

A Tiger Too

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*Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

-The Tyger, *William Blake, 1794*

We got the idea while watching the six o'clock news one evening, right after this clip about a bunch of beach condos in south Florida collapsing into the ocean. Funny thing really. This guy in south Jersey breaks into this lady's house one night, and has a run-in with an unexpected visitor, so to speak. He'd been staking this gal out for about a month, watching her, studying her habits, and waiting for just the right opportunity. Finally, a night comes when he figures she'll be gone for awhile. After creeping around for about an hour or so, he gets a little too comfortable and starts poking through this gal's underwear drawer. Big mistake. What the guy didn't know was that this lady collected exotic animals as a hobby. He was having himself an intimate moment, smelling her panties or something, when all of a sudden this seven-hundred-fifty-pound Bengal Tiger leaps out of her linen closet and pounces on him. It was the top story of just about every major news syndicate that night and clips of the incident ran for at least a week. When the police found the guy he was sobbing like a three-year-old, with his pants around his ankles and a pair of panties still on his head. The cat was sitting calmly on top of him purring and methodically grooming his glistening white cheeks. Guess he was comatose for a month. The media loved it and my kids did too.

"Daddy we want one. We want a tiger too," they pleaded.

"Sorry," I told them. "Not after the way you two handled that gerbil I bought you."

"How were we supposed to know that gerbils can't hang glide? It wasn't our fault.

Anyway, tigers are too big for that," Jane argued.

"What about Steve the iguana and his little incident at the nursing home? Your grandmother still doesn't have any dentures."

"Cats are very self sufficient. A tiger could practically take care of himself. I bet you wouldn't even notice we had one."

"Well, they look like they eat an awful lot. I just don't know if we could afford one."

"I'll get a paper route!" Ralph shouted enthusiastically.

"I'll sell my clarinet!" said Jane.

"All the same, we'll still have to talk it over with your mother."

"She'll agree! She said she wanted a watch dog."

"Yes, but she has allergies."

“Well, I’ve never heard of someone being allergic to tigers.”

It was hard to reason with that, and as soon as the tears started to well up in Jane’s eyes I knew I had lost the battle.

When we brought Mr. Kitty home for the first time the whole neighborhood was visibly envious. Ms. Johnson said their family was going to buy one the very next day. The Smiths said they’d get one in the summer, and so did the McMurrays. Only Ms. Ellensberry seemed uninterested. She sighed and made an off-hand remark about Mr. Kitty obviously being a sub-genus cross breed of the South Rotesian Diggerback Tiger and the forest dwelling Botswanian Tree Tiger, and not at all like the pure breed Asian hunting lion her family used to own. Of course she was just jealous. With the exception of the Terry family, who were busily rewiring their house after it was rampaged by a hoard of wandering rats last winter, everyone wanted a tiger of their own.

For weeks, there was a line of people who wanted to meet Mr. Kitty. It nearly sprawled around the whole block. We had to install bleachers after Bob Walton’s son broke his arm. He fell when a branch broke on a tree the kids usually hung from to watch our new pet. With that and all of Mr. Kitty’s toys, our yard was beginning to look like a circus.

He was great with children though, and seemed to like everyone. Joey Atkinson was the first to discover that Mr. Kitty could do tricks. After yanking too hard on his tail we all watched in amazement as Mr. Kitty was able to swallow Joey’s head completely! It was sensational, everyone wanted to try it. When we finally got around to making a waiting list, it was three weeks long.

It wasn’t all fun and games though, the problems were visible from the beginning. For some reason Mr. Kitty couldn’t seem to grasp the concept of a litter box. He was definitely very intelligent, but a rolled up newspaper was the only disciplinary aid we had and that made training very difficult. Moreover, cleaning the box was always a joint venture that required at least three strong backs to complete. Perhaps we just weren’t motivated.

There were the hairballs too. Baseball sized and soggy. They would’ve been manageable if they didn’t clog the air vents and have a knack for winding up in my coffee. Food was also a problem. Ralph’s paper route money just wasn’t enough to cover the one-hundred-and-fifty-pound bag of Meow Mix we needed every week. After all the dogs began to disappear from the neighborhood, we suspected even that wasn’t enough to quell our fuzzy little Asiatic hunting cat’s insatiable appetite. To top it off, Mr. Kitty seemed to constantly need to sharpen his claws. We had to replace our leather furniture with lawn chairs from K-Mart and install kevlar wallpapering after he committed an unspeakably savage act to our living room sofa. The final straw came after the catnip incident.

Little Timmy Wilkins came over to play with Mr. Kitty one stormy afternoon and brought along what we thought was a harmless toy cat ball. We noticed almost immediately that Mr. Kitty’s behavior was becoming strange, but we thought nothing about it. It wasn’t until he started to lick the living room windows that we became concerned about the toy ball’s contents. By then it was too late. No one could have guessed that catnip worked on tigers too. Without any warning he roared ferociously and leapt out the front door towards

43rd street. Apparently, through his feline-drug-induced hallucinations, our cat took some sort of fancy to Mr. Robinson's brand new cherry-red convertible BMW. It must have been mating season. By the time we got outside we could only cover the children's eyes and watch helplessly as Mr. Kitty made the most uncivilized advances toward the luxury automobile. Fortunately, poor Mr. Robinson came out with only a dislocated shoulder and a limp, but because he was struck by lightning on the golf course a week earlier, his injuries were slow to recover. Much to our dismay, Mr. Robinson's insurance policy did not cover damage inflicted by wild animals, so we were therefore responsible for the bill. Sadly, it was then that we decided Mr. Kitty would have to leave. The children were inconsolable.

"Please don't make Mr. Kitty leave daddy! We love him!" they pleaded. Weighing the situation for a moment, I decided a simple explanation would be best. "Now kids," I began reluctantly, "I know this is hard for you, but there is something you need to understand. You see, nature is a vast mercurially chaotic force unconquerable and untamable by the feeble ineffectual intellect of mortal mankind. It is mysteriously enigmatic, ultimately unpredictable, and best left alone. For millenniums, we as sentient organisms, due to our internal survival mechanisms, have been relentlessly obsessed with subduing and controlling this virulently transient phenomenon known as nature with calamitous results and little success. Mr. Kitty is part of that constantly changing force, kids, representing and embodying both the delightful and destructive elements that seem to tantalize and haunt us like some horribly enslaving addiction. Try as we may, we can never master the elusive force that is nature. This is why we have to get rid of Mr. Kitty. Do you understand?"

"Can we get a giraffe?"

"No children. Nature is indomitable."

"We want a giraffe!"

"I'm sorry kids. Nature is a force to be reckoned with. I mean it."

"How 'bout a zebra? Zebras don't look dangerous."

"Nope. He'll get us in the end." And just when it looked like they would finally listen to reason the Hotch family pulled up to their house next door with a nine-foot, seven-inch, two-thousand-three-hundred-forty-five-pound North American grizzly bear. The children went wild.