

## **Tiger in the Bathtub**

On the day of Ming the tiger's arrest, my body turns liquid. It was known for three years that day would come, and my body had practiced its trick for four years before that. "You can't hide a beast like that," my father says, one day after he found out the tiger existed, a year and a half before the tiger was taken.

"This is Harlem," I wanted to say, two paces unsure and one pace too shy, "anything can happen." My father drums five fingers on the breakfast table. He grunts as he reads the newspaper. He doesn't look at me. I wait with my hands clasped. In the kitchen or in the hall, listening with my back against the wall. I wait for words that come in variations of four.

"Get me the \_\_\_\_"

"Where is the \_\_\_\_"

"Go to your \_\_\_\_"

My father likes counting by four.

I count my fingers and think of Ming in apartment in 5E. He was a cub when I first heard about him. On the day of Eid prayer, while the morning is still dark, my father and I walk to the mosque. I am wearing one new hijab and two new shoes. My father doesn't say any words, so we listen to birds stirring to the distant call for prayer. They think it's a song.

In the mosque my father disappears behind a screen divider and joins men whose voices make it hard to listen for him. I sit behind two old women and press my hands between my knees. It takes six seconds for my fingers to turn pink.

"They say someone bought a tiger cub here and is hiding it," One woman says, the back of her scarf a swirl of pink, purple and blue.

I lose my father's voice to the noise on the other side of the divider. I blink twice.

"Oh yes," the other woman responds, and her body leans towards her friend. "He lives in my complex, actually."

I watch my fingers, so pink I wait for them to burst.

“He isn’t hiding it, really” she continues, “he’s very proud of it. Some construction worker who likes exotic pets. All of the neighbors know about it, too. I heard about it all the way down on the first floor.”

I imagine the woman in the colorful scarf’s reaction. Five manicured fingers hovering over one open mouth. “Oh, what a waste!” She sighs, “That tiger must’ve been so expensive, and that man will just get caught, after all.”

The woman who lives in the complex has a bad hip. She uses the cane her son bought especially for her and never leaves the first floor. She didn’t have to go anywhere to hear about Ming. I think of my father, across the divider, too far to hear the women’s voices. I spell the word *s-e-c-r-e-t*.

On our way home, I don’t think of holding my father’s hand. My head is swimming with new words; two old women, one tiger, and one new secret. My father hums to himself and walks ahead. I scuff my new shoes and hum a little too. When we make it to our front door, I glance over my shoulder and see one old woman, leaning on her cane and entering the complex across the street. Ming was eight weeks old when I find out we were neighbors.

I was eight years old when my father brought his friends into our apartment. He told me to wait in our one bathroom and came to lock the door after me.

“Can a tiger fit in a bathtub?” I said and sat in the tub with two knees to my chest. I watched one of my father’s hands settle over the doorknob while the other slipped in his pocket. He squinted his eyes at me, he rubbed his head. His face said that was too many words.

“No,” My father sighed, and voices began to murmur, somewhere else in the house. “tigers don’t belong in bathtubs. Water does.”

“How much water?” I pinch the side of my leg once. My question is three words this time. It’s careful this time.

“You don’t count water like that.” My father says and shuts the door. I listened to his two feet walking away. The slow rise of voices after that. I think I hear him laugh.

In the tub, I spelled the word *b-o-d-y*. In the tub I couldn’t stretch my legs. I was bigger than a body of water.

At a park near our home, my father looks at his reflection in the wishing fountain. He stands over the water and throws one coin in. He smiles privately twice. I am still eight when I wish to be the uncounted water in the fountain. We wait until the sun turns orange to start walking home.

At the crosswalk, a man wearing a striped neon vest and one hard hat passes. My father stares ahead, and in my throat, words are jumping.

“Where is Ming?” I want to say, “Where does he sleep?” I have three minutes to say anything at all.

Instead, I reach for my father’s hand and hold my breath when his head turns down towards me. He does not see the man in the striped neon vest. His eyes are swimming with a four-word question.

*What are you \_\_\_?*

My body becomes the fountain. I blur my eyes and stop counting; I don’t ask questions. My father sees his reflection, his face swims to the surface. He looks at me longer and lets me hold his hand. We don’t talk on our way home, and I think of Ming, curled in a bathtub; one tiger pretending to be human.

I am fifteen when my father says a new set of four words. He strolls into the kitchen, holding a rolled newspaper in one hand, one cheery smile stretching across his face. “They caught that tiger!” He says.

It takes two seconds for my blood to become bathroom tile, to become an empty bathtub. My father drops the newspaper on the breakfast table, my hands shoot out to grab it. I forget to clasp them; I forget to wait.

I read: *425-POUND TIGER DISCOVERED IN HARLEM RESIDENCE*. I close my eyes. I think of the construction man, who will come home to an empty bathtub, and the woman in the colorful scarf, who will hear the news too late. I think of Ming’s four legs and two eyes. The five stories his captors climbed to reach the apartment door. Four hundred and twenty-five is too big for a bathtub, it’s too big for an apartment. I open my eyes. My father’s voice says words, he floats around the kitchen, his face is wild with the news. “Right here in Harlem!” He exclaims, again and again. Two words swim through me, over and over. I struggle to breathe. I drum five fingers on the breakfast table. I don’t look at him.