accolades from many respected bullfighting officials. He will retire rich and respected, to a large house with many mirrors from which he can view his butt from any angle. Someplace lovely.

Italy, perhaps.

Then there's Eugenio. Eugenio sees the bull charge and grabs his chest so hard he crushes the anti-anxiety pills into powder. He's having a mild heart attack. Oh, he'll live. Only after today, there will be no more bullfighting. No more money. What will he do? He will continue listening to the lemons. He will continue to be an average man, which will make him angry. Angrier than he's ever been. Because from now on he will have to live with what happened to his daughter.

And there are simply not enough pills in the world for that.

Then there are the rescuers. The brave, brave men. They make their way down from their seats and, in a spectacular display, tumble over themselves to jump over the callejon and be the first one into the ring to save me.

There is no need.

In a flicker, I slide to the ground, reach for my sword with both hands, and lie flat on my back. I angle the blade up, holding steady with both hands. When a bullfighter places a sword into the back of the bull, the blade slices not the heart itself, but only an aorta. It is a slower death, designed purely for the drama of the kill. So when this bull gallops over me, I catch him underneath; the sword slides deep into the center of his heart, and he dies instantly. It is illegal, but the quickest way, with the least pain.

In this way, Wild Mustang dies too.

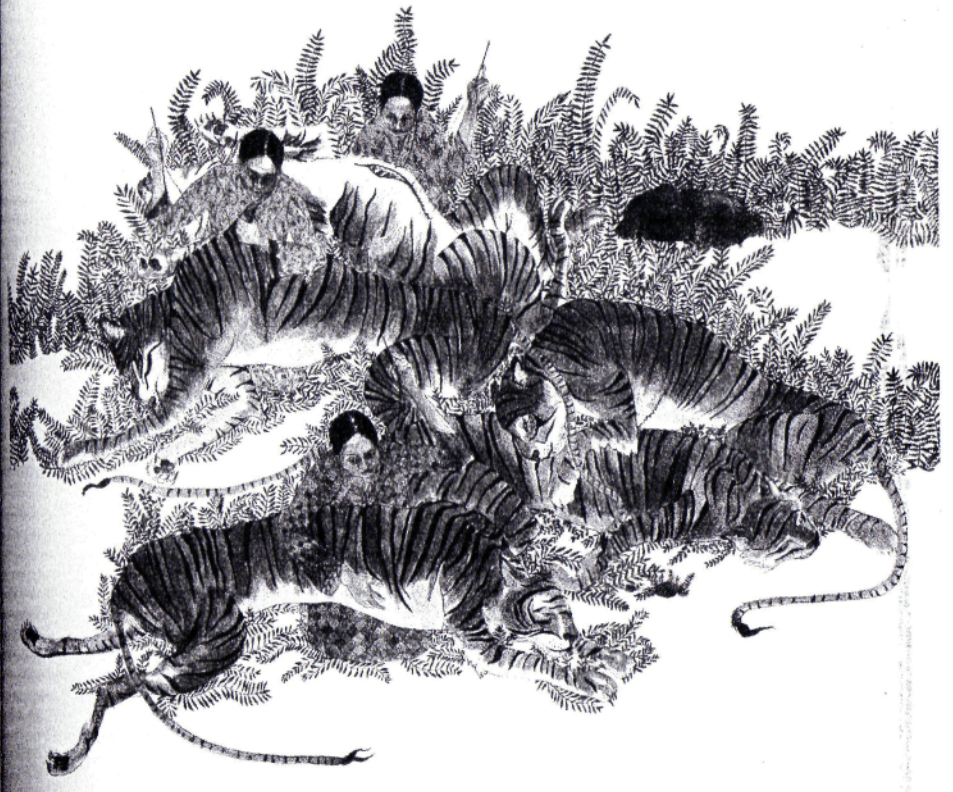
I suffer only a few cuts and bruises.

AIMEE BENDER

■

Tiger Mending

FROM *BlackBook*



MY SISTER GOT the job. She's the overachiever, and she went to med school for two years before she decided she wanted to be a gifted seamstress. (What? they said, on the day she left. A surgeon! they told her. You could be a tremendous surgeon! But she said she didn't like the late hours, she got too tired around midnight.) She has small-motor skills better than a machine; she'll fix your handkerchief so well you can't even see the stitches, like she became one with the handkerchief. I once split my lip, jumping from the tree, and she sewed it up, with ice and a needle she'd run through the fire. I never even had a scar, just the thinnest white line.

So of course, when the two women came through the sewing school, they spotted her first. She was working on her final exam, a lime-colored ball gown with tiny diamonds sewn into the collar, and she was fully absorbed in it, constructing infinitesimal loops, while they hovered with their severe hair and heady tree smell — like bamboo, my sister said — watching her work. My sister's so steady she didn't even flinch, but everyone else in class seized upon the distraction, staring at the two Amazonian women, both six feet tall and strikingly beautiful. When I met them later I felt like I'd landed straight inside a magazine ad. At the time, I was working at Burger King, as a block manager (there were two on the block), and I took any distraction offered me and used it to the hilt. Once, a guy came in and ordered a Big Mac, and for two days I told that story to every customer, and it's not a good story. There's so rarely any intrigue in this shabberdash world of burger warming, you take what you can get.

But my sister was born with supernatural focus, and the two women watched her and her alone. Who can compete? My sister's won all the contests she's ever been in, not because she's such an outrageous competitor, but because she's so focused in this gentle way. Why not win? Sometimes it's all you need to run the fastest, or to play the clearest piano, or to ace the standardized test, pausing at each question until it has slid through your mind to exit as a penciled-in circle.

In low, sweet voices, the women asked my sister if she'd like to see Asia. She finally looked up from her work. Is there a sewing

job there? They nodded. She said she'd love to see Asia, she'd never left America. They said, Well, it's a highly unusual job. May I bring my sister? she asked. She's never traveled either.

The two women glanced at each other. What does your sister do?

She's the manager of the Burger King down on Fourth.

Their disapproval was faint but palpable, especially in the upper lip.

She would simply keep you company?

What we are offering you is a position of tremendous privilege. Aren't you interested in hearing about it first?

My sister nodded lightly. It sounds very interesting, she said. But I cannot travel without my sister.

This is true. My sister, the one with that incredible focus, has a terrible fear of airplanes. Terrible. Incapacitating. The only way she can relax on a flight is if I am there, because I am always, always having some kind of crisis, and she focuses in and fixes me and forgets her own concerns. I become her ripped hemline. In general, I call her every night, and we talk for an hour, which is forty-five minutes of me, and fifteen minutes of her stirring her tea, which she steeps with the kind of Zen patience that would make Buddhists sit up in envy, and then breathe through their envy, and then move past their envy. I'm really really lucky she's my sister. Otherwise, no one like her would give someone like me the time of day.

The two Amazonian women, lousy with confidence, with their ridiculous cheekbones, in these long yellow print dresses, said OK. They observed my sister's hands quiet in her lap.

Do you get along with animals? they asked and she said, Yes. She loved every animal. Do you have allergies to cats? they asked, and she said, No. She was allergic only to pine nuts. The slightly taller one reached into her dress pocket, a pocket so well hidden inside the fabric it was like she was reaching into the ether of space, and from it her hand returned with an airplane ticket.

We are very happy to have found you, they said. The additional ticket will arrive tomorrow.

My sister smiled. I know her; she was probably terrified to see

that ticket, and also she really wanted to return to the diamond loops. She probably wasn't even that curious about the new job yet. She was and is stubbornly, mind-numbingly, interested in the present moment.

When we were kids, I used to come home and she'd be at the living room window. It was the best window in the apartment, looking out, in the far distance, on the tip of a mountain. For years I tried to get her to play with me, but she was unplayable. She'd stare out that window, never moving, for hours. By night, when she'd returned, I'd usually injured myself in some way or other, and I'd ask her about it as she tended to me; she said the reason she could pay acute attention was because of the window. It empties me out, she'd said, which scared me. No, she'd said, to my frightened face, and she'd sat on the edge of my bed and ran a washcloth over my forehead. It's good, she'd said. It makes room for other things.

Me? I'd asked, with hope, and she'd nodded. You.

We had no parents, by that point. They'd died at the hands of surgeons, which is the real reason my sister stopped medical school.

That night, after she took the job, she called me up and told me to quit my job, which was what I'd been praying for for months — that somehow I'd get a magical phone call telling me to quit my job because I was going on an exciting vacation. I threw down my BK apron, packed, and prepared as long an account of my life complaints as I could. On the plane, I asked my sister what we were doing, what her job was, but she refolded her tray table and said nothing. Asia, I said. What country? She stared out the porthole. It was the pilot who told us, as we buckled our seat belts; we were heading to Kuala Lumpur, straight into the heart of Malaysia.

Wait, where's Malaysia again? I whispered, and my sister drew a map on the napkin beneath her ginger ale.

During the flight, I drank Bloody Marys while my sister embroidered a doily. Even the other passengers seemed soothed by watching her work. I whispered all my problems into her ear and

she returned them back to me in slow sentences that did the work of a lullaby. My eyes grew heavy. During the descent, she gave the doily to the man across the aisle, worried about his ailing son, and the needlework was so elegant it made him feel better just holding it. That's the thing with handmade items. They still have the person's mark on them, and when you hold them, you feel less alone. This is why everyone who eats a Whopper leaves a little more depressed than they were when they came in. Nobody cooked that burger.

When we arrived, a friendly driver took us to a cheerful green hotel, where we found a note on the bed telling my sister to be ready at 6 A.M. sharp. It didn't say I could come, but bright and early the next morning, scrubbed and fed, we faced the two Amazons in the lobby, who looked scornfully at me and my unsteady hands — I sort of pick at my hair a lot — and asked my sister why I was there. Can't she watch? she asked, and they said they weren't sure. She, they said, might be too anxious.

I swear I won't touch anything, I said.

This is a private operation, they said.

My sister breathed. I work best when she's nearby, she said. Please.

And like usual, it was the way she said it. In that gentle voice that had a back to it. They opened the car door.

Thank you, my sister said.

They blindfolded us, for reasons of security, and we drove for more than an hour, down winding, screeching roads, parking finally in a place that smelled like garlic and fruit. In front of a stone mansion, two more women dressed in printed robes waved as we removed our blindfolds. These two were short. Delicate. Calm. They led us into the living room, and we hadn't been there for ten minutes when we heard the moaning.

A bad moaning sound. A real bad, real mournful moaning, coming from the north, outside, that reminded me of the worst loneliness, the worst long lonely night. The Amazonian with the short shining cap of hair nodded.

Those are the tigers, she said.

What tigers? I said.

Shh, she said. I will call her Sloane, for no other reason than it's a good name for an intimidating person.

Sloane said, Shh. Quiet now. She took my sister by the shoulders and led her to a wide window that looked out on the land. As if she knew, instinctively, how wise it was to place my sister at a window.

Watch, Sloane whispered.

I stood behind. The two women from the front walked into view and settled on the ground near some clumps of ferns. They waited. They were very still-minded, like my sister, that stillness of mind. That ability I will never have, to sit still. That ability to have the hands forget they are hands. They closed their eyes, and the moaning I'd heard before got louder, and then in the distance, I mean waaaay off, the moaning grew even louder, almost unbearable to hear, and limping from the side lumbered two enormous tigers. Wailing, as if they were dying. As they got closer, you could see that their backs were split open, sort of peeled, as if someone had torn them in two. The fur was matted, and the stripes hung loose, like packing tape, ripped off their bodies. The women did not seem to move, but two glittering needles worked their way out of their knuckles, climbing up out of their hands, and one of the tigers stepped closer. I thought I'd lose it; he was easily four times her size, and she was small, a tiger's snack, but he limped over, in his giantness, and fell into her lap. Let his heavy striped head sink to the ground. She smoothed the stripe back over, and the moment she pierced his fur with the needle, those big cat eyes dripped over with tears.

It was very powerful. It brought me to tears, too. Those expert hands, as steady as if they were holding a pair of pants, while the tiger's enormous head hung to the ground. My sister didn't move, but I cried and cried, seeing those giant broken animals resting in the laps of the small precise women. It is so often surprising, who rescues you at your lowest moment. When our parents died in surgery, the jerk at the liquor store suddenly became the nicest man alive, and gave us free cranberry juice for a year.

What happened to them? I asked Sloane. Why are they like that?

She lifted her chin slightly. We do not know, but they emerge from the forests, peeling. More and more of them. Always torn at the central stripe.

Do they ever eat people?

Not so far, she said. But they do not respond well to fidgeting, she said, watching me clear out my thumbnail with my other thumbnail.

Well, I'm not doing it.

You have not been asked.

They are so sad, said my sister.

Well, wouldn't you be? If you were a tiger, peeling? Sloane put a hand on my sister's shoulder. When mending was done, all four — women and beasts — sat in the sun for at least half an hour, tigers' chests heaving, women's hands clutched in their fur. The day grew warm. In the distance, the moaning began again, and two more tigers limped up while the first two stretched out and slept. The women sewed the next two, and the next. One had a bloody rip across its white belly.

After a few hours of work, the women put their needles away, the tigers raised themselves up, and without any lick or acknowledgment, walked off, deep into that place where tigers live. The women returned to the house. Inside, they smelled so deeply and earthily of cat that they were almost unrecognizable. They also seemed lighter, nearly giddy. It was lunchtime. They joined us at the table, where Sloane served an amazing soup of curry and prawns.

It is an honor, said Sloane, to mend the tigers.

I see, said my sister.

You will need very little training, since your skill level is already so high.

But my sister seemed frightened, in a way I hadn't seen before. She didn't eat much of her soup, and she returned her eyes to the window, to the tangles of fluttering leaves.

I would have to go find out, she said finally, when the chef entered with a tray of mango tartlets.

Find out what?

Why they peel, she said. She hung her head, as if she was ashamed of her interest.

You are a mender, said Sloane, gently. Not a zoologist.

I support my sister's interest in the source, I said.

Sloane flinched every time I opened my mouth.

The source, my sister echoed.

The world has changed, said Sloane, passing a mango tartlet to me, reluctantly, which I ate, pronto.

It was unlike my sister, to need the cause. She was fine, usually, with just how things were. But she whispered to me, as we roamed outside looking for clues, of which we found none; she whispered that she felt something dangerous in the peeling, and she felt she would have to know about it in order to sew the tigers suitably. I am not worried about the sewing, she said. I am worried about the gesture I place inside the thread.

I nodded. I am a good fighter, is all. I don't care about thread gestures, but I am willing to throw a punch at some tiger asshole if need be.

We spent the rest of the day outside, but there were no tigers to be seen — where they lived was somewhere far, far off, and the journey they took to arrive here must have been the worst time of their lives, ripped open like that, suddenly prey to vultures and other predators, when they were usually the ones to instill fear.

We spent that night at the mansion, in feather beds so soft I found them impossible to sleep in. Come morning, Sloane had my sister join the two women outside, and I cried again, watching the big tiger head at her feet while she sewed with her usual stillness. The three together were unusually productive, and sewn tigers piled up around them. But instead of that giddiness that showed up in the other women, my sister grew heavier that afternoon, and said she was sure she was doing something wrong. Oh no, said Sloane, serving us tea. You were remarkable.

I am missing something, said my sister. I am missing something important.

Sloane retired for a nap, but I snuck out. I had been warned, but really, they were treating me like shit anyway. I walked a long distance, but I'm a sturdy walker, and I trusted where my feet went, and I did not like the sight of my sister staring into her teacup. I did not like the feeling it gave me, of worrying. Before I left, I sat her in front of the window and told her to empty herself, and her eyes were grateful in a way I was used to feeling in my own face but was not accustomed to seeing in hers.

I walked for hours, and the wet air clung to my shirt and hair. I took a nap inside some ferns. The sun was setting, and I would've walked all night, but when I reached a cluster of trees something felt different. There was no wailing yet, but I could feel the stirring before the wailing, which is almost worse. I swear I could hear the dread. I climbed up a tree and waited.

I don't know what I expected — people, I guess. People with knives, cutting in. I did not expect to see the tigers themselves, jumpy, agitated, yawning their mouths beyond wide, the wildness in their eyes, and finally the yawning so large and insistent that they split their own back in two. They all did it, one after the other — as if they wanted to peel the fur off their backs, and then, amazed at what they'd done, the wailing began.

One by one, they left the trees and began their slow journey to be mended. It left me with the oddest, most unsettled feeling.

I walked back when it was night, under a half-moon, and found my sister still at the window.

They do it to themselves, I whispered to her, and she took my hand. Her face lightened. Thank you, she said. She tried to hug me, but I pulled away. No, I said, and in the morning, I left for the airport.