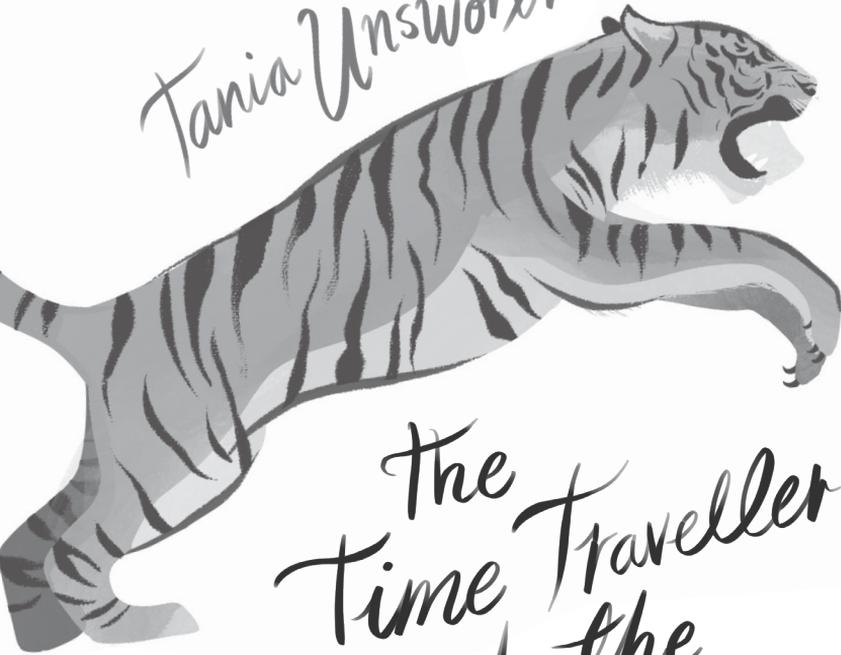


Tania Unsworth



The Traveller
and the
TIGER

ZEPHYR

An imprint of Head of Zeus

First published in the UK in 2020 by Zephyr,
an imprint of Head of Zeus Ltd

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN (HB): 9781788541701
ISBN (ANZTPB): 9781800240803
ISBN (E): 9781788541695

Typeset and designed by Ben Prior & Heather Ryerson

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,
Croydon, CR0 4YY



Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG
WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM





1946. CENTRAL INDIA.

It was so still, John was sure it was dead. He didn't know how long he'd been standing there, rigid with shock and disbelief. The birds had risen shrieking from the trees and answering cries of alarm had filled the forest. Now a hush had fallen over the clearing. John stepped forward, still holding the gun in both hands, his eyes locked on the body in the grass. It lay with its back to him, its colour even more improbable in the hard, open glare of the midday sun. He took a few more steps and stopped, his heart thudding. Insects pulsed steadily in the undergrowth and an invisible woodpecker tapped, paused, and tapped again.

John leaned closer, craning his neck.

The tiger snarled and twisted with shocking ferocity, striking too fast for John to see. He felt his feet leave the ground; a confusion of sky, muscled fur and burning breath. Then pain tore through his body, and the world went out.

It was dark when he opened his eyes. He was half on his back, half on his side. There were stars in the sky, and in the corner of his vision, the black shapes of trees. His gun lay nearby, moonlight glinting on the barrel, although he couldn't reach it. Something hot and vastly heavy was preventing him from moving his legs. He raised his head.

His heart staggered and seemed to stop.

The tiger was lying on top of him, pinning him from the waist down. John could smell the sharp, musky, overpowering scent of its skin, could see the slope of its back, ten shades darker than the night sky. As he stared, the slope rose a fraction and he felt a shudder run through the tiger's body.

It was still alive!

Every atom in John's body froze. Then his heart bounded into frenzy, and the stars above him trembled, as if the sky itself was being shaken. Any

second now, the tiger would turn and kill him. John wished he was already dead, just to have it over and done with, just to stop the awful pounding in his chest. With a great effort, he managed to raise his right hand. He clutched the front of his shirt and waited.

Nothing moved. Only the cold night breeze in the grass, and the slope of the tiger's back as it breathed.

No tiger lay out in the open, especially one that was wounded. John didn't need Mandeep to tell him that. It would drag itself to cover if it could. He felt another breath fill the tiger's body and pass slowly away.

The animal was too hurt to seek refuge. It couldn't move, any more than he could. They were in the same boat, the tiger and him. For a second, John had an image of a fishing vessel with narrow hull and snug canopy, the tiger steering with a long oar at the stern, while John kept watch at the bow. The image was so clear and so bizarre, he felt a spark of hope. Perhaps he was dreaming. Fast asleep under a mosquito net in his bedroom at home. Safe.

Then the pain came back. It came suddenly, as

if – like the tiger – it had been waiting to strike, spreading from his right leg in a knife-sharpened wave. He heard himself groan, and as if in answer, the distant *whoop-whoop* of langur monkeys. The sky blurred.

Time passed. He couldn't tell if it was a minute or an hour. He found the pain was slightly less if he twisted his shoulder to one side. He grabbed a clump of grass to hold himself in place and clenched his teeth.

His leg must be broken, he thought. It was a miracle he wasn't dead. The tiger could have killed him easily. Mandeep said...

His head swam, his hold on the grass slippery with sweat.

Mandeep said that a tiger's forepaw was powerful enough to knock a full-grown bull off its feet, and deft enough to catch a passing fly. Once, during a hunt, a tiger had sprung from the bushes and leaped over the head of one of the beaters. It had barely brushed the man as it passed. Yet when the others went to help the beater to his feet, they found him dead. The tiger had snapped his neck as if it were a twig.

If a tiger wants to kill you, Mandeep had once told John, there is no power on earth that can stop it.

It didn't want to kill me, John thought. *It was only defending itself.*

His mind wandered. Back at home they would have missed him by nightfall, although it would have been pointless to send a search party. They would be waiting for first light before setting out to look for him. By then it might be too late. John wondered how his parents would feel if he died. Sad, of course. But mostly disappointed at how badly he had let them down.

The pain had grown distant. In its place was a creeping chill, as if his bones were turning to ice.

He stared at the tiger's dark bulk. Its breath seemed slower than before, and he found himself counting each rise and fall.

One... two...

Perhaps if he tried, he could count them in to morning, he and the tiger, together in the same boat.

Eight... nine...

The boat had a blue canopy; water droplets flew, sparkling as the long oar dipped. All he had to do

was concentrate, and he could count them in to shore, across the teeming, earth-brown river.

John had loosened his grip on the clump of grass some time ago. Now, barely knowing what he was doing, he lifted his hand and placed it on the tiger's back, palm flat against the warm, silky hide.

Thirty-seven... thirty...

The sky grew pearly and the low mist of dawn gathered above the tall grasses, turning their tips to silver. The sound of birds filled the air with a hundred different trills and babbles and whistling calls. But John was hardly aware of any of it. Somewhere, between one number and the next, he had hesitated. He had lost count. And now there was no point starting again.

The tiger lay still beneath his hand.

Far above, a vulture circled on broad, unhurried wings. John followed it with his eyes, feeling his mind drift from his body. He was with the vulture, looking down on himself. He saw his own face turned to the sky, saw the motionless body of the tiger. It looked far smaller than he remembered, already turning pale. The living flame of its skin

fading to the colour of grass at the end of summer.

A terrible grief filled John's heart. A sense of wrongness that could never be put right. Tears rose in his eyes and ran unchecked down the side of his face. He heard a cry, the thump of running feet. The men in the search party were here. Mandeep was leaning over him, touching his hand.

John tried to speak but no words came.

'Be still,' Mandeep said.

He was carried home, one of the servants running ahead to fetch the doctor from town. His broken leg would never fully heal. He would always walk with a limp, although in time he would get used to it. In time, he would get used to many things. A new home, a new country, a different way of thinking about the world.

But all his life – even when he was an old man – he would carry the sense of wrongness he'd felt that morning when the tiger died. As if something had happened which wasn't meant to happen. As if a mistake had been made in the universe. And because of it, he would live his life the same way he walked.

Always just a little out of step.