky didn't move. Tiger saw the blood seeping over Areky's fur, so he put his nose by Areky's mouth, but there was no breath coming from it. Tiger's face crumpled with unbelievable misery, and he didn't know what to do. He was aware that you couldn't fight humans as they inflicted incredible pain, but he didn't want to leave this wonderful tiger who had befriended him, adopted him, taught him and, as far as Tiger was concerned, was his father.

As the truck was nearly upon him, a man shouted, 'I got me a tiger, I got me a tiger..' Tiger looked down at Areky and nuzzled him. 'Goodbye. Thank you for everythingDad.'

Keeping small, Tiger bounded away but was spotted, and bullets whistled past him. Hugging the ground as low as he could he made an immediate ninety-degree turn and for a little while the fatal bullets hurtled to where they thought he was running to...

CHAPTER 13

Territory

From a safe distance, Tiger lay hidden in the branches of a tall tree and watched the hunters as they carried Areky away, dangling from a pole between two bearers, like yesterday's washing. They put Areky in the back of a truck and then sat down and drank beer to celebrate their kill. Tiger watched, tears streaming from his eyes until they packed up and drove away...

He bowed his head in salute to the tiger who had meant everything to him and nothing to the humans except a day's fun and a lifetime bragging....

Several days later, when the anger that had wracked him had diminished, Tiger worked out what to do next. He wasn't quite ready for this, but Areky had taught him well, and Areky had impressed on him that fortune favoured the brave, so.....

At a large rock he smelled Areky's scent, longed again to have him back and then roared to the world that he was taking over Areky's territory. He smeared his scent over the rock and urinated profusely. Now there was no turning back, and he went to other strategic points that defined the territory and repeated the process.

Several weeks later and everything had gone well. There had been no problems, and he had fed well. No other tiger had arrived to try to take his new domain, and it now abounded with his scent. Sitting on a high overhang, surveying his domain, he saw several tigresses walking below him. He went down to meet them.

‘You are in my territory.’

‘Yes, we know. We used to visit Areky, but we heard he had died,’ said Misha, the dominant female.

‘He was shot.’

‘And you are?’

‘Devida....his son.’

‘Do you have any sons, Devida?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘Really? No sons? How fortuitous. Come with me, please, Devida.’

Devida stood still.

‘My apologies, Devida, I meant no disrespect. Would you allow me to show you something, please?’

‘Of course,’ replied Tiger, with as much superiority as he could muster.

Tiger followed Misha to a tigress. ‘This is Maniah,’ she said, after the formal introduction of the new holder of the territory.

Maniah looked Tiger up and down. ‘He’s nice.’ Her demeanour changed and she moved slowly to him and brushed against him. Her head moved coyly from side to side and her tail swished.

‘Well... I think my job is done,’ said Misha as she moved away towards the other females.

Maniah walked away from Tiger a little and looked back at him. She sashayed a little and went a little farther. Tiger watched her go. She winked at him. He winked back. Over his shoulder, Misha shouted, 'You have to go with her.'

'Why?'

'It helps,' she replied and then instantly regretted her flippancy. This was not Areky. 'I think, Devida, Areky would also want you to follow her.'

He thought for a moment and then followed Maniah as she walked away.

A short time later Maniah re-joined the other tigresses and crinkled her nose to show her pleasure. A few moments later Tiger walked jauntily towards them ...

CHAPTER 14

My Territory

Tiger heard a loud roar and was instantly alert. He sniffed the air. Ah well, it was going to happen, and now it had. Looking behind him, to the jungle fifty yards away, he watched as a male tiger emerged and stood, looking.

‘You are in my territory,’ roared Tiger.

‘I don’t think it’s yours,’ Tomsu replied. ‘You didn’t fight for it.’

‘It’s mine, I claimed it, move on.’

Tomsu moved forward, and so did Tiger. Two ferocious cats circling each other on a bare piece of land at the top of a cliff face.

Tomsu attacked, throwing himself at Tiger, but Tiger moved slightly and deflected most of Tomsu’s weight and claws. The battle raged, with the advantage going back and forth until Tiger appeared to twist his paw slightly and it slowed him up. Sensing weakness Tomsu advanced until Tiger was nearing the cliff edge and Tomsu saw his chance. He leapt at Tiger with fangs ready and teeth bared, but Tiger dropped quickly onto his side, took his weight on his back, extended his legs and levered Tomsu over him. Tomsu’s speed and weight propelled him to the cliff edge where, for a moment, it looked as though his claws, dragging on the ground, would stop him; but he went over the edge. Going

down the face, he bounced off crags, scraped over rocks and landed, gashed and bleeding below.

And there he lay, motionless.....

Tiger went to the cliff edge and looked down at Tomsu. In his head, he heard Areky... *'We are all, one way or another, both predator and prey, and we all accept that. That is the way in our world. We have to live, we have to survive.'*

Tomsu slowly stirred but winced as he felt the pain from his broken and bleeding body. He looked slowly around him to find Tiger, sitting a few paces away, looking at him. Tomsu growled, but Tiger said, 'If I had wanted to kill you, I could have done that yesterday.'

'Yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'I have been lying here since yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'And you have been sitting there that time?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'To protect you until you are strong enough to leave.'

'I don't understand.'

'You don't have to, you just have to leave.'

Tomsu sat up and then, after a few moments, raised himself unsteadily to his feet. He shook the dust off his fur.

'You are strong enough now, now you leave,' demanded Tiger, and moved to one side to give Tomsu a clear path. Tomsu took a long look at Tiger and then, beaten, he slowly walked away.....

CHAPTER 15

Humans

Lying on a high bough, Tiger watched as the tigresses, with their cubs, walked across the plains in front of him. It had been a little while since he had seen them, so he climbed down and headed for them. Fifty yards from them he heard a small pop, pop sound and a few seconds later two of the tigresses started to weave, sleepily, and then dropped to the earth. Misha saw Tiger approach and shouted to him. ‘Devida, what is happening?’

Tiger heard the approaching trucks and saw cages on the open backs. CAGES! Tiger’s heart flew into overdrive, fear immediately consumed him, and he started to tremble.

‘Run,’ screamed Misha to the other tigresses, ‘run.’

Tiger ducked down in a hollow and tried to still his panic. Calm down, he told himself, calm down; you are not in a circus now. In fact, realised Tiger, they were in his domain, and if he could defeat Tomsu, then he had a chance against these thin humans.

As the men started dragging the two tigresses to the waiting cages, Tiger ran at them, roaring as loud as he could, teeth bared, and waded into the middle of the group, knocking them over, terrifying them. One recovered his gun and was taking aim at Tiger when Misha landed on his back and dragged him to the dirt. One open paw gouged his back, and his screams panicked the

others even more, and they started running frantically to the trucks.

‘Misha, you and the others chase them. Keep them moving, herd them far away. We need time...’

Tiger went to one of the drugged females, held the ruff of her neck in his massive jaws and started dragging her to the safety of the jungle. Panting hard, he left her where she couldn’t be seen, and then went back again....

Later that evening Tiger and the tigresses were sitting in a semi-circle. The drugged females were now alert again. Tiger looked at Maniah, with her young cub and smiled at her. She licked the cub and smiled back.

‘My sisters were lucky today,’ said a relieved Misha.

‘Yes, they were,’ replied Tiger, knowing exactly what dreadful fate they had avoided. ‘They would have been taken away by the humans.’

‘It is not right, Devida. My sisters should not be the playthings of humans.’

‘No, they shouldn’t. But humans rule,’ he said in a quiet voice.

‘But that’s not right. We rule the jungle, but we don’t keep other animals in cages....to look at.’

Tiger’s mind wandered back to the circus.....

The men with torches move to Tiger and back him into a corner. He raises up, lashes with his claws and growls. They move in closer. There is no escape, and the man with the electric prod rushes in and electrocutes him. Tiger goes down and shakes as the current sweeps through him.

Half-conscious he lies there, and they taunt him with the blazing torches. He tries to defend himself, but they electrocute him

again. When he moves they put the fire straight in front of his face. He recoils, but they electrocute him again. The next time he rouses, and he is confronted with the fire, he doesn't move; he is beaten. One of the men fetches a hoop and they set it alight, then put it at floor level in front of Tiger and then lash his backside until he goes through the blazing hoop....

'Misha, they have all the power, there is nothing we can do...'
Tiger felt all his spirit, his energy, his being, ebb from him and he looked down. Shaking his head slowly he got up and walked slowly away.

CHAPTER 16

Awakening

A few days later Tiger was walking along a path with high banks either side. Seven baboons were up ahead, and they saw him coming. They raised the alarm and started making aggressive sounds and gestures, but Tiger kept walking towards them. Their gestures and screams became more defiant but Tiger just snarled his superiority, and as he got closer they ran up the high banks and disappeared.

A little farther, he rounded a bend to find the path had gone, filled in by one of the banks that had collapsed. It was too high for him to scale, the banks either side being even higher, so he turned around to find another path. After walking a few paces, he stopped and looked back. He stood there for several minutes, then returned to the obstacle blocking his path.

As he walked towards it, he roared a command. 'Move out of my way!'

When he got to it, he roared even louder. 'I am Devida, ruler of this part of the jungle, the most feared animal here; I command you, get out of my way!'

The obstacle didn't move, and he looked intently at all the small pieces of earth and dirt and stones that had combined to block his path.

He sat looking at it for nearly half an hour, and then he slowly walked away.....

Later that night Tiger walked into the small clearing where the tigresses were gathered. 'Misha,' said Tiger.

'Yes, Devida?'

'I was wrong.'

'About what?'

'Humans. They don't have all the power; there is something we can do.'

'Devida, there is nothing we can do. They are too powerful.'

'Yes, that's what they think; and we believe.....'

CHAPTER 17

Marus

Several days later Tiger went to the edge of his territory and roared. He stood and waited, then roared again, but heard nothing. He walked away but later that day he repeated the process, and he heard a faint roar from the other territory. He roared again and heard another, louder, reply. He sat and patiently waited...

Later, across the clearing, Tiger watched the tiger emerge. They looked at each other, roared their identity again, and moved warily towards each other, but stopped within a safe distance. Tiger bowed slightly, and Marus did the same.

‘What do you want, Devida? What is so important that we have to meet?’

‘I want your help, Marus.’

‘You know you won’t get it.’

‘Why not listen to what I have to say, Marus, and then judge?’

Marus paused. ‘Go on...’ he said unenthusiastically.

After he had laid out his plan, Tiger asked, ‘Will you do it?’

‘When you explained initially I thought you were mad,’ replied Marus. ‘I have seen what the humans do in my territory, and I have heard of their circuses and zoos. They take what they want,

they reign supreme. But fight them; no. Better to run, to hide. But now, Devida, you suggest this. The opposite of everything we think, we feel, we know to be right. It could be very dangerous.'

'Yes, it could.'

'Some could get hurt or killed.'

'I'm afraid that's more than likely.'

'And that's only if you succeed.'

'Yes. If we don't, it could be a bloodbath.'

They both sat and said nothing. Marus didn't know what to say, and Tiger had nothing else to say. They had kept their respective safe distances but after what, to Tiger, seemed a long, long time, Marus walked two steps closer and sat down again.

'I will help you.'

'Thank you, Marus, thank you.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'I want you to ask every Tiger to come here for a meeting. Each tiger must forget enmities and be given safe passage through each other's territories.'

'That's a lot to ask, Devida.'

'I know. But if we can't trust each other, there is no point in going any farther.'

'If this works, Devida, you will be remembered forever.'

'If it doesn't, you can put that on my grave.'

They both fell silent as Tiger's words resonated through them.

'I go now, Devida. Until, we hope, the Meeting...'

He bowed his head slightly and backed away.

Tiger, in gratitude, bowed lower....

CHAPTER 18

A way of thinking

Tiger joined the tigresses and cubs as they lazed in the heat of the day, and gently cuffed Maniah's cub. He noticed Misha staring at him.

'What?'

'I was just thinking.'

'And what were you thinking?'

'That you are different.'

'In what way?'

'You are a tiger, but you don't think like a tiger.' She paused, marshalling her thoughts, and Tiger waited for her to continue. 'Tigers think about now. About today, maybe tomorrow, but mainly today. I have to eat today. I have to drink today. There is no need to think about more than that. What happens today will dictate tomorrow. But you...you don't think like that. You look into the future. You say if we do this, and this, then this will happen; and then we will do this and then...and then. Tigers don't think like that.'

'I don't know what tigers think like. I am me.'

'Why do you think as you do, Devida?'

Tiger struggled to answer. It took a little while and then he said, 'When I was in the circus I hated it. It felt so wrong, but it only *felt* that way as I had no idea there was anything different.'

That was my life; that was what I knew. But inside me,' he stopped for a moment, 'inside I hurt so bad. So to help reduce the hurt, I became good at working out what I should do to make the men happy, keep in their good books, get hit less, minimise the pain.....survive. So I was always thinking ahead, always tried to have a plan or strategy to get me through....'

Misha looked at him, with affection in her eyes. She got up and went to him and nuzzled him affectionately.

'I am so glad you got through.'

CHAPTER 19

The Meeting

For a day, for many miles around, the jungle had echoed with the occasional roar of a tiger as he went into new territory and announced his arrival. The introduction was quite simple; it said, 'I am coming to the Meeting, I come in peace; but if another tiger takes advantage of that, I will fight to the death.'

Tiger sat on a large branch of a toppled, dead tree in the middle of a clearing and waited. One by one the tigers arrived. Wary, on guard, prepared... Each sat on the edge of the clearing, and each kept their distance from the other until twenty tigers sat there in a semi-circle.

Tiger walked from branch to branch to address them.

'Thank you all for coming to the Meeting.' He looked enquiringly at Marus. 'Is everyone here?'

'All except Zazu.'

'That's a shame. He is the elder statesman in the jungle.' Tiger thought for a moment and then carried on. 'I know you have travelled far, so...'

On cue, Misha and her sisters brought out fresh meat and put it, deferentially, before each tiger. They retreated backwards,

heads down. They returned with upturned leaves full of water. Their mission accomplished they left the gathering.

‘Please,’ beckoned Tiger, ‘eat, drink....’

For the next hour, Tiger laid out, in as much detail as he could, his plan. The tigers listened patiently, but it was obvious some were not impressed.

‘So you see,’ wound up Tiger, ‘if everyone is involved, we have a chance.’

‘We came all this way to listen to this? Marus, I thought you had more brains than listening to this nonsense,’ one Tiger spat out.

‘Humans are all-powerful, they cannot be beaten,’ another added.

‘And what do we care? We are not in a circus or a cage. We are free, in a jungle, and that’s fine by me,’ roared another sarcastically.

‘But can’t you see,’ replied Tiger, ‘that only the free can help those that are caged? That only the free can help those forced to do tricks? That only the free can set others free?’

‘I really don’t care.’

‘And another thing, who made you the leader? What makes you think you are so smart you can change the world? Who do you think you are dragging us here and spouting this rubbish?’

A tiger stood up. ‘I’ve had enough of this rubbish. I’m leaving; anyone joining me?’ He retreated a few paces, and four other tigers followed his lead. ‘And if anyone asks me what happened today,’ he continued, ‘I will tell them that you were ill, to save my own embarrassment.’

‘But...’ protested Tiger.

‘Enough of your rubbish,’ and they left the clearing, with Tiger now at a loss at what to do next? Would that kill this? Was that the beginning of the end, or the end itself?

He addressed the remaining tigers. ‘I don’t know what to say. I thought every animal would want their brothers and sisters to be free,’ he said sadly, and his voice trailed off.

‘And so they should,’ said a voice that made the others freeze.

Tiger looked at where the tigers had left the clearing to see them walking back. Behind them was the mighty Zazu. Zazu was, by tiger standards, huge. He had been, for many years, literally the king of the jungle. Although he had his own territory, all tigers knew that if he wanted theirs, he could take it. In his younger days, he was fearless, and his name was spoken in hushed, revered tones. But as he got older he used his reputation for solving disputes as no one dare question his decisions.

The departed tigers went back to their vacant seating positions, but the slower, more reluctant ones were roared at by Zazu.

Zazu walked up and down the line of tigers, eyeing them up and down. One opened his mouth to say something but Zazu glared at him with fierce eyes and he closed it immediately. Having exerted his authority, he walked to the middle of the clearing where Tiger automatically started to move to defer to him.

‘No, Devida, stay.’

He turned to address the gathered Tigers. ‘I have listened to everything Devida has said. *Some* of you have. Devida has a brain; *some* of you have. Devida has been forced to do tricks in a circus, *none* of you have. Devida has a plan, *none* of you have and, if it succeeds, it will change the world for animals.’

He eyed them up and down again to make sure they understood and then went to the middle of their group and waited for them to shuffle up to make room for him. When they had, he sat and looked at Tiger.

‘You were saying, Devida?’

Tiger was a bit lost and confused. In his world, perhaps in all worlds, hierarchy was everything. He looked at Zazu. ‘I err.....perhaps you.....?’

Zazu bowed slightly to Tiger, deferring to him, encouraging him. After a moment’s hesitation, Tiger said, ‘I have told you what I want to achieve, I will now tell you how we can achieve it.....’

Neither Zazu nor Tiger saw the look of contempt that flashed between the dissenting tigers...

It was dusk before Tiger had finished and the tigers had finished asking questions. ‘That’s about it,’ said an exhausted Tiger.

‘Well done, Devida, well done,’ enthused Marus.

‘Yes,’ echoed Zazu.

‘What happens now?’ asked one of the group.

‘You all go back to your territories and spread the word. Give all the animals safe passage and tell them what I have said. You also need to inform tigers in other territories that were too far away to come here today.’ He hesitated. ‘Zazu, would you mind taking control of that part and organising it, please?’

The tigers looked aghast and waited for Zazu’s put down for such a breach of hierarchical etiquette.

‘Of course, Devida.’

The tigers were amazed and looked at Tiger with new respect.

‘Any questions before you go?’

‘You do understand,’ said Zazu softly, ‘that we are animals.’

‘Yes, Zazu.’

‘We are going to need help.’

‘I know....’

Zazu looked at him questioningly but said nothing more.

‘Anything else?’

There were no more questions.

‘Then thank you all. From me, and one day, with luck, from all the animals in the world.’ With several offering a slight bow, the tigers left, into the jungle and back to their respective territories to spread the word. Only Marus remained.

‘I’m glad that’s over,’ said a relieved Tiger.

Marus was just about to say something when he looked over Tiger’s shoulder and backed away slightly. Tiger looked around and saw Zazu standing there. It occurred to him then that this tiger may be older, but he was still huge and to be feared. Tiger also backed away a little.

‘Marus, would you give us a moment, please,’ asked Zazu.

Marus moved to the edge of the clearing and sat down.

‘Devida, I want to tell you what you are thinking....’

‘You do?’

‘You think you cannot do this. That although you stood up there looking confident, giving us the way to win, a part of you knows you cannot beat the humans. That although your plan is a good one, you, more than most, know what happens to animals that stand up to man. That perhaps it may be better if someone else led; me perhaps? You think you lack the strength to carry this through? Am I correct?’

‘Yes...I’m sorry, Zazu.’

‘Then let me tell you, you are wrong. If you can survive what you went through in the circus, then you have more strength

than you understand. You should be, have to be, our leader.'

Zazu slowly, respectfully, bowed and then turned and left.

Marus had heard their conversation, had seen Zazu's show of respect and looked at Tiger with a new appreciation.

'I am also going now, Devida,' he said.

'Thank you, Marus. Without you, this could not have started.'

'Without you, Devida, it cannot end,' and he bowed slightly and left.

CHAPTER 20

Help

Several weeks later, on the edge of the highest cliff top in his domain, Tiger sat and watched the plains below. It was a kaleidoscope of animals, all doing what they were supposed to do in the general order of things. He looked for something in particular, knowing he would not see it.

No, none of the animals were jumping through hoops.....

Much had happened. The news had gone out to all the tigers, then the other large animals, then the birds, then to everything. Any living thing that was not human had been told. And the message had gone round the world, taken by birds and fish....until they were all ready for the day when Tiger would start the revolution.

It was time for the final part of his plan.

He raised himself and looked over the plains to where the plains met the sky. Raising his head to the heavens, he sniffed the air and then emptied his lungs.

He waited.

He did it again.

And waited.

He did it again.

And waited.

He did it again.

Then walked slowly back to the waiting jungle.

CHAPTER 21

Sheena

In the large park, mothers were pushing prams, little children were playing in the splash pool and schoolchildren were sitting on the grass having their lunch. One small group of a dozen girls were eating their sandwiches and chatting about the topic of the day, indeed most days at the moment.

‘Only two weeks, only two weeks,’ said the girl excitedly, ‘two weeks. The end of term dance in two weeks...’

‘I’m not going,’ said another abruptly.

‘Just because Pete is taking someone else, you’re all grumpy.’

‘Not.’

‘Are.’

‘Why,’ asked another, ‘is it so important to go with a boy? Who cares? There are other things in life other than boys, you know.’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘You agree, Sheena, don’t you?’

‘Well, I think it’s all about.....’ and she tailed off.

‘About what? What’s it all about?’

‘I.....I.....excuse me...’

Sheena got off the grass and moved away, finding a quieter place where she stood still. She closed her eyes, concentrated, and then sniffed the air. She did it again, and again.

‘Tiger,’ she whispered to herself. ‘Tiger.....’

‘Come and finish your lunch, Sheena,’ a girl shouted.

Sheena went back to them but picked up her school satchel.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Tiger needs me.’

‘What?’

At tea time that evening father said, ‘How do you *know* Tiger needs you?’

‘I can smell him.’

‘Sheena, my love, you can’t. Tiger is thousands of miles away; it’s not possible to smell him.’

‘I can smell him,’ she replied with utter certainty.

‘Sheena,’ said mother. ‘Assuming you can smell him, what does it mean?’

‘I have to go and help him.’

‘How do you know he needs help, Sheena? Why would Tiger, a huge male tiger, in a jungle in India, need the help of a little girl?’

‘If I can smell him, he needs my help. I don’t know what he wants, but he may have been captured again. He may be being beaten while we are sitting here talking. I have to go to Tiger,’ she insisted.

Her father rested his hand on hers. ‘Sheena, that’s not possible.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you are at school and your mother and I go to work. How can we go rushing off to who knows where, for who knows what?’

‘I have to go.’

‘I’m sorry, Sheena, you can’t.’

She looked desperately at her mother. ‘Mum....?’

‘It can’t be done, Sheena.’

‘You come with me.’

‘To where, Sheena? Where would we go to?’

‘To West Bengal.’

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said father, needing time for a strategy to get through this, ‘let’s sleep on it, you go to school tomorrow and then it will give me and your mum time to work out what to do. How’s that?’

‘Thank you, Dad.’

Her mother hugged her.

The next day at breakfast, as Sheena went out of the door to school, her mother shouted, ‘Have you got your lunch?’

‘Yes, Mum.’

‘Ok, see you later.’

‘Goodbye, Mum.’

Later that morning, in a panic, Dorothy rang Gerry at work.

‘Gerry, it occurred to me that when Sheena left for school this morning, she said “goodbye”. She never says goodbye. I’ve phoned her school and they say she hasn’t been today.’

‘Well, we know what that means; she ended up in India the last time this happened. Wait there, and I’ll come straight home.....’

CHAPTER 22

Bon Voyage

Sheena had been in the lifeboat for nine days, living on the modest amount of food she had raided from their house and put in the garden shed the night before. She peered again at West Bengal, and the coastline she remembered, became ever closer. It was now a matter of judging at what point she jumped into the sea. The bay came into view, so she decided now was as good a time as any. Climbing out of the lifeboat she went to the side of the ship, took a long sniff and dived in.....

From the ship, the beach didn't look too far, but quite soon Sheena was struggling. Her strength was ebbing, and her gasps for more air were making her take in seawater. Although she was now quite close to the shore, her strokes were taking her nowhere, and she was close to losing consciousness. She fought with what strength she had left, kicked her legs and flailed her arms, but it was no good, and she sank slowly below the waves.

Tiger hurtled from the edge of the jungle, down the beach and threw himself into the sea. As he swam he kept sniffing and then, about fifty yards out, he dived. Going down he peered into the clear water and saw her suspended twenty yards below him. He went deeper, gripped her clothes in his teeth and swam upwards.

On the surface, he positioned his body under her so she could breathe the air, but he knew she was not breathing. He roared at her to breathe. He roared again, but she was still lifeless. She slipped off his back and slowly went back beneath the waves.

Tiger dived again, and for a few moments, the surface was calm and serene. Suddenly Tiger surfaced, with Little Girl on him, and then, with a massive uplift of his strong neck, he launched her thirty feet into the air.

Little Girl landed on her back with an enormous crash, forcing her lungs to work and ejecting geysers of seawater. She started to cough and splutter and Tiger swam quickly to her, put her on his back and headed to shore.

CHAPTER 23

Together again

Tiger sat, sphinx-like, on the warm sand of the beach, with Little Girl between his massive front paws, leaning her head against him. Her right hand lovingly stroked his neck.

‘I’m just about dry now, Tiger.’

Tiger stood up and bent down to allow Little Girl to get on his back. He looked round at her, she patted his head, and he set off into the jungle.

Tiger walked into the clearing where the tigresses were snoozing, and they became alert on his arrival.

‘This is Little Girl,’ he said.

He lowered his neck, and she slid off. The tigresses walked to her, surrounded her and smelled her.

‘Hello,’ she said.

Misha came forward. ‘I am Misha.’

‘It’s nice to meet you, Misha. Tiger has told me about you?’

‘Tiger?’ asked Misha quizzically.

‘Tiger,’ said Little Girl, looking at Tiger.

‘Ah, we call him Devida.’

‘Little Girl,’ said Tiger, ‘do your parents know where you are?’

‘No.’

‘Then we must tell them, they will be worried.’

‘I could write something, somehow, but how will it get there?’

‘I will make sure it does.’

Maniah and her cub moved close to Little Girl, sniffing her gently.

‘This is Maniah,’ said Tiger, ‘and this,’ he cuffed the cub playfully, ‘is my cub.’

They all sat around, and Little Girl told them how she had met Tiger, and about her life as a human....

The next day Little Girl found some large dry leaves she could write on and a piece of charcoal to write with and composed a short letter to her parents. When she had finished, Tiger took it from her and went high on the cliff.

‘Thank you,’ said Tiger to the eagle.

‘I will ask the albatross to cross the mighty ocean and deliver the message.’

‘I am grateful.’

The eagle flew into the distance and Tiger watched it go. He remembered Little Girl’s parents. They had been kind to him, and he didn’t want them to worry...

Tiger was tired. He sat and looked over the plains. A lot was happening and the day was getting close now. He felt a lot of weight on his shoulders, and he wondered, at times, whether he was doing the right thing?

He smelled them immediately, as they emerged from the jungle behind him. He turned round, instantly alert.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded of the five tigers standing in front of him. The same five that had walked away at the first Meeting, but Zazu had made them return.

‘Change of plan, Devida.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘We don’t like what you are doing.’

‘Why?’

‘It changes things; we don’t like change.’

‘You prefer our brothers and sisters to be caged and beaten?’

‘Of course.’

‘Of course?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why? Why would you want that?’

‘Because then we are invisible.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘What do we care about others as long as we are left alone. We are doing fine, thank you. And there is something you, the oh so clever Devida has overlooked.....it won’t last. Whatever you succeed in doing won’t last. You will free a few animals, and who cares, shut a few zoos, and who cares, and life will go on. But, in time, it will start again. And when it does, when it does, it will be hell for animals. And it will be a hell you created!’

‘It may not.’

‘It will. You may not be around then to see the humans take revenge on the animals that you helped set free. And to make sure they know their new place, they will be slaughtered in their thousands, in their tens of thousands, as an example.’

‘You are too late,’ said Tiger, ‘it’s about to start. Everything is in place.’

‘No, it’s not too late. For it to start, it needs you.’

The tigers circled and one leapt on him, and the others followed. Tiger fought ferociously but one against five was doomed and he soon tired as they slashed and bit him. Pinned to the floor Tiger waited as the largest tiger stood over him, his mouth open, about to kill him.

‘Die, Devida, and let your hopes and dreams die with you.’

‘Stop!’

The tigers looked up at the voice to see that they were surrounded by animals of all sorts. ‘We would rather you didn’t do that,’ continued the antelope.

The tigers looked at each other and laughed. An antelope? And other animals? It would take more than a few animals to stop five kings of the jungle.

‘And how are you going to stop us?’ he said sarcastically.

The ring of animals opened slightly, and a rhinoceros charged, its horn entering the belly of one tiger and throwing him high into the air. Then he wheeled and lifted another. The tigers retreated towards the cliff face as another rhinoceros entered the fray, and the animals barred their escape into the jungle.

‘You won’t stop us,’ said one of the tigers defiantly.

‘You don’t understand.’

‘Understand what?’

‘You have already lost.’

The animals moved in, leaving Tiger on the outside, and quite quickly it was all over. The tigers may have been big, but even they could not beat a multi-pronged attack that included several cobras.

Tiger was distraught. ‘Already there are deaths.’

‘Don’t blame yourself, Devida,’ said the antelope, ‘this was not your fault. In a revolution, there are always dissenters. Ones that consider themselves more than they consider others.’

‘Yes, we have to be together.’

‘You have to go now, Devida.’

‘Why?’

‘You have to go.’

It was a statement of fact, and although he didn’t quite understand why he had to go, he left. Out of respect for Devida, they waited until he was out of sight and then the hyenas, jackals, vultures and other flesh eaters, moved in to strip the tigers until they were just white bones.

CHAPTER 24

The Message

In their modest home, Gerry and Dorothy worried for their little girl, but they knew where she had gone, and they knew they could not follow her, as West Bengal was a big place. She had gone before and came home safely and so....and so.... But Dorothy still cried. She was a loving mother and Sheena was a loved little girl.

They knew they had to wait, but for what? For news that she had been killed? For news that she had been injured and was now critical? Not knowing anything was killing Dorothy.

She went out into the back garden to put some washing on the line, and Gerry started to wash up their teacups. He hummed a tune as he stood there, and then he heard a scream from Dorothy. Running outside he saw her transfixed as a huge, magnificent eagle perched on the fence a few feet from her, watching her. In its talons it held something. Gerry pushed himself in front of Dorothy, protecting her, but she said, 'It's not attacking. It has something for us.'

Both of them thought, but did not say, 'It's a message from Sheena.' But both of them also thought, 'What nonsense, an eagle delivering a message from Sheena.'

Father, holding out his hand, edged slowly forward, so as not to annoy or frighten the eagle. When he was close enough, the eagle dropped the message in his hand and waited. Father and mother read it, saw that Sheena was safe, and father said 'Thank you' to the eagle.

The eagle bowed to them majestically, wings outstretched, screeched loudly, pushed itself off and rose quickly until it was just a speck, high in the blue sky above.

CHAPTER 25

Now...

As the sun rose to put the night dwellers to bed and awake the day dwellers, Tiger and Sheena looked out over the plains. Tiger sighed and looked at the floor.

‘The world is waiting for you, Tiger.’

He lifted his head and looked at her.

‘Are you sure we should do this?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we should.’

He raised himself up and roared loudly, and waited. Then he roared again, and again, and again. They both listened to the silence.

Then below them, they heard an elephant trumpet. Then another and another. Other animals shouted their allegiance to Tiger, until the plains and the jungle were deafening with their sounds...

‘It is done now, Little Girl. There is no turning back...’

And from that point, it spread. The message was carried from the jungles and plains, across the land, and then to the coast. From there it crossed the seas and oceans, carried by seabirds and dolphins and whales, to the next country where it started again.....

When all the animals in the world had been told, they all knew when it would start. And on that day, at that time, every animal in the world stopped.

Stopped.

Bullocks pulling ploughs; stopped and lay down.

Dogs on leads; stopped and lay down.

Animals in zoos went back to their burrows/den/stables; and lay down.

Horses being raced; stopped and lay down.

Orcas and dolphins at Sea Worlds; stopped doing their tricks.

A 'seeing eye' dog stopped seeing; and a blind man crossed a busy road, causing chaos.

Lions in a circus performing tricks; stopped and lay down.

Cattle about to go on a truck to market; stopped and lay down.

Every animal, bird, fish, reptile in the world that was there just for the pleasure of humans stopped doing what its masters wanted.

Stopped...

In the newsroom, reports were flooding in.

At her desk, the television presenter watched her Master Series Autocue. The light showed her which camera to look at, and the screen below it let her know what was currently being shown on air.

'Three, two, one, go,' she heard in her earpiece.

'We have a news flash. We are getting reports from all over the world that animals are refusing to do what they are supposed to

do. Literally going on strike. To help us make sense of this, I am joined by animal expert Dr. Brock Gibbons....'

A picture came up of Dr. Brock Gibbons at his computer at home, obviously on a Skype link.

'Good evening,' he said.

'Dr. Gibbons, what do you think is happening?'

'It seems to me that there is some kind of illness striking the animals. That's the only thing that can explain it.'

'But isn't it a bit coincidental that all the animals are refusing to cooperate at the same time?'

'Firstly,' replied Gibbons in a rather superior way, 'they are not refusing to cooperate; that's merely a human interpretation. What you are suggesting would lead to some kind of intelligence, some kind of mass communication and that's not possible.'

'But...'

'No, really. They may appear intelligent at times, but it is just repetition. When a dog fetches a ball they only do it for the reward, they don't really know what they are doing.'

'My dog fetches the morning paper.'

Gibbons laughed. 'Yes, but he doesn't read it.'

'But,' persisted the interviewer, as she was fed more information in her earpiece, 'it isn't just four-legged animals. It appears to be almost anything that has a relationship to man. What if, in some way, they were communicating? What if, in some way, they have formed an alliance?'

Gibbons shook his head, as though talking to a child. 'Alliance for what? Animals don't make cross-species alliances; very few even make intra-species alliances. We, human beings, are the only species to have evolved to help each other. No, it's as I have

said, some kind of disease that more than likely is hitting their motor neurone system and taking away their ability to move.'

'So no communication, no alliance?'

'Absolutely not. The day my dog forms an alliance with the cat next door, I will eat my boots.'

'So it's not possible?'

'No. We are the only intelligent, cooperative species on this planet. Only humans work together.'

'Could....'

She stopped as more information invaded her ear.

'Dr. Gibbons, thank you, but we will have to leave this now, we have more breaking news.' She listened again. 'I am sorry to inform you that initial reports suggest that hundreds and hundreds of people have lost their lives when a bomb exploded on a plane as it was landing at JFK Airport. It seems the blazing plane crashed into the main building. Eye witnesses at the horrific scene....'

CHAPTER 26

Mister President

In the Oval Office of the White House the President of the United States sat at his desk, his wife sat to his side, and men and women sat and stood around the room in front of him.

‘Mister President, we have to do something. They haven’t moved in two weeks.’

‘What the hell do you expect me to do?’ bit back the President who was sick of the whole thing.

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘Steve,’ said the President, addressing one of the men, ‘what about the lab tests?’

‘Nothing, sir. Whatever it is that’s making them do this, it doesn’t appear to be an illness or virus.’

The President looked to the corner of the room, where his dog was lying on a blanket. ‘Here, Wolf.’

The dog looked up and then resumed snoozing. The President held up his arms in frustration. ‘That dog has ignored me for days. I’m President of the most powerful nation in the world for Christ’s sake; I can give a command to start a nuclear war, but I can’t get my dog off its backside.’

The President grabbed the phone. ‘Get me Rick.’

He hung on, tapping his fingers impatiently. ‘Rick, any news yet?.....Rick, for Christ’s sake, Congress gives the CIA billions of

dollars so it can gather information, and you can't tell me anything? Well, get something. And quick!

Billy Bob, one of the President's biggest backers in his run for the White House, said, in his heavy Texan drawl, 'Mister President, we're suffering badly. People could starve. Communities could perish. My company has less than one day's stock of meat for beef burgers.'

'What? For Christ's sake, Billy Bob, not now.'

'But, Mister President, the mighty U S of A will grind to a halt without our beef burgers.'

'Billy Bob, I understand your concern, but at the moment you are going to have to sort out the beef burger problem yourself.'

'But, Mister President, when my company backed your campaign we assumed...'

'And I appreciated that then, and still do now,' replied the President, glaring at him icily.

He stood up and looked at the dog. 'Wolf, here, boy.'

The dog ignored him, so he looked towards his wife.

'Come on, little Wolfie, come to mommy. Who's a good boy then, who's a good boy? Come to mommy. Mommy loves you,' she cooed, but it fell on deaf ears.

The phone rang, and an aide answered. 'It's the CIA, sir,' and handed it to the President.

'Rick.....what? Rick, I'm putting you on speaker phone. Go ahead, Rick.'

'Mister President, our Consulate in Mumbai, India...'

'I know where Mumbai is!' barked the President testily.

'Sorry, Mister President. Our Consulate has relayed a communication they have received in relation to the strategic withdrawal of services by non-humans...'

The President shook his head at the CIA speak.

‘...It says you will be contacted shortly, sir.’

‘Who by? Who is contacting us?’ asked the President.

‘It doesn’t say, sir, just that you will be contacted shortly.’

‘How was it communicated, Rick?’

‘A letter was delivered to us, Mister President.’

‘Did your people at the Consulate follow the person that delivered the letter?’

‘Err...no, sir.’

The President erupted. ‘Why the hell not?’ He waited for a reply. ‘Rick, I asked you why the hell not?’

‘Mister President.....Sirit....it...was delivered by a monkey.’

‘Rick, have you been drinking? Is this some kind of joke?’ He looked at the room. ‘Is this All Fools Day?’

‘No, sir,’ said Rick quietly.

‘And I assume,’ continued the President sarcastically, ‘that no one signed the letter?’

‘Yes, sir. Sheena did.’

‘What?’

‘It was signed by Sheena, sir.’

‘And who is Sheena?’

‘We don’t know, sir.’

‘I despair. Have you got any other helpful information for us, Rick? A whale coming to tea perhaps?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Rick, get your people on this, get proper intel, so we don’t have any more of these conversations. Ok?’

‘Yes, sir.’

He looked at the dog but addressed the room. ‘So they are going to contact me. Sheena says so. And we know it’s correct

because a monkey delivered the letter. We don't know who, where or when they're going to contact me, but that's ok. I'm only the President, so I've not got a lot to do....' For a minute he was lost in thought. 'Could you give me a little time, please,' he said, and they filed out.

In the next office, Billy Bob pulled out his mobile phone and dialled. 'The President says it's our problem, so go to Plan B as we discussed.'

A thousand miles away, hundreds of cows were lying in pens. When the lorries had arrived to take them to the abattoir, they had not moved. Although they were lashed and had electric prods stuck in them, they still refused to move.

The man put the mobile in his pocket and shouted 'Ok' across the yard to the waiting men. He went back to his nearby office, and he heard the gunshots as the men waded into the cattle and killed them as they lay. An hour later, hundreds of cattle were stacked, body on body, in trucks and taken to the plant to be processed. In the office, the man said to a lady sitting at a desk, 'Do you know what that sound is?'

'I don't hear anything.'

'Listen. Can't you hear it?'

'No, what?'

'That, ma'am, is the sound of Americans eating beef burgers; and dollars fluttering down and landing gently in Billy Bob's lap....'

CHAPTER 27

NASA

The Vice President leaned back in his chair and drank the last of his coffee.

‘Jim, I gotta go. The President expects me to do the odd day’s work for all the money I’m not getting.’ He looked to see if there was any coffee left and took a last sip as he waited.....

The man laughed. ‘Never mind, you’ll be back to your oil wells soon enough and then you’ll miss all the power’.....

‘Oil.....now that is power’.....

‘You off to solve the “animals that won’t move” problem?’.....

‘Don’t think I have the experience for that. Remember, I do oil, not cattle’.....

‘Ah well, talk to you again, Tom, er Mister Vice President,’ they both giggled.

‘Before I go you missed Elizabeth’s christening; how about you come to her twenty-first? You’ve got ten years to make up your mind and arrange transport’.....

‘I’ll do that, Tom, yes, I’ll do that’.....

The Vice President stuck up a thumb, in due course Jim mirrored him and then the large screens went blank...

The thirty-minute chat had taken nearer two and a half hours....

CHAPTER 28

Ready?

In the jungle, the tigers had convened as they had at the start. Tiger was sitting on a branch of the dead tree with Little Girl by his side.

‘We knew it could happen, Devida,’ a tiger said solemnly.

‘Yes,’ Tiger replied sadly.

‘You said yourself it wouldn’t be easy.’

‘I know. But animals all over the world are being beaten or slaughtered just because they won’t work. Why? Why would they do that?’

‘Because,’ said Zazu, ‘they can. And this is what it is all about; just because they can, they cage us, beat us and slaughter us. Some of our species have left this earth forever because.....they can.’

Tiger took a deep breath, shook his head slowly, and carried on. ‘We are nearly there. Are all the arrangements ready?’

‘Yes,’ came several replies.

He looked at Little Girl. She was a child, with childlike innocence; and yet, she had rescued him from the circus, had run away from home twice to help him, was sitting here amongst huge, vicious tigers that could kill her with one bat of a paw or one fatal bite. What courage, what strength, what an incredible human she was....

‘Ready?’ he asked her.

She smiled. The most wonderful smile in the whole world, which lit up the gathering. And the tigers, who had come to respect and love this little girl, a human, who had taken enormous risks for them, bowed slightly out of admiration for her courage.

‘Then it’s time.’

The next night, animals from the jungle slipped through the shadows to the docks and then secreted themselves on board the ships. If any were found en route to their destination they had the means and the ferocity to take over the ship and make sure it kept going.

CHAPTER 29

The Oval Office

In the Oval Office, the President was having a meeting with the Budget Committee who were explaining the financial ramifications of the animal strike. It was nearly three weeks since the start of the situation, nearly three weeks since the President had been told he would be contacted by Sheena, and three weeks sincenothing had happened.

‘Three weeks,’ said the President, ‘three weeks.’ He looked at Wolf. ‘The only time that dog has moved is to....well, you know.’

‘It’s eerie, sir,’ ventured an aide. ‘The order of things has changed somehow; but how, and its relevance, I am not sure?’

‘I see Billy Bob’s still happily selling his beef burgers. They must be machine-gunning the cattle to get them to the plants. It’s a shame, as I think the country would be a lot slimmer without Billy Bob’s burgers.’

‘Mister President,’ interjected a man.

‘What?’

The man pointed to Wolf who had gone to the window, stood on a chair and was looking out.

‘What’s out there?’ asked the President.

A man peered through the window. ‘Nothing unusual, sir.’

The President went to look for himself but saw nothing. Wolf jumped off the chair and went back to his corner.

And waited....

In the dark, at the docks, the animals left the ships and congregated in the shadows. 'No matter what happens,' said Tiger, 'keep going...'

In the Oval Office, the President and his aides were interrupted as Wolf ran to the window and started barking. The President looked at an Aide who went to the window. 'Nothing, sir.'

There was a discreet knock on the door, and one of the President's secretaries came in. 'You should see the television, Mister President.' She turned it on, and it went automatically to a News Channel.

Their cameras were showing thousands of animals walking in a long line down the main streets. Traffic had pulled over, people were watching from buildings and shops. At the front were a phalanx of tigers; in the middle of which rode Little Girl on Tiger's back.

In the Oval Office, all eyes were glued to the television. 'I think we now know who Sheena is,' said the President. His phone rang, but he ignored it and so an aide answered.

'Mister President, the Governor's on the phone. He has deployed police marksmen and anti-terrorist teams, and they are ready to neutralise the situation now, sir, before it gets out of hand. Do you have any input, sir, before they go ahead?'

As the aide was speaking, marksmen were training their high-velocity rifles on Tiger and the other tigers. As always, take out the leaders and move on down...

'Mister President,' said the aide urgently, 'did you hear me, sir? I have the Governor on who...'

The marksman with Tiger's head in his sights was ready. He was lying comfortably on the floor, his rifle resting on a small stand for stability, and the crosshairs in his riflescope were straight in the middle of Tiger's head.

'I have a clear view,' he said, into a tiny headset, which was a polite way of saying, 'I can now kill the target.'

In the Oval Office, the aide was frantic. 'Mister President!' he shouted, but it was too late.

On the rooftop, the sniper slowly squeezed the trigger.

'Clear view.'

He squeezed a little more.

'Good to go.'

And then he completed the action, and the bullet hurtled from its chamber.

For a moment the sniper was confused as the scope was now black and his rifle was pointing slightly upwards. And then it cleared, and he saw the grinning face of a monkey. The marksman looked up and saw the monkey with his hand under the barrel of the gun, and the other hand wagged a disapproving finger at him. Then he ripped the gun from him and ran away.

Suddenly, in the marksman's ear, he heard, 'Stand down! Stand down! The President has ordered us to stand down. I repeat, all units stand down!'

'Err, standing down....'

He paused for a moment, wondering whether this would affect his continued employment.

'Perhaps err, I should mention, err, that err, that err, a monkey has run off with my rifle.....'

CHAPTER 30

Africa

In their house in Africa, Dorothy and Gerry were in the lounge. Gerry dozed, Dorothy read a ladies' magazine, and the tv flickered silently in the corner. Dorothy looked up occasionally at the screen, but it was the usual stuff. This time she stared at the tv, shook Gerry, and turned the sound up.

'Sheena and Tiger are in Washington,' said Dorothy in amazement.

'In America.....' said Gerry, and then he just sat there with his mouth open.....

CHAPTER 31

Arrival

The procession of animals halted outside the gates of The White House, stopped by dozens of armed guards, with armed police lining the sidewalks. Tiger roared at The White House. He roared again, demanding attention.

The President was watching from a window. 'A child on a tiger.' He looked at Wolf. 'So this is what you have been waiting for, eh? Sheena on a tiger. How did you know, Wolfie, how did you know..?'

Wolf ran for the door to greet and be part of, the animal army outside.

'Ok,' said the President. 'Let's go.'

'Sir, you can't, it's a tiger. Lots of tigers...'

'If he hasn't eaten the little girl, he can't be that hungry,' he replied sarcastically.

The President, with bodyguards all around him, stood a safe distance in front of Tiger. 'Mister President,' said Little Girl. 'Thank you for meeting us.'

'I take it you are Sheena?'

'Yes, Mister President, and this is Tiger. I am Tiger's friend.'

'And how can I help you, Sheena? I assume you don't want circuses and zoos anymore?'

‘Your assumption is wrong, Mister President.’

An aide cut in, ‘I don’t think you should be talking to the President like ...’ but was cut off immediately as Tiger snarled at him.

The President glared at the aide. ‘Tiger beat me to it.’ He thought for a moment. ‘One second, please, Sheena...’ He turned back to the aide. ‘You can do something useful,’ and he whispered in his ear.

‘Sheena, you and Tiger and the other animals have travelled a long way, so before we talk about what you do want, why don’t you come into the grounds and let me give you food.’

‘Is this a trick, Mister President?’ asked Sheena.

The President was insulted that this child did not trust him. His anger rose but, good poker player that he was, his demeanour didn’t change. The aide beside him waited for his boss to erupt, but his boss had started grinning. On reflection, thought the President, this little girl is a damn sight smarter than most of Congress.

‘No, Sheena, this is not a trick. And to prove it.....’ He called over a news camera crew. ‘This is to give my word,’ he said to the camera, ‘that while these animals are under my jurisdiction, they are completely safe.’

‘Thank you, Mister President.’

Cooks and kitchen staff raided the fridges of the White House, local shops stripped of any food they had left, and local animal lovers came with bags filled with food. When they had eaten and rested a little, the President said, ‘So what do you want, Sheena?’

‘It’s not what I want, Mister President, it’s what the animals want.’

‘And what do they want?’

‘Choice,’ said Tiger.

The President’s jaw dropped. ‘You can talk to me?’

‘Yes, Mister President, did you think I was a dumb animal?’

‘Touché.’

The President went quiet for a moment, looking at Tiger.

‘Choice? What do you mean by choice? How can they have a choice? My dog doesn’t have a choice, it would be chaos. He has to obey, that’s the way it is.’

‘Why should he obey you?’ asked Tiger.

‘Because I own him.’

‘You own him?’

‘I think I see where this is going, and that may not have been a good choice of words, but he has a good life.’

‘As long as he obeys you and your rules.’

‘Of course.’

‘But he has no choice.’

‘No, not really.’

‘Mister President.....’ said Tiger.

‘Please, call me Andrew.’

‘Andrew, let me make this very plain to you. I was born in a circus, in Africa. By inflicting pain and fear, I was forced to do tricks. I had no life other than eating, sleeping, doing tricks andpain. Tell me... Andrew, would you have liked that life?’

‘No,’ said the President quietly.

‘So...Andrew, tell me what choice I had?’

The President said nothing, but his poker face was struggling to keep off the look of discomfort that was invading him. He looked at the magnificent creature before him and was revolted that man could do that to such an animal. And then his intelligent, Ivy League mind realised you could not differentiate

between a magnificent tiger and a lowly beast, or.....or.....any animal. A pain grabbed his chest as he went from ignorance to enlightenment in just one fleeting moment.

‘Have you ever been to a circus, Andrew?’

The President was reluctant to answer and almost mumbled, ‘Yes.’

‘And did you enjoy it...?’

The President went quiet.

‘Did you ask yourself whether the animals were enjoying providing your entertainment? Whether they even had a choice?’

The President looked down and bit his lip.

‘Do you know of any humans in a circus that are beaten and electrocuted to make them perform? Do you think the acrobats, jugglers, clowns or high wire people are beaten to make them perform?’

The President tried not to look at Tiger and Sheena as he was struggling. His eyes were moist, and he blinked quickly as he looked down.

‘Do you know,’ continued Tiger, ‘of any humans that are kept in cages all their lives just to be looked at? Do you know of any humans that pull a plough from dawn till dusk and then start again the next day?’

‘But,’ said the President, regaining his composure, ‘I asked you earlier if you wanted all the animals to be freed from the circuses and zoos and you said my assumption was wrong.’

‘Little Girl said your assumption was wrong and it was and is. You are missing the point,’ he said tersely.

Tiger looked at the aide who had interrupted, but he held up his hands in front of him. ‘Not a word,’ said the aide.

‘You are so blinded by your humanness that you see nothing from our point of view. There is nothing wrong with circuses or zoos or aquariums. What is wrong is that the animals in them had no choice in the matter.’

‘But...’

‘Look at it another way....Mister President. Let’s take zoos. There may be many animals that would love to live in a zoo. They may be a bit old, maybe not too good in the company of their own kind, maybe none too bright, or not blessed with what it takes to survive in what you call “the wild”, but we call home. In a zoo, they can wander round, get fed, show off to the visitors, sleep..... They would love to live in a zoo.’

‘Yes... I can see that.’

‘And a circus. Some animals are natural show-offs. Why, they’d pay the circus to let them perform. But that’s because they’d want to. They’d just arrive for the performance, do their thing, astound the audience with their tricks and back to the jungle to their families, or to the cities and their apartments.’

The President smiled. ‘Apartments. Good one... So animals will do most things we want of them today, all they want is a choice. To do or not to do...’

‘As humans have,’ said Tiger. ‘Choice.’

‘But what about beef burgers?’ shouted Billy Bob from nearby.

‘I’m sorry for that. Unfortunately, he’s not very subtle, but I’m afraid he does have a point. His cattle will have a choice and.....we eat animals.’

‘So do I,’ replied Tiger, and the President, for a moment, looked confused.

‘I’d forgotten that.’

‘Just give them a life,’ pleaded Tiger, ‘before you eat them. And stop queueing them up; watching their sisters and brothers being slaughtered while they wait their turn.’

The enormity of what he had been listening to had affected the President, and he was struggling again. A few hours ago they were just animals, about which he gave little thought. But now, somehow, they had acquired a *being*. He was looking at them as though they now existed with feelings, pleasure, and pain. As though they had human qualities...

‘Tiger, Sheena, I can honestly say you have changed the way I look at animals. I will try to make changes, global changes, but you have to understand that it won’t be easy. Our systems are built around, in many ways, animals. The obvious being cattle, sheep, fowl which we devour in vast quantities and some countries rely on for their income. And then there is the so-called entertainment value of animals which, as you have so dramatically shown, is appalling, but hidden. But I promise you I will try to make a difference, as you have with me....’

Later that day the animals went back to the docks, the roads lined with clapping and cheering well-wishers, but this time they were given naval ships to go home in or, if they dared, they could go back in Boeing C-17 military planes.

Tiger decided birds flew....

CHAPTER 32

Decision time

The next day the President called an emergency session of Congress and demanded a set of laws that would establish a new framework for animals. A Bill of Rights that would enable every animal to have a choice. Although many in there were against it, they knew that the tide of opinion out there, with the people who they counted on to be re-elected, was with the animals, and so it got through. Coincidentally it was the turn of the USA to Chair the UN and a debate was demanded there, which went to a Resolution and passed.

And so it started.

The change from captive to free animal.

At the Sea-life entertainment centre, a man in a suit was arguing with a woman in a bathing costume at the side of the large Orca pool. Looking on from the side of the pool an Orca listened.

Suit man snapped, 'This is ludicrous. Our best money earner and we have to allow it to go?'

'If it wants,' replied the lady trainer.

'Well, I don't want....unbelievable.'

The trainer looked to the Orca. 'Toto, if you want to go out there,' she pointed out to the sea, which bordered the pool, but had bars to stop any escape, 'you can. What would you like to do?'

The Orca stared at her then swam off.

‘See, what nonsense. As though a damn fish understands.’

The Orca returned and watched them.

‘Toto,’ said the trainer again, ‘do you want to go back to sea?’

Toto’s head went up and down.

‘That’s hardly proof!’

‘Toto, the Director doesn’t believe you.’

Toto dived deep, out of sight. After a few moments, it surfaced next to the Director, its tail lifting gallons of water and soaking him.

‘Now do you believe?’ asked the trainer.

Later that day the large metal bars to the ocean were lifted allowing Toto to go free. He swam to it and then turned around and went back to the pool edge where the trainer was standing. Toto squealed at her.

‘I don’t understand.’

He squealed again. She dived in and clung to its fin, and he swam to where the raised bars to the ocean were. He did a soft backflip to remove her and then went to her and nuzzled her face. She stroked him lovingly. ‘I’ll miss you,’ she said, with tears in her eyes, and then Toto turned and swam away...

In the zoo, the lions had asked for help with their decision, which made the authorities in charge of Animal Repatriation realise it was difficult for some animals to make a decision as they didn’t have the knowledge to do so. It was easy to release herbivores as it didn’t take much in the way of a brain to sneak up on a blade of grass, but carnivores? Some of the lions had been born in captivity, and it became obvious, especially to them, that they would struggle in the wild. But they wanted to go home,

wherever that was, and so a Plan B was agreed. They were sent to National Parks where, initially, they could roam free but be fed. A sort of half-way house, a refuge. If they learned to hunt, they could leave the safety of the Park, but if not they would be happy there.

As the animals went up the ramps to board a waiting fleet of large trucks, two old lions were watching from the lion enclosure. They roared a loud 'Goodbye. Good life' to their brothers and sisters and slowly wandered over to where the food waited.

CHAPTER 33

The Circus

On the high cliff above the jungle, Tiger gave another message to the eagle, who gave it to other eagles, which passed it on to seabirds and then to another eagle, who landed where several apes were sitting.

‘You know Devida?’ asked the eagle.

‘Of course. The world knows Devida.’

‘He needs your help.’

They looked at each other, and all nodded. ‘How can we help Devida?’

When it was dark, the apes moved stealthily through the shadows of the circus where Tiger had performed his tricks. Inside the office, three men were drinking.

‘Well, that’s the end of that,’ said the Circus Owner, putting his feet on his desk.

They laughed a conspiratorial laugh.

‘For now,’ he continued, and they laughed again. ‘Ok, all the acts have gone, and we’ll rehire them when we set up shop in a place where a little money changing hands will keep us safe and out of sight. All the small animals have been set loose or used as food. We need the tigers, so we’ll sedate them to shut them up. We’ve paid the rent on this site for another six months, so all we

have to do is sit tight, wait for the hullabaloo to calm down and then move out one dark night.'

The door burst open, and the apes rushed in. One of the men grabbed his gun, but it was ripped viciously from his grip. Seizing the men in strong hands, they dragged them out.

The caged tigers watched, amazed, as two apes unlocked their cages.

'Come with us.'

'Why?'

'We have a present from Devida.'

Although few remembered Devida from his circus days, they had heard snippets of what he had achieved in the outside world, although they didn't actually believe it. They knew you couldn't beat man, so why would they set you free? No, it was all wishful thinking. Silly stories passed on by gullible animals...

The tigers followed the apes to the Big Top.

'Sit down, please,' said the ape.

In front of them stood the equipment for their act. The hoops, the high stools, the ladders, the climbing bars. And amongst it, three apes with whips.

'Enjoy,' said the ape next to them.

The men were dragged in from the side, shaking with fear. Picking up a hoop, an ape held it in front of them.

'You'll like this,' whispered the ape to the tigers.

The men refused to go through the hoop and so the apes waded into them, thrashing them with their flesh-cutting whips. Screaming in pain, blood seeping through their clothes, they complied as the ape shook the hoop again.

'Too slow.'

They were grabbed and thrown violently against the bars, breaking ribs, breaking fingers.

The ape shook the hoop again and two of the men almost ran through it. The third man tried to escape but his path was barred by two apes. One sank his teeth into his shoulder, just deep enough that the pain would be excruciating, but not deep enough that he would bleed to death. They carried him back to the hoop, where he was whipped viciously once more, and, screaming in pain, he climbed through.

The ape raised the hoop a little higher and shook it at the men who were now at the end of their tether. They stumbled to the hoop and climbed through it. The ape raised it again, just high enough so that they had to throw themselves through it to do it successfully. Two did it but one man, whose rational thinking had now left him, shouted 'Yeah, right' in defiance. An ape seized him and held him tight against his chest, increasing the pressure as the man screamed for him to stop. When he was nearly unconscious, the ape sank his teeth into the man's jaw and tore a piece of soft, fleshy cheek from his face. The other men looked on in horror. To complete their induction into the world of hurt they were in, an ape patted them on their back as a 'well done'.

The apes gave them a few minutes to recoup, and then they herded them to the climbing frame that went over their heads.

'We can't do that,' cried the Owner. 'We're not,' he said with contempt, 'monkeys.'

The apes looked at each other. What greater insult could there be?

'We should kill them, here, now,' said one.

‘We should, but we can’t. We are doing this for Devida, and Devida wants them to experience what he did.’

They herded the men to the bottom of the climbing pole.

‘Climb.’

‘We don’t climb.’

‘You can learn.....’

The whips opened their flesh, and they screamed with pain.

The watching tigers were enjoying this reversal of roles, but one said, ‘Won’t they take their revenge? Won’t they hit us later?’

The ape smiled. ‘No.’

The men tried to climb the poles but they couldn’t. The apes didn’t care. Not only had they been insulted, but the men had to feel what Devida and the others watching, had felt. So, in a way, it was better they couldn’t climb. If they couldn’t climb, they weren’t performing. And those that didn’t perform.....were punished.

It was, after all, the way of the circus.

They waded in with their whips, and their fists, and their teeth, until the floor was running blood....

CHAPTER 34

Wolf

In the Oval Office, the President was working at his desk. It had been a long day; he was tired, he ached from sitting too long with a bad posture, his shoulders tight from too much tension and he needed a few minutes' break. A walk outside in the grounds perhaps... He looked over at Wolf.

'Come on, Wolf, I need a bit of exercise.'

He walked over to a coffee table and picked up a lead which he rattled encouragingly. Wolf barked excitedly and went to the President. Bending down, the President started to put the loop over Wolf's head and then noticed the dog watching him. He stopped, and then put the lead back on the table.

'It's not a dog's life anymore, eh, Wolf? Come on, pal....'

CHAPTER 35

Zazu visits

The night sky shone with a thousand jewels over the clearing in the jungle. Little Girl sat with Tiger and the tigresses.

‘Home tomorrow, Little Girl,’ said Tiger fondly.

‘I shall miss you; all of you.’

‘We will all miss you,’ replied Misha.

In the jungle, nearby, Tiger heard a sound and was instantly alert. His teeth bared and he let out a low, warning snarl. He relaxed as Zazu left the shadows and walked towards them, stopping a few yards away, out of respect for joining them without notice.

‘Please, Zazu, join us,’ said Misha. ‘We are honoured by your presence.’

Zazu came forward and sat with them. ‘Please excuse my intrusion, Devida.’

‘Is there something we can give you, Zazu?’ asked Misha. ‘Food, water?’

‘No, thank you. I am here to thank Little Girl.’

‘Me?’

‘Of course.’

‘Why?’

‘You set us free.’

‘I didn’t, Tiger did.’

‘That’s true, but you set Tiger free. Without you, Devida would still be in a circus, as would many others.’

‘But...’

‘Please. Accept my, our, thanks.’

‘Thank you,’ said Sheena. She held out her arms, went to Zazu and put them round him. ‘Thank you.’

Zazu had never really been close to a human before, but this Little Girl, this wonderful Little Girl, melted his heart. He purred and licked her face as the others watched the mighty Zazu, the most feared and ferocious king of the jungle, who deferred to no one, take on the countenance of a playful cub. Little Girl hugged him tightly and then sat between his massive paws.

Later they ate and talked late into the night.

The next day, at sunrise, they congregated.

‘Today is the day, Little Girl,’ said Tiger sadly.

‘Yes.’

‘Tiger, if you would allow me,’ said Zazu, ‘I would like Little Girl to come with me for a moment.’

‘With you?’ asked Little Girl in surprise.

‘Yes, please.’

Little Girl looked at Tiger, who nodded.

‘Ok.’

Zazu took her, with the others following, on his back, out of the jungle and to the cliff top. Well before the edge, he lay down to allow her to get off.

‘One moment, Little Girl.’

He walked to the cliff edge and looked over, and then, satisfied, he walked back to her.

‘Come with me, please, Little Girl,’ and he led her to the edge of the cliff. Tiger looked at Misha with concern. What was going on? What was Zazu going to do? Should he intervene now, before it was too late? Too late for what? Tiger started moving towards them.

When the tens of thousands of animals gathered below saw Little Girl, they all bowed as one in total silence.

Little Girl looked round at Zazu, and Tiger who had now joined them and seen the homage below.

‘Thank you, Zazu,’ said Tiger respectfully.

The tigresses joined them.

‘This, Sheena,’ said Zazu, ‘is now Little Girl day. On this day every year, the animals will have a truce and remember what a little girl did for them.’

‘Thank you.’

Zazu lay down. ‘Would you get on my back, please?’

She got on his back, and he stood at the cliff edge. ‘Hold on tight,’ he said. She gripped his ruff with both hands, and when he was sure she was secure, he reared in the air on his hind legs.

The animals below emitted an enormous cacophony of tribute.

CHAPTER 36

Caged

Outside the Circus, the fading sign read 'Closed until further notice.' Weeds were growing out of control, and pedestrians walked past, no longer interested.

Inside the circus the Circus Owner and the other two men were lying in a locked cage, their bodies thin and emaciated. The man whose cheek had been torn away, was dead, his body stiff and starting to smell.

With little room in the small cage, their muscles kept cramping from not being able to move around, and from trying hard not to brush against the dead man whose presence they found revolting.

All the animals had gone, set free by the apes, and so the only caged animals left...was them.

In a fit of fury, with what little energy he had left, the Circus Owner grabbed the cage bars and shook them furiously. 'Help... help, help, help....'

He listened intently but heard nothing.

And then he realised his life would end, quite soon, in a cage.....

CHAPTER 37

The Expert

In his study in his home, Brock Gibbons, the ‘go to for a quote’ animal expert sat at his computer and wrote another article for another newspaper. He straightened his back, groaned and ran his fingers through his hair. Looking at his empty coffee cup he was about to shout his wife for a refill when he remembered she had gone out.

He groaned again.

Grabbing the cup, he went into the kitchen. At the sink, as he rinsed out his cup, something caught his attention, and he looked past the island to where his large dog and the next-door neighbour’s cat were sitting.

On the floor in front of them sat a plate. On the plate were his boots. To one side the salt and pepper waited...

And so it began.

Humans and animals living in harmony....

CHAPTER 38

The Meeting

Six months later Devida bowed his head slightly as Zazu entered the clearing. The pride bowed much lower.

‘We are honoured by your presence, Zazu,’ said Devida.

‘We are indeed,’ echoed Misha. ‘Can we get you food?’

‘No, thank you, Misha.’ He looked at Devida. ‘We have things to do?’

‘Excuse us, Misha,’ said Devida, ‘we will be back later, perhaps we could eat then?’

‘Of course, Devida.’

Zazu followed Devida out of the clearing and they walked to a cliff where they could see over the vast plain. They sat down, their front legs straight as though sitting on a throne.

‘It’s so calm,’ said Zazu, looking at the grazing beasts below them. ‘Everything is balanced, everything in order.’

‘Yes.’

‘Our relationship with humans has been changed, perhaps forever.’

Devida just looked ahead.

‘Are you sure you want to continue?’ continued Zazu.

‘We have no option.’

‘Maybe there is another option, or a few, or many....?’

‘No, just one option or no options.’

Zazu stopped asking questions and stared ahead. It was several minutes before he asked again. 'Are you completely sure? Is there nothing that will change your mind? Any other scenario that you have not factored into the equation?'

'No, it's as I said all those months ago; nothing has changed.'

'Why didn't we do this then?'

Devida thought for a moment. 'It needed a new way; a new way of thinking towards humans. We needed our brothers and sisters out of captivity and free. We needed humans to look at us differently.'

'Which they do?'

'Some.'

'So rather than some form of half-way house you want a.....genesis?'

'Yes.'

'So we continue as your original plan?'

'Yes.'

Zazu went quiet again.

'Would you prefer not to be part of it, Zazu?'

'It is not possible to not be a part of it. No, I am just making sure you are certain.....'

'I am. Could you send out the word, please?'

'I will. How long?'

'Everything starts at mid-day time here, in twenty-eight days. Some of our brothers and sisters need time to get ready although they have waited long enough.'

CHAPTER 39

The White House

The President was starting to wind up a regular meeting of the Budget Committee when someone said, 'Excuse me, Mr President, but the last time we were here your dog did that and a load of Tigers appeared.'

The President looked over to Wolf, the Alsatian that was usually by his side, the one called 'little Wolfie' by his wife, and saw he was at the window; waiting.

'Wolf,' called the President, but Wolf kept looking. 'Ah well, he's more than likely seen a squirrel or racoon or something. Maybe a fifty-foot raptor is about to join us.'

They all grinned at the President's sardonic humour and carried on with tidying up the vestige of the Meeting.

When they had left, the President looked over at the dog, still looking out of the window. 'Wolf,' he said quietly. Nothing. 'Wolf,' he said loudly. Nothing. Wolf just kept looking out of the window. The phone rang, the President took the call and said, 'Ok.' Taking one last look at the dog he shrugged and walked out of the Oval Office.

CHAPTER 40

Interlude

Tears streamed down Sheena's face and her tummy hurt. They had laughed most of the evening at Hayley's house and it had been wonderful. They started off, six of them, revising for tomorrow's exams, but somehow it had gone on to fashion, and boys, and makeup, and boys, and holidays, and boys, and boys, and boys.....

She walked home light-headed, happy, content. True, she had not really revised for tomorrow but she knew she was quite bright, she knew she would do well. She always did...

She looked up at the night sky. A beautiful, clear, dark night when the stars shone and lit up the sky and kept her company as she walked the few hundred yards home.

The sky went black as a hood went over her head, a hand over her mouth and strong arms carried her away.

CHAPTER 41

Four weeks

Tiger had said four weeks but for some that wasn't really enough. Sometimes it took months, years even, to get to a state where they could help Devida. In fact they had never heard of Devida; all they knew was that it was important *now* to do what they had to do. The conditions may not be right but *now* was the right time. Their whole being told them so and their anxiety passed on to others and others and others until every one of them emerged from their deep sleep to help Devida, who they had never heard of.

From simple cells to primates, the tiniest insect to the largest whale, fish to birds, omnivores to carnivores, they all knew. Some had heard the word that had travelled like wildfire round the planet. Others just *knew*.

And now they all knew, a part of them was relieved. It was something that had troubled them forever but for which they had no answer. None of them had an answer, never had an answer from the time it had begun. Because there was no answer.

And then Devida had come along and provided them with one. And how simple that answer was. An answer so simple that they struggled to believe that it had not been done before. But of course, some solutions are obvious when someone tells you the answer. And some answers can only be provided by someone, something, that thinks differently....and asks the right question.

For some, the calling meant death. They knew that. But within their DNA they also knew that death was necessary for the greater good of themselves, of their species, of their species' future....

CHAPTER 42

The start

Throughout the continents they waited. You couldn't tell they were waiting but they were. They still pulled ploughs, walked down the streets on their leads, roamed the forests, swam in the oceans....

But they were waiting.

For the exact time.

The time they had been waiting months for, what they had practised for, what their DNA had changed slightly to accommodate for. And now Devida had told them. Twenty-eight days. That was all. After two hundred thousand years it was all down to twenty-eight days.

All that practising; to make sure it was synchronised in every land, in every continent, in every ocean and in every sea.

There was a tremendous swell of excitement which they knew they mustn't show. An unseen energy that swept the planet, wave after wave after wave of solidarity. They all *knew*, down to the simplest cell, they *knew*....

CHAPTER 43

The Oval Office

In the President's office, he sat with his feet on the desk and his eyes shut. Christ, he was tired. The President, who didn't believe in God but had a habit of saying 'Jesus Christ' or 'God knows?' was exhausted. There had been a lot of all-nighters, constantly ringing House members to get support, offering something here and something there just to get this damn Bill through. But it seemed that now the tide was turning and it would happen. Thank God.

He opened his eyes and yawned. Christ, he was tired. He looked down and saw Wolf looking up at him.

'A good idea, my friend,' he said and swung his legs off the desk. 'We should walk, eh? Get some air, get some exercise.'

He reached down, put his face in front of Wolf's, rubbed noses and scratched behind his ears.

'Nobody does that for me, pal,' he said. 'What I would do for an ear scratch.' He warmed to his theme. 'Not even the most highly paid hookers will give you an ear scratch.' He giggled to himself.

Wolf opened his mouth, leaned forward and with his strong, sharp teeth ripped the President's throat open. Blood gushed

everywhere and the President, who could neither breathe nor get blood to his brain, died within moments.

Wolf looked at his former master, bowed slightly for the respect the President had given him since the human / animal armistice and then padded softly into the next office where a secretary sat at her desk.

‘Hello, Wolfie,’ she said, ‘what’s that on your mouth? Come here, boy, let me wipe it for you.....’

It had started.....

CHAPTER 44

Takeover

It was obviously a concerted action.

Every animal that could kill a human did so. The lions, tigers, elephants, all big creatures that had power, started to kill. Dogs roamed in packs, dragging down humans and inflicting dreadful injuries on them until they died. The packs went into hospitals and tore into the flesh of the patients, ripping them apart where they lay until the Wards were rivers of blood.

Rats poured into homes to get to the old, infirm and young; killing and spreading disease.

Mosquitoes hatched out in their millions and spread every disease known to man. Locusts swarmed in their billions and ate everything in their path.

Mighty whales reared up under boats and capsized them leaving the meat-eating predators to finish off anyone who didn't drown. Sharks scoured the ocean fringes for humans who hadn't heard, hadn't understood or were a bit simple in the head.

Even predator cells in the human body started multiplying exponentially and bodies became ravaged with cancer cells, HIV, Typhus and flesh-eating microbes. People were dying as they struggled to live.

Of course, had this been a simulation, the humans would have won. Their brains, technology and firepower would have easily won the day. But that simulation would have been undertaken by humans as a thought experiment, from a human's point of view and completely underestimating the enemy within.

What they would not have understood was that everything that was not human had the ability, alone or in numbers, sometimes huge numbers, to kill humans.

And, of course, the humans did fight. They shot what they could and then they ran out of bullets and ideas. You can't nuke a city full of things that are killing, because the things they are killing are humans, like you.

And cancer cells? Bullets don't work. Well, they do, but it's a bit self-defeating.

And there comes a time when you have fought so much, so long, that you have to sleep. But it's not a good idea because everything that can enter your room, your bed, your settee, will. They may be small, they may not do too much damage on their own, but in a day or two, when the sweating starts and the lesions break out, and your immune system refuses to help, well then you just have a day or two left....

At NASA Headquarters, The Controller was talking to a large screen on which the head of Commander Jon Glyn, OIC of the Mars Mission was giving an update. Suddenly there were screams of horror as they saw, on other screens around the wall, every species that lived in Florida gain access to the Kennedy Space Centre and the killing started. Moments later they were under attack themselves and Jon Glyn and his colleagues watched as their friends and colleagues were slaughtered or eaten alive...

So the killing continued, until it stopped.

Within three weeks every human being on the planet was dead. Nearly every human. But essentially the planet was now devoid of humans. Every man, woman and child had been wiped out. The only thing left were bones and whatever liked bones were slowly consuming them.

It was over.

Devida's grand plan had been achieved.

The evolution of man, that had taken a couple of hundred thousand years or so, was over.

The world was free of man and its malignant, decaying influence on the planet.

Man was extinct.....

CHAPTER 45

Little Girl

For four weeks Little Girl and her mother and father had been the guests of Misha and her pride. They had taken her to a small, abandoned village with just several huts that was only a few hundred yards away. The apes had mended the large leaf roofs to stop the rain and there they were looked after.

Little Girl had repeatedly asked why they were there but Misha could only say it was because Devida had requested it and he would explain soon.

‘When is soon?’

‘Soon.’

When it was over and the earth was still red, Tiger went to the village.

Little Girl saw the pride open and he walked in. She wanted to rush to him, to hug him, to love him but something held her back. What?

He bowed before the family.

‘I am sorry you have been held here. I am sorry for the inconvenience I have caused.’

‘Why are we here, Tiger?’ asked Gerry. ‘Why did you abduct us and bring us all this way?’

Tiger had all the answers. He had rehearsed them, worked through the logic, but now it all seemed a bit meaningless.

‘So that you could have a choice.’

‘What choice?’

‘Whether you want to live or die.’

‘Tiger,’ interrupted Sheena, ‘what are you talking about? Why would we want to die?’

‘Because everyone else is dead.’

Sheena was about to say something but her father stopped her. ‘Tiger, I may have this wrong, very wrong, but are we here because the animals have killed all the human beings?’

‘Yes.’

‘All of them?’

‘Yes, you three are the only human beings on this planet.’

The family heard this, took it in, understood it, but understood nothing. Their minds went over the sentence. ‘You three are the only human beings on this planet.’

What exactly did it mean? It obviously meant they were the only three left but....but..... Gerry thought, ‘Well, that means seven and a half billion people have died. Seven and a half billion....’

Tiger was aware of another, more gruesome statistic; the animals had devoured about two hundred and fifty million tonnes of human flesh and bone.

Dorothy was lost. ‘How can you kill all those people? How is it possible?’

Sheena asked the obvious question. ‘Why would you do that, Tiger? We treated you so well. You were part of our family. Even

the President gave all the animals equal treatment on the planet. Why, Tiger, why...?’

And then it hit her.

‘You have killed my friends?’ She burst into tears. ‘You have killed my friends? What had they done wrong? They were my friends.’

Tiger said nothing; what could he say? He had given the order to wipe out the human race, three of whom stood before him and were there as they had been kind to him. The hypocrisy didn’t elude him. Little Girl and her mother and father were kind people as, no doubt, millions of other humans had been, but they were still killed. Tiger should have been distraught, but he wasn’t. He felt detached, remote. Three weeks of continuous killing, because of his order, was too much to cope with. Even for a predator Tiger.

And so his love and affection for the three human beings in front of him was dulled. A part of him wished they had been killed as well so that he didn’t have to go through this. But he had decided at the start that he would give them a choice.

‘Tiger,’ said Gerry, ‘this is too much for us to take in, so tell me what you are going to do with us?’

‘I am giving you a choice. You can live out the rest of your life in peace, anywhere on this earth that you wish. The animals there will make sure you are safe and looked after.’

‘Or.....?’

Tiger didn’t answer.

‘Tiger,’ said Sheena, tears coursing down her cheeks, ‘why did you kill my grandma.....? I don’t know what she did that you would kill her? Why would you kill anyone? We have always been nice to

you. We helped you escape to the jungle, to a new life. Why would you hurt us? Why would you....?’

Tiger knew she would ask this question over and over as it was beyond her young mind. And Tiger had all the answers, he had rehearsed them over and over, but now...now he could think of nothing.

‘Tiger,’ asked Dorothy, ‘this may be a daft question but are you sure everyone is dead? Or is that just an exaggeration? Maybe there are people somewhere? That you’ve left alive, like us? Is there? Someone, somewhere....?’

Her voice tailed off as she saw from his demeanour there was no one. Not one soul other than them on the planet. She almost giggled. They owned a planet. And then she realised what she had thought. They would own a planet. That’s what humans had thought. They owned the planet, rather than just lived on it. If only they had seen themselves as just a species living among so many others.

‘I have to leave you now,’ said Tiger quietly. ‘I will come back tomorrow.’

For a moment he saw the pain in Little Girl’s eyes and he died inside. It was a mirror of what she had seen in his eyes in the circus when she was in the audience.

He bowed slightly and turned and left. He didn’t have anywhere to go, but staying there wasn’t an option he could endure any longer.

Misha

Tiger was half-asleep on the cliff overlooking the great plains.

‘Devida,’ whispered Misha softly. She sat and waited behind him.

Tiger opened his eyes and saw the vast expanse below him, with the animals wandering, eating, being eaten, with its forever cycle of life and death...

‘Yes, Misha,’ he said softly without looking around.

‘Can I help?’ she asked.

‘Misha, please, join me.’

She raised and moved to the side where he could see her.

‘Can I help, Devida?’ she asked again.

He sat and looked at her. ‘Every human on the planet is dead. Every man, woman and child, except for Little Girl, Dorothy and Gerry have been wiped out. They cannot rise again as there is nothing to take their place. The apes, the nearest to them, do not have the facility. Nothing will replace man for hundreds of thousands of years, if ever.’

‘Wasn’t that your plan?’

‘Yes. And I executed it perfectly. Man thought they were good at battles and war and extermination, but we made them look like tiny children playing with toy guns.’

‘But...?’

He paused.

‘There is no “but”. For a lasting solution it had to be done and it was. So there are no buts?’

‘So, no regrets?’

‘No.’

‘Do you want me to ask you the obvious question?’

‘No.’

‘Forgive me, Devida, I know I am overstepping my boundary...’

‘Then don’t,’ he said curtly.

She bent her head and humbled herself before him. ‘I...’

‘Be quiet,’ he commanded.

She kept her head bowed, remaining passive and silent.

‘Raise your head but say nothing.’

She did as she was told.

She watched him for fifteen minutes. Neither moved.

‘Misha,’ he said at last, ‘forgive me for raising my voice.’

‘Forgive me for being disobedient.’

‘I am struggling, Misha.’

‘I know.’

‘Everything I have done was needed. The elimination of the humans was needed. Giving the world back to those that deserve to live in it was needed. Giving the planet back to those that will look after it was needed...’

‘And yet....?’

‘And yet there is Little Girl and her mother and father, who will haunt me.’

‘You spared them.’

‘Yes, but for what? A lifetime of loneliness? A lifetime of feeling abandoned on what was once a planet teeming with humans and now just them? What have I inflicted on them?’

‘You gave them a choice. They may choose to die.’

‘They won’t do that.’

‘Why?’

‘Little Girl. Gerry and Dorothy could conceivably have decided not to live in this world any more but they can’t kill their only child. No, they will stay now until they die.’

‘Have you thought what will happen if they have any more children?’

‘They will have to know that is not possible. If they have any more children they will be killed at birth.’

‘So just Little Girl and mother and father until death.’

‘Yes.’

‘Little Girl is much younger than her parents, Devida.’

‘I know. I don’t envy her.’

‘Devida, I am a mother and I feel for them as a family. But a part of me thinks that if they get over this, embrace it, enjoy the world for what it is and what it offers now, their life will be richer than it ever would have been.’

‘I am not so sure. Would we think that if we were the only two tigers on earth?’

Misha went quiet and thought.

‘Put that way, I don’t know....’

CHAPTER 47

The Family

The family had kept to themselves for three days. The tigresses had brought them food and water and apes arrived with succulent berries and fruits that grew high in the trees.

The first day was full of crying and misery. They were alone in a world full of everything of which they had no understanding. They mourned the loss of everything they held dear.

The second day was full of crying and misery. They were alone in a world full of everything of which they had no understanding. They mourned the loss of everything they held dear.

The third day was....different.

Gerry and Dorothy had gone into *reductio ad absurdum* mode. Everyone had gone; everyone. Nothing was left; nothing. They would be living in mud huts and scavenging for food. They couldn't travel, couldn't wash, couldn't anything....

And then Sheena, Little Girl in this world, took on the mantle of saviour as she had when she had rescued Tiger and, in due course, all the animals.

'Dad,' she said. 'I am not really allowed to say this, but you are talking nonsense.'

'I don't think you understand, Sheena, what a mess we are in.'

'Dad, Mum, I don't think you understand what a mess we are not in.'

Gerry looked at Dorothy with a 'let her talk and appear to listen' sort of face.

'I saw that,' said Sheena.

'Sorry,' they both said.

'Dad,' she sighed, taking on the role of adult to two rather simple children, 'you have always said wouldn't it be wonderful to have a Rolls Royce.'

Gerry was now convinced she was in denial, perhaps dehydrated or malnourished. 'Well now you can have one,' she continued, 'there are thousands and thousands of Rolls Royces out there and I bet they all have a full tank of petrol. And there are millions of other cars with tanks full of petrol.'

Gerry still didn't get it.

'Dad, we own everything in this world. We own everything...'

'But.....' started Gerry.

'But.....' started Dorothy.

They looked at each other and then Dorothy said softly, 'She's right. Everything...everything in the world is at our disposal.'

'Dad, you used to show me pictures of that golf course, on the beach, you said it was famous, and the enormous houses that looked over it and the ocean.'

Gerry thought for a moment. 'Pebble Beach in California.'

'Yes, well, we could live there.'

'How?'

'We own Pebble Beach, Dad, and all the houses around it. We could live in the White House if we wanted, or Buckingham Palace, or the Forbidden City. We can live anywhere in the world we want to.'

Gerry smiled. 'It's a bit of a long way, Sheena.'

'The animals got us here....'

'That was a bit hairy.'

‘Nooooo,’ said Dorothy sarcastically. ‘I always fly Eagle Airways.’

Gerry went silent for a moment and his face clouded over.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Dorothy.

He laughed a sardonic laugh. ‘How we have changed in such a short time. Everyone in the world is dead but us. Everyone we loved, we knew, we worked with, lived by, are all dead and we are happily discussing where to live in the world we now seem to own.’

Dorothy glanced at Sheena. ‘It’s better that way.’

Gerry was struggling. ‘What if it’s not true? What if Tiger and the animals are lying and need us here for a reason?’

‘What kind of reason would make us that important?’ Dorothy asked.

‘I don’t know. There must be something.’

‘It’s just us, Gerry,’ Dorothy said softly. ‘Me, you and Sheena.’

Gerry started crying and Dorothy hugged him.

‘It will be alright, Dad,’ said Sheena who, perhaps because she was growing up, was more receptive to new ideas. ‘We start all over again and, who knows, there may be someone else out there. Maybe. Maybe they hid or something, or they were in a forest or....who knows? Maybe someone you can play golf with?’

The absurdity of finding someone alive that would play golf with Gerry overwhelmed him and he started to laugh hysterically. Sheena, concerned, looked at her mother who shook her head slowly. Let him cry, let him laugh; let him do whatever it took to accept that everything had gone. Dorothy wondered whether this was the start of a Matriarchal society with her and Sheena making the decisions and Gerry the hunter-gatherer. She smiled to herself; knowing Gerry, it seemed unlikely.....

Later that evening Gerry excused himself and walked to the clearing where the tigers were.

‘Tiger,’ he said, ‘could I speak to you? In private?’

‘Of course, Gerry. Where would you like to go?’

‘How about to your cliff?’

Tiger got up and led Gerry there.

Gerry beckoned Tiger to sit and he sat in front of him.

‘I need some explanations, Tiger. I need to understand. I am struggling desperately and I need to be strong for my family.’

‘What do you want to know, Gerry?’

‘I’m sorry, Tiger, but I have to start at the start.’

Tiger nodded.

‘Tiger, Sheena rescued you. She risked her life for you.’ His face was a map of confusion as the mass of conflicting information ran across it. ‘She entered your cage when you could have killed her. She led you to the jungle and safety. And when that didn’t work out and you escaped you sought her out to help you again.’

‘Yes,’ replied Tiger quietly.

‘And then our family helped you to escape to India. In fact Sheena stole on board to make sure you got there.’

‘Yes.’

‘And then when you decided to make a pact with humans you asked Sheena to help you. Again....’

‘Yes.’

‘Tiger,’ Gerry’s voice broke, ‘we helped you. We did everything we could for you.’ Tears started running down his cheeks. ‘Why did you treat us so badly? Why did you use us and betray us? But more than that, why did you use and betray a little girl who had rescued you from a life of hell?’

Tiger looked at him but said nothing.

‘Please, Tiger,’ begged Gerry, ‘please help me understand.’ His body shook as he cried and cried and the last few days’ horror that he had tried to mask as much as he could demanded to be let out. ‘Tiger,’ he pleaded, ‘please help me.’

‘Gerry, nothing I say will mitigate what I did to you and your family. Nothing. I have no excuses, no script, no words to make it acceptable. All I can tell you is why.’

Gerry wiped his eyes and face with his sleeve.

‘Humans,’ started Tiger, ‘had everything. Their evolution gave them an advantage the like of which has never been seen. In this jungle I am a feared predator but really I’m not. I am only feared by those I prey on. The birds, snakes, insects, mice,’ he paused, ‘in fact almost everything in this jungle isn’t scared of me because I do not prey on them. I prey on beasts and deer and other large animals whose flesh I can eat to survive. So although I am seen as an invincible predator, ants, tiny ants, given the chance, would rip me apart. Tiny ants...’ he repeated for effect.

Gerry was nodding but he was not sure at what.

‘What I am saying is that in our world, the non-human world, we are all powerful in our tiny little world. And it is tiny. I rule a part of this jungle, but it’s a tiny part. I stay here and other tigers keep away. When I am old a younger version of Devida will arrive, I will dramatically posture and snarl, but we both know my time is up and so he will take over and I will wander away to live out my days wherever and however I can. That is the order of things. Everything, to use one of your terms, is micro; we don’t do macro.’ Gerry sat enthralled. Whatever he expected to hear it wasn’t an exposition of economic theory and utility.

‘But humans,’ continued Tiger, ‘are different. They have evolved differently. They are macro. With their dextrous hands and enormous brains they have gone far beyond their limitations.

Far, far beyond. I am at the top of my species. I am the best there is. But humans can destroy me in seconds. I have to kill my prey face to face. Humans can shoot me from a mile away and I won't even know I am dead. So humans rule, but after thousands and thousands of years of evolution where has it got them? Are they more civilised? No. Have they evolved a system of planetary cooperation? No. Do they respect everything else that lives on the planet? No. Do they look after the planet? No. Does their presence add value to this planet? No. Are they good for this planet? No. In fact it is so bad, they are so bad, that they are constantly at war, constantly starving, constantly murdering. They even murder and rape their own little children. No animal does that. And you are the top of the food chain? How? Why? Gerry, Little Girl rescued me from a circus. A circus.....where humans cage creatures like me and whip them and beat them to perform for the pleasure of humans. For your pleasure, Gerry. For your pleasure.....'

Gerry was getting ready to say something. Say something to put up his defence of the human race of which he was one. But the last line, the circus line stopped him. Tiger, this magnificent, intelligent animal in front of him, had been whipped and beaten so that he would sit on a stool or jump through a hoop. For humans. For their pleasure.

'This planet, Gerry, has no need for humans, is better off without humans.'

Gerry was nodding again, but this time he realised he was agreeing with the logic that ended up with the genocide of his race.

'Gerry, when I first thought about having a pact with humans, that was actually my thought. We could work out a system whereby humans and animals would co-exist. All I needed to do

was convince humans of the logic behind it. And for a while I went along that path. But then I realised there was no logic to what I was suggesting. Who would benefit from this pact, this coming together as equals? The animals, certainly. The humans, no. In the short term it would have worked, as the do-gooders and the vegetarians would be in the ascendant and the vote-savvy politicians would back it, but in the longer term? No. There is not any portion of human history that suggests collaboration, for any period of time, has worked. Humans, at some point would have reverted to type and their need to subjugate. So I changed the plan. I started off with Plan A, a collaboration, to give us time to go to Plan B, an annihilation.'

'You make it sound so matter of fact, so logical. The extermination of a species,' he clicked his fingers, 'just like that.' Gerry went into deep thought for a few moments and Tiger waited.....

'You are very intelligent and eloquent for a Tiger.'

Tiger smiled. 'Ah yes, the contradiction and confusion of metaphors. There is no point in giving me the power of speech if I have nothing to say. There is no point in me saying anything if I do not have the intelligence and eloquence to say it. There is no point me proposing that humans should be wiped from the face of this planet if I cannot put together an intelligent and convincing argument for it.....'

Gerry's mouth opened, stayed there and then slowly closed. 'Errr....true,' he said, 'true....'

Gerry stopped talking and sat, quietly for several minutes.

'So just me, Dorothy and Sheena?'

'Yes.'

'That's it? No rabbit in the hat?'

'No rabbits, no hats.....'

CHAPTER 48

Clarification

Devida, Zazu, the tigresses and the family sat in the clearing. The air was cooler and the moon shone down on them.

‘I am glad,’ said Zazu, ‘that you have managed to come to terms with, what was, a life-changing episode for you.’

‘So are we,’ replied Dorothy, ‘although when we go out there, back to our world, we may struggle a little.’

‘Perhaps more than a little for a while,’ said Gerry with a touch of sadness resonating in his voice.

‘Are you sure,’ asked Little Girl earnestly, ‘that there are no more humans? One or two that may have been missed?’

Gerry waited for her to ask whether any of them were golfers?

‘No one, Little Girl,’ replied Tiger, ‘just you and Gerry and Dorothy.’

‘You were very efficient,’ Gerry put in, ‘three weeks to clear a planet of a species.’

‘We learned it from you. You did it to hundreds of thousands of species, over hundreds of years, we just had to concentrate on one.’

‘Forgive me, Devida,’ said Misha. ‘May I...?’

‘Of course, Misha, but tonight there is no need for permission.’

‘Thank you, Devida. Dorothy,’ said Misha, risking a ticking off by addressing the female, ‘have you decided where you will go in

this world that, according to Little Girl, you now own?’

‘I think so. Initially, we need to be where we know, where, at the moment, we belong. So we’ll go back to South Africa. First to our home and collect things that have a meaning to us, things that will remind us of what was before. Then we are going to find a Rolls Royce,’ she grinned at Sheena, ‘or, more than likely a truck, and go to Cape Town and find a nice home overlooking the coast. It’s lovely there. We’ll start there…….’

CHAPTER 49

The End

The family went back to South Africa and went to live in Cape Town as planned. Gerry had explained that they would stay there for a while and then travel the world, bit by bit, country by country.

They didn't.

They settled down to a nice life by the ocean and stayed there for the rest of their life. They knew, deep down, there was no point in wandering the world, seeing the sights. It's not just the sights that are an attraction, it's the diversity of people, and there were no people.

Not only that, they used to go somewhere, take pictures, show their friends. But they had no friends.

And on top of all that the world was growing around them. After a few years Cape Town was unrecognisable as the city it once was as the plants and the trees and the animals took it back into their bosom.

Tiger went back to being Devida. Hunting and sleeping and fathering more cubs. As he became older no young, strong tiger tried to take his territory as Zazu had decreed that no one should.

Tiger died when he was seventeen years old and Misha cried. The news travelled rapidly and animals came to say goodbye to the Tiger that had changed the world. One week later the animals gathered in their tens of thousands on the plain and bowed their thanks. As one they trumpeted and bellowed and sang their goodbyes....

And all over the world every non-human took one moment to appreciate what he had done.

The eagle landed with news of Tiger's death at the home of the only humans on the planet. She gave them a small package bound by leaves and bowed to them before flying away.

Inside the package they found Tiger's ears. Misha had bitten them off and sent them. It was a message. It said, if you want to talk to Tiger he will still hear you, as you heard him when he spoke.

They found a nice urn and buried Tiger's ears in the garden overlooking the ocean and they cried. They had lost someone, something, truly amazing and perhaps the like of which the planet would never see again.

In due course the family found peace on a planet with no humans. They did not know of the Sartre quote of 'Hell is other people' but in their own way they found out it was. Dorothy and Gerry lived a happy and contented life into their eighties.

Little Girl missed them when they had gone but she had come to accept the cycle of life that she saw all around her. Non-humans lived and died when it was time, not stuck in Nursing Homes to vegetate and rot.

Little Girl lived another twenty years, surrounded by her friends, the animals, the birds, the insects, the fish in the sea, the

plants.

Little Girl had become one of them, a creature of the planet.....

When she died, the animals, out of respect, buried her. One week later, on the plains that Tiger had roamed, the animals gathered again and paid tribute to Little Girl who had helped Devida change the world....

In her grave, after one week, the insects and bacteria set to work to eat her. When she and Dorothy and Gerry were alive it was a rule that they should be kept safe. But Gerry had insisted, with the others' agreement, that when they died the creatures that would usually feed on a body should do so.

From his point of view they had fed off animals and plants all their life and when they died their bodies should be given back to repay the debt.....

CHAPTER 50

No.....

On flat ground not far from what used to be New York, twenty rocket ships blocked out the sun and slowly lowered themselves to the ground. Their huge boosters making a screaming noise that deafened for miles around.

After fifteen minutes a hatch opened on the first ship and a staircase slid noiselessly to the floor below.

A dozen men walked slowly down, gulping the air and shielding their eyes from the sun as they did.

They had never been here before. Their parents had, but they hadn't. They were Meartheans. Born on Mars to parents from Earth, and they wanted to go back where they instinctively felt they belonged, where all the stories they had heard for all those years originated.

They walked away from the ship and took in their surroundings. They had not seen anything like it. True, they had the same on Mars, but it was all cultivated, here it just was. The trees, the rocks, the sky, everything. Just was.....

Out of some scrubland a pack of dogs approached. The leader came close and started barking aggressively. The others joined in, getting closer, their fangs bared. When they were dangerously close the men took small weapons from their belts and, silently, killed all the dogs.....