

## Tyger

by Dan A. Cardoza

Her mother had warned her about the dangers of speaking to strangers, for crap-sakes. Felice had just turned fourteen and knew the hell better, sometimes more so than her mother. Felice hadn't been allowed to drive his pick-em-up truck either. But, if living had been dependent on logic alone, none of us would have made it this far.

That night, Felice's step-daddy Jack, and her black and blue-eyed mother, Sandy, had been distracted by the popular T.V. show Jeopardy. The show's beloved host, Alex Trebek, had just returned from another round of nuclear treatment.

The couple's befuddled expressions had less to do with Alex's funky selection of final Jeopardy. It has more to do with how he'd gotten soft inside. He'd appeared kinder, more gracious, having berated his guests less frequently. For a sadist like Jack, Alex's bitter tongue had been watered down somehow. There had been no sign of cognitive dissonance or guest anxiety. Nor the usual tension, or social awkwardness, typically instigated by Alex, the shows passive-aggressive host.

*Looking into the eyes of death will do that to you,* Felice recalled her mother saying. Felice had been slinking in the shadows near the kitchen counter. Felice spied Jack as he shot her mother a smirk, one that quickly turned it into a grimace. Jack loved keeping his woman off balance that way.

Cat-like, Felice slipped the keys from inside the lacquered, Chinese rice bowl. The bowl had been situated in the middle of the kitchen's scratched Formica counter, next to the dirty dishes. The full set of bowls had been a mutual gift to the Jeopardy darlings. In haste, they'd picked them up at McCarran International, five long years ago, after they'd gotten hitched by an Elvis preacher in Las Vegas.

They'd eaten burlap sacks full of white rice ever since. So much so, Felice swore she'd begun to dream in Cantonese. Felice's mother had turned the black key bowl into an orphan, a few months prior, when she'd smashed most of the matching set up against the kitchen wall. "Too much Jack Daniels, and P.M.S.," she'd said. Breaking shit would be something Felice had inherited, but more often than not, it had been the more delicate formal ware inside her.

Paducah, Kentucky, had been where her stepdad Jack beat her mom. Lately, Jack had treated Felice as if she had been her mom's apprentice. He'd begun to berate and tongue-lash her, eye-stab dirty looks her way. But, unlike her mother, at least not yet, Felice hadn't learned how to kill her self-esteem. But, Felice had been a good student, figuring out how her mother had slowly become Jack's accomplice in her self-destruction.

Though she studied hard, Felice hadn't learned how certain emotions and feelings could be empowering. Just recently, she'd had what seemed like obsessive, celestial thoughts, *If Jack lays one more itty-bitty, teeny-weeny, finger on mom or me, he'll be walking around with extra ventilation in his skull.*

Notwithstanding, a kind of mental pressure had been building.

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Felice throttled the Ford F-150 pickup north, along the meandering Ohio River. Her impulsive behavior had been meant to defuse an atomic meltdown. Beyond the radioactive chaos and her impulsive behavior, Felice had no other concrete plans.

But our girl had been the adventurous type, and a quick study. As the iridescent arrow in the dash conjured a full tank of gas, so too, it pointed east. East it would be. Felice tromped down the gas pedal and had commanded two hundred and thirty stallions, under the hood, to race ahead in the road.

That's when it hatched. Plan B. She'd travel Local Route 60 and intercept Interstate 64, through Louisville, and then on to Lexington. And after, she'd slip out the back door of Kentucky into West Virginia. Once at Huntington, Felice would pull over and contact her distant cousins. Two girls who'd lived in a hollow, far away from the disaster she had been leaving. It would be a new beginning, a universe away from her twisted and sociopathic stepdad, Jack.

Maybe she'd tell the cops, cut a deal about borrowing the truck, a small price for freedom after being terrorized. She'd explain how sick and cruel Jack had been, give them examples, and mention how her mother was so done with him, how her mother had once called the police about all the abuse. And by the time they'd arrived, how Jack had talked her into doing all the confessing, "It wasn't him," after all, she'd said.

Felice would say how her mother had confessed about her, causing the ugly bruises on her throat. Her mother had said, "I was depressed; it was from a failed suicide attempt, with a rope and the clothe line." Truth be told, the demon she had loved so much and depended upon

had nearly strangled her to death with her sweat pants cord. To Jack, control had been an aphrodisiac.

The someplace, the future where she'd head, didn't matter to the pissed off Felice, as she straightened out the curves in the direction of U.S. Route 60. Any place would do, as long as there would be some sort of emotional freedom waiting there. As Felice drove, she'd hoped that her mother would make it somehow, and break the fragile pact with her version of adjunct evil. Felice certainly wasn't going to have any of that. If it meant running away from everything, and everyone, so be it.

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Up ahead, in her racing headlights, a mammoth dog appeared out of nowhere in the middle of the road. It sat crouched on the double yellows as if waiting. She could hear the loud crash in her thoughts and envision the bloody entrails on the crumpled hood. The Sphinx of an object appeared rooted in intent and purpose.

As Felice skittered off the edge of the road to avoid the animal, the pickup fishtailed and performed half circles with the slippery steering wheel. The empty cargo bed had been reason enough for Felice's struggles. There hadn't been enough weight in the back for good traction. After a full donut, she'd come to a complete stop.

As if waking from a dusty nightmare, Felice had found herself near the back edge of the graveled turn out. A place, if you were lucky, where you could change a flat tire, or if you were in high school, a locale to guzzle cheap beer and cop a feel. As the truck emerged from the cloud of dust, Felice's heart skipped and scratched, like one of those vintage 45s.

"Had it been a bear," she'd asked herself, "a deer, El Chupacabra?" Felice had been asking herself surreal Jeopardy questions. With her windows down, she'd noticed the unmistakable odor of a full cat box. A friend of hers had a Burmese. One whiff had been enough to trigger her olfactory alarms. Each tiny molecule flashed red warning lights. Something outside had been dangerous and feral.

After she'd gasped and coughed, Felice had caught her breath and had focused her eyes through what had been left of the filthy smoke directly in front of her.

There, in the dust-stained carnival lights, had stood a fully grown Kashmir Tiger.

Felice had known for certain what she'd seen, but of course, she'd bet her life it had been a hallucination. Maybe all of this had been a condensed kaleidoscope of pure madness caused by

all the stress she'd been experienced, or the impact of what it had meant to run away forever finally. She hadn't felt crazy, which had been a good and bad thing.

Deep down, she'd known she had been too mature for one of those cheesy, childhood Cheshire Cat nervous breakdowns. After a quick come to Jesus moment with what remained of her sanity, Felice had known for certain she hadn't been seen things.

"Jesus Christ," she'd said in a panic, almost yelling, "It's a damned tiger."

As quick as she could power her windows up, Tyger had strolled around to the rusty back bumper. There, his haunches had coiled as taught as the leaf springs under the truck's undercarriage. Siamese and nonchalantly, Tyger drew down on his thick bones, muscle, and sinewed anatomy. Then he'd exploded in a burst of controlled energy. What seemed to flow had been furred skin and mercury. As he leaped into the bed of the truck, the crescent moon had smudged what remained of his shadow on the ground in shades of pumpkin.

As Felice frantically pounded at the door locks, Tyger had spoken through the opened back glass slider. Tyger ordered Felice, "Whatever you do, don't shut the back window and don't turn around. You certainly don't want to press your luck. Deep down in the furnace of my stomach, I still lust for the exquisite flavor of humans. Felice, I can't tell you how many Sika deer have attempted to make eye contact with me, or how many of them I've eaten. While you're at it, turn off the headlights."

Felice had practiced the word no, a thousand times. After all, she had been rebellious, but she had been far from being dense. And so she obeyed and darkened the high beams. It's then she'd placed the ignition key on the seat beside her, squared her shoulders, and had begun staring off into the building architecture of night, just as he'd demanded.

Felice had become an actor in a horror play with a cast of two. She couldn't help but obsess the beautiful literary stanzas her loser mother had taught her as a child. The prose had been titled Tyger, penned by the dead and buried existential writer named William Blake. *Tyger Tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night, what immortal hand or eye could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

There had been nothing, nothing but a calming bustle and thrum in the shadows of the rearview, the deep timbre sound of controlled breathing.

"Felice, I heard that," he'd said. "Felice, your mother has her problems, but she's not a loser. It's just that there's a certain kind of love, a love you can only feel if you are weak inside.

Of course, it's the wrong kind of love. There are times in life when a women's heart can grow weak. If it does, it can become fair game, easy prey, not unlike a distracted rabbit or insecure deer."

"The old school Royals always spoke in such beautiful prose. William Blake, you've touched my heart, dear." Felice had stared through the windshield. She had begun to feel a strange kinship.

"Felice, what is your first question?" Tyger had said.

Felice's mind had begun doing backflips. She'd checked off all the mental boxes of lucid aberrations. But all this had seemed real. Now, her biggest fear had been saving herself, not her sanity.

Somehow, she'd instantly gone back in time. She had returned to Louisville, Kentucky, at the circus, with her birth father. She'd just turned four. It had been her birthday present. There was this tiger, in an ornate, gilded cage. The beautiful enclosure had been fastened to the top of a slow-rolling art nouveau flat carriage.

The tiger had been making eye contact with Felice. As if in the king's parade, the elegant Lusitano and Lipizzan Liechtenstein horses performed perfect dressage, dressed smartly in their lacquered hooves, as they had pulled the tiger's carriage forward. First, they strode beside Felice and then away in the direction of darkness, so prevalent that day, just outside the parted canvas doorway of the main tent. Into the night, they'd gone, quietly into a calamity of stars. Oh, what a special day that been for our Felice, part waking, part dreaming.

And it had been the last day that Felice would ever see her beloved father. A few weeks after all her newfound wonder and excitement, while at the circus, her father had been killed by an I.E.D. in Helmand Province, nearly two-hundred kilometers from Kandahar, in the beautiful, clear mountains. Felice had been angry with herself for missing him so much.

Here with Tyger, this impossible evening had somehow reminded Felice of that terrible and fearful day she'd buried so long ago. So long ago, Felice had asked herself, where had all the pain come from?

Balancing the stepping stones in the swiftly flowing river of the surreal, Felice continued across the dark waters and had asked her first question.

"I can't believe I have a question, but what do you want with me?"

“I neither need nor want for anything, dear Felice. Consider yourself blessed for not shitting your britches for a starter. You know it’s happened before, I’m one ferocious S.O.B., if I say so myself. Relax, if I wanted, I could have skinned and eaten you, bitter parts and all by now.”

“Then why, why are you here?” Felice had asked. Her head had turned into a fever storm. Her thoughts were hot, like the night she had a fever, and her mother had placed her in the ice-filled tub. She could have sworn she’d been a mermaid.

“My sole intention is to empower you,” said the massive tiger, his head twice the size of a lion.

“Empower me? Empower me to go home, to that damned double-wide trailer, and that dumpster-fire of a stepfather?”

“Felice, there’s nothing I can do about the past or your mother for now. I am here for you and you alone. Your mother will take care of herself. I’ve been sent by all the goodness and wonder that still exists in the world. Believe it or not, something deep inside you requested me.” Tyger yawned as if he’d been bored, but he hadn’t been. His mouth had widened like a dark cave in a sliver of moonlight, emptying thousands of bats. His canines glistened as if they’d been Siberian sabers.

“You are a hallucination, Tyger, just a damned hallucination. No one cares enough to save me, including you or my dead father.”

From somewhere deep in his belly, Tyger had growled. His yowl had the low decibels of the beginning of thunder. The compression of carbon dioxide had nearly exploded the cab windows. The windshield wipers manically chattered against the thick glass. All that lingered had been feted and fouled with the graveyard stench of water and old flowers in polluted vases. It permeated everything inside Jack’s pickup cab. The tingling vibration in Felice’s stomach couldn’t have felt more real or exciting.

“I’m no such thing—a meager hallucination, how dare you?” said Tyger.

After a very long pause, Tyger had clawed back his temper from the primordial instincts of fang and hiss. He hadn’t been hungry. It had more to do with being hurt. But, he wouldn’t let Felice know this. He had a Kashmirian reputation to maintain.

“Felice, I am so sorry about your father, but the afterlife is out of my hands, dear, and not my cup of tea anyway. But I promise you will have a wonderful life. An experience you will

control. You and only you will be in charge of what you become and who you are deep down inside. You will be the keeper of your self-esteem and soul. No one has the right to hurt you, especially in the place your life force exists. I know because I am going to instruct you on how to regain your power. That's why I'm here to give you simple instructions, Felice. Something you can benefit from the balance of your life."

If tigers could look pleased, Tyger did.

"Oh, so now you know what I need? And, you can see into my future?"

"Yes!"

"Really?"

"Really, Felice."

"Okay, I'll listen. What the hell do I have to lose? I might as well go crazy in style."

"You aren't and won't be going crazy anytime soon. I can assure you of that, Felice. Although dear, it has served your species well at times. How about that Descartes guy, the one who slept in the ovens? And how about the one-eared dude, that Van Gogh? But, I digress, sorry."

"Preach, Tyger!" Felice almost smiled. She couldn't believe her sense of humor.

"It's very simple, Felice, my message. It's about whom you are and self-worth. It's about what you have to offer this marvelous world we all share."

"Oh, okay."

"Felice, in the glove box, you know there is a Glock .40. Jack thinks he loaded the gun with hollow points for just about anyone other than himself. But that's not true. He loaded it for you. By that, I mean, you and his semi-automatic are going to control the agenda going forward. You and the Glock are going to speak clearly and loudly to Jack."

"What, me, what?"

"In a quick minute, Felice, I'm going to leap out of the truck's bed and into the tree line to my right. First, I have simple yet effective instructions for you. When you arrive back home later tonight, and you will, I want you to carry the Glock into the double-wide, with the barrel pointed down, at your side. Once in the house, Jack will approach you, with all the anger and yelping a paltry jackal can bring. Engage his anger, his eyes, as he approaches, and then raise the gun with both hands. Please make sure you point it straight between his two Pithecanthropus eyebrows. And then wait."

“Oh my God, I can’t do that.”

“Of course you can, Felice or I wouldn’t be here. Believe me. Jack will stop dead in his tracks. A narcissistic sociopath values his own life above all else. The standoff will last maybe a minute. But it will seem like an eternity. This works in your favor. It will get his wheels and gears turning in his head. At some point, he’s going to glance at your trigger finger, Felice. Your trigger finger has to think like Tyger. It has to be all about control and purposeful violence. You have to commit to my instructions, if this is to work, *capiche?*”

“I guess!?”

With ferocious intent, Tyger had puffed up his massive jowls and shuttered, “In matters of life and death, there is no guesswork. Guessing means you’re willing to risk giving up your life for his pathetic ass. Finally, once he engages your trigger finger, take another step toward him, force eye contact again. All he will see is the glint of two shiny, granite tombstones. Going forward, he will never chance to bother you again. You will be saving your life and possibly your mother’s, unless she’s completely given up. In that case, she’s already dead. Trust me, Felice, I know these things.”

“Calm down Tyger, Mr. Tyger, whatever you call yourself. O.M.G., I get it, enough already.”

“I’ve made it crystal clear then, Felice, I’m glad you feel me. By the way, we won’t need to meet again, like this anyway, or in any real capacity. I’m not your B.F.F. I am Tyger, that’s who I am, who I choose to be. If you sense me inside you, name me whatever the hell you like.”

“Alright, I get it, somehow.” Said Felice, sadly.

It’s then Tyger had completed his task. Tyger boomed and fractured the darkness in a deafening roar, a sound that could only be measured against the deepest silence known to humankind. As quickly as the commotion was settled, Tyger gathered his bad-ass self and leaped into what can only be described as a celestial black hole near the tree line.

After the longest time, in reality, seconds, the pickup bed ceased bounding and shaking. Relieved, Felice gathered up her courage and quickly turned to her right. In a wash of moonshine, anxious tree limbs switched the black hole shut. It’s then the woods regained all composure.



Before Felice headed home, she had thrown the pickup in reverse, braked, and paused. She'd then stared through the dusty headlamps at what appeared to be large paw prints scattered in the loose gravel.

No, Felice hadn't gone crazy after all. And Felice would be going home.

As she headed back along the Ohio River, she'd powered the cab's windows back up. Then she had reached behind her head and latched shut the sliding, glass window. In the dissipating funk of cat, she allowed herself to imagine a future with her in it.

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As Felice had driven down the road in the trailer court, she couldn't believe the bug speck in the windshield had been her mother. Near the end of the lane, her mother had grown the size of Alice in Wonderland. She'd been waiting there next to the fully packed suitcases.

Felice had quietly brought the truck to a stop. "Mom, what gave you the courage finally leave?"

"Honey, I sure in the hell don't know. It was like there was this gnawing sensation deep inside of me."

"Gnawing?" Felice smirked as if she'd known how to keep a secret.

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Along the great Ohio River, heading north at first, Felice and her mother couldn't help but laugh at the rebellious suitcases as they insisted on smacking against the steel walls of the truck bed. Jack's truck, and how the truck had been in her mother's name all along. Her mother had told Felice how Jack had burned up all his cache and credit years ago.

It would be a long ride, all the way to North Carolina and Elizabeth City, out near the coast, where there would be safety and a new future.

As they drove off into a blanket of new stars, Felice strained to look up at the easterly sky. She'd finally found it, the Chinese White Tyger constellation (西方白虎/[Pinyin](#)/ Xīfāng Báihǔ). It had shown brighter than all the rest.