

Oh, What A Beast May Teach Us

A Short Story



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CONTENTS

1. Chapter 1	1
2. Chapter 2	6
3. Chapter 3	11
4. Chapter 4	14

CHAPTER 1

The tavern wasn't exactly a four-star establishment. Hell, one star would have been pushing it to be honest. It would *not* have passed inspection of those hoity-toity folks down in the lower 48. Unfortunately, that's what you get in the deep woods of Alaska. These buildings just don't stay new for long. However, it was one of two in this small town, and it attracted some interesting people. Usually, not the most proper, but you could always be guaranteed a laugh or two. Anyone who was old enough, and had a strong enough liver came into this "malodorous atrocity", these are my words. A few patrons have called the "Old N' Dingy Tavern" a cozy place to warm up from the snow and blistering winds. Although, the name did not inspire great confidence for newcomers or travelers passing by onto somewhere more... interesting. To be honest, we kind of liked it that way. Us folk who live off grid enjoy our solitude.

Immediately, the first sense that is triggered as you enter our town's favorite watering hole was the smell. The odor of spoiled beer and stale tobacco smoke filled the air making its impression on the furniture and walls. Over time, it turned anything worthwhile inside into a rusty

brown color. The chairs all have pieces missing; some chairs only have three of their original legs. Others, no back to them. This created an entertaining sight when the old-timer alcoholics came in from the woods and mines. You can't go a night without having some loud inebriated gentlemen, if you can call them that, fall face first onto the floor. Which of course, was followed by a cacophony of laughter from the flock of intoxicated idiots.

Miraculously, there *were* people not persuaded by the drink. A select few whose destinies side stepped the foolhardy drunk motif. I know. Surprising coming from a place out in the middle of nowhere. Of these few sober individuals included a rather tall woman named Eloise. Eloise was the local nurse. Unfortunately, her usual patients are those who'd like to get to know her on a deeper level...However, she is not one to put up with such brash and disrespectful sorts.

"Come on, Ed?" whined the hardened man. One eye looking up and the other down towards features he found intriguing, "I think we'd have fun. Let me show you a good time," he slurred.

"Not a chance, Ed," said Eloise bluntly as she forcibly wrapped the man's bleeding forearm with gauze and a clean dressing, "Plus I don't think your wife cares much of you talking to me like that, do you?"

"What she doesn't know, won't kill her," said Ed with a confidence only a drunk could muster.

"I'm less worried about her, and more worried about having to stitch you up after your bloated carcass is dropped, half-dead on my stoop," Eloise stated.

"That only happened one time."

"And the next time it happens, Ed. Not only will I finish you off. Because you know I can. I'll help your wife hide the body."

Ed went silent. Even in his inebriated state, he understood when Eloise meant business.

“Now get out of the tavern while I still have some sense. You interrupted my meal with your blood and irritating nature.”

As a result of interactions like these she can be a harsh woman. She had no qualms with injecting some of her more aggressive touchy-feely patients with a large heel-like object into their groin. She often told a story about when she began her schooling. A large middle-aged man tried to elicit her services, and not the kind that involved medicine. She answered his call by breaking his jaw in two places and partially fracturing a few bones in his right leg. Let’s just say that after their very physical conversation, only the very inept ever asked for anything but bandages ever again.

Another individual who has surpassed the temptation to join the masses in their alcoholic escapades is one named Johnathan. John is the resident handyman. He, like Eloise, is not one that will tolerate the average native for long. However, the trait he utilizes the most are stories of his travels. Stories of traversing the country, meeting new and interesting people, eating delicacies, and reading numerous books along the way. These tales made him a popular character among the few children in town. His tales were golden threads of yarn among the basket of pale hues to the youngsters.

“Mr. John!” shouted a group of youngsters across the muddy street.

“Hey kids,” John shouted back, looking over his shoulder. He placed his screwdriver and snippers down on the table.

“Fixing the lights again?” asked one young boy.

“Yes, indeed. The thin insulation doesn’t do so well in the cold. So, a replacement was in order,” John said with a grin, “What can I do for you kids?”

“Can you tell us a story?”

“Yeah, one we’ve never heard before!”

“Oh, boy that may be a challenge. I’ve told you most of my stories.”

The air filled with pleads and exaggerated fat bottom lips of the young group of spectators. Some even went as far as to drop to their knees as if praying to the lord himself.

“Alright, alright, alright.” John caved. He could never pass down a chance to regale the youngsters with a good story, “There I was atop the biggest mountain in the state. One ski on my foot and the other in my hand. It had broken into two pieces. And the only way to get down the slopes was to ride the white powder to the bottom. So, I jerry rigged my broken ski together with a little bit of bailing wire and electrical tape. It resembled wet noodles more than a ski, but I made do. As I began my steady journey down the hill, the earth shook. Avalanche!”

Some of the locals didn’t believe all of John’s stories, but by golly gee whiz, the kids loved them. Hell, most of us adults did too. It was one of the few true bouts of entertainment we had in our small town.

Finally, there’s me, Connor. I am unfortunately the owner, bartender, and drunkard wrangler of the “Old N’ Dingy” tavern. Don’t judge me too harshly, I am the *new* owner of the bar. Recently purchased. I have plans. One of them is to rename the joint and toss out all the useless furniture. We’re going to have a huge bonfire. Maybe some of the drunks will help. On second thought, some of them are full of that flammable concoction... The heat may get a little out of hand. Anyways, I’m rambling. I have lived here in this pathetically tiny town almost half my life. Thankfully, I have not always been a barkeep. I was lucky enough to find some time and enough money to travel in my youth. Doing so, allowed me to pursue my passions and gratefully

gained some appreciation for the simple life outside of fancy parties and accolades.

It has been many years since I returned home, where I was *meant* to live out my days. In my youth I was a hunter. An overzealous one in need of a valuable lesson. I am fortunately still young enough that I can remember my time as a huntsman overseas. I remember the many wild, exotic, and mysterious creatures I have taken down with my rifle. To this day I have their furs and heads as trophies of my successful hunts proudly displayed in my less than opulent establishment. Yet, there was one beast I do not hold in my collection: the tiger.

CHAPTER 2

I remember the hunt like it was yesterday...

“Welcome to Russia,” said a man in a thick accent.

I stuck out my hand for a firm handshake, “Thank you. Happy to be here. What is your name, good sir?”

“Alexi,” he stated.

“Pleased to meet you, Alexi. I am Connor Gable,” I said, gallantly. I found it challenging to remove myself from my rich upbringings, where manners were king, and money was emperor, “So, when do we leave?”

“First light.”

His short answers and lack of the use of ‘sir’ irked me. I was important God damn it! “Excellent,” was all I could muster standing next to this stern, no fluff man, “Have you and yours been paid yet?”

“Not in full.”

“Why not?”

“My boss says, we only get paid if you come back with tiger head,” his broken English was showing, and I found it rather charming. It made me soften to the man.

“Odd.”

“Less paper trail.”

“Pardon?”

“You know this is illegal, yes? Poaching tigers. There are not many left in the wild.”

“I am no poacher!” I announced, “I am a decorated hunter!”

“Humpf,” Alexi scoffed, “And the cat you *hunt* is a vegetarian...”

I dismissed his statement and prepared for the next day’s adventure. I was going to get that damn animal, no matter what.

It was a wet day by Baikal Lake. My hunting partner, James, Alexi, and I set off early in the morning to find the one animal that had eluded me, the tiger. Particularly, the Siberian Tiger. It is the largest of its kind. Its pelt and head would make an excellent trophy to end my hunting career. Russia would be my last exotic hunting trip of my life, and I was hell bent to make it count.

We began the day with a grueling hike into the thick woods. The trees were enormous! Trunks six men wide and hundreds of feet tall in some places. The ground was frigid and wet from the night’s rain. The leaves and branches dripped droplets, berating us as we trekked silently through the thick brush. As we inched our way up the hills, we made it to a clearing that gave us a grand view of the vast landscape. The lake’s calm waters reflected the blue sky. Thick white clouds had begun to separate, allowing golden translucent rays of sunshine to beam eloquently on the land. It was as if the heavens were kissing the ground softly, as a mother would a child.

Continuing our journey through the hills and the lush brush we came across a small overlay of low branches that we engineered into a platform for us to wait for the elusive striped ruler to show his face. With the morning still young, my partner and I ate a meal of bread

and dried meat. As time went on, my eagerness drained from my body. I became numb to the anticipation and anxiety as I lied in waiting for hours upon hours. Fixed in the prone position, my rifle in hand, awaiting the elusive creature. I pondered on the chances of seeing the beast.

I couldn't help but think of the many hunters who would be envious of my triumph *if* I succeeded. My accomplishment would mean elevating my status within the hunting community, reaching my goal of becoming a member of an exclusive club of trophy hunters who have taken down every apex predator on the planet.

The day continued, and still no monstrous feline entered my crosshairs. I would have waited for three days, more, if I had to. As the day's light began to fade, I looked up into my scope to scan for movement. At that point, I was aiming to shoot at anything, deer, large birds, I didn't care. I wanted something to help alleviate the boredom that had settled into my bones.

"God! This is grueling."

"Patience," said Alexi.

"Isn't there a way to lure one out?" asked James, "With food or something?"

"To the tiger, we are food. If you'd like to volunteer yourself as bait, be my guest. I get paid if you land a tiger, the means in which we catch one matters not."

James went pale, "I see..."

"We have trekked all day, and not one shred of evidence that a tiger even exists out in these parts," I said frustrated.

"Did you not do your research?" asked Alexi.

"Of course I did!" I retorted, offended by the notion, "I always research my prey. I've read countless books on the hunting and mating

habits of the Siberian Tiger! I would say I'm a damn near scholar on the subject."

"Yet you still require a guide..." stated Alexi, "Some expert."

I scoffed, "Well, these lands are new to us. Hence you have been hired. And paid very well, if I'm not mistaken."

"In your studies, have you researched the species' population?"

"Have I researched its population?" I repeated, in an offended tone.

"Well, have you?" asked James.

I stared at the pair of them. Blinking rapidly, "I. I." I started to ransack my mind, over-turning all the information, I could remember. No where could I remember anything about population of the Siberian Tiger, "No, damn it! I have no clue about the numbers. I was focused on its tactics evading me. Not how many there are!"

Alexi shook his head, "Stupid Americans..."

I had that one coming. James stayed silent to his statement too.

"The reason we have not seen any so far is because there are not many left alive. The animal has been hunted and poached for generations. As you know it is a prized creature. The mothers only give birth to a couple of kittens with every birth. Infrequent at best, and most of the time, one or maybe two cubs make it to adulthood. Leaving the population at an estimated total of 600 wild tigers living in Russia.

"600!" announced James, louder than he intended.

I stayed silent for a moment, "I never realized how close to extinction they were."

"Scientists say that at this pace, the animal will be gone forever in a matter of a generation or two. Hence why it is so expensive to poach one...Excuse me, *hunt* one."

“If it’s so terrible, why do you belong to such an enterprise that allows this to happen?” I asked heatedly.

“My family must eat. This work pays better than most in Russia. So, I compromise my principles. I guide rich yuppies with little sense to kill endangered animals, so *my* kin don’t become extinct.”

“I see...” was all I could retort. Then for the next several hours we waited in silence.

CHAPTER 3

Then, as if it were floating atop the dirt, a 700-pound male Siberian Tiger emerged from the thicket. He was stunning! His massive body made the trees seem to shrink in his presence. His gargantuan paws were the size of frying pans. His golden orange glowed, accentuated by its stripes, dark as the night itself. His tale, a long hypnotizing piece of flesh and fur that seemed to have a mind of its own as it swayed gently with every step the big cat took. His monstrous legs carried him so gently, and his long arching back rhythmically danced as he moved. Finally, the tiger's strikingly handsome face made his presence both comforting and frightening simultaneously.

The eyes were as large as billiard balls and shined a golden amber that gleamed in the diminishing sunlight. His whiskers were a cloudy white color that seemed to reflect light. The smooth hairs appeared as straight as the finest carpenters' masterpiece; sanded and measured constantly. Aiming at the closest level to perfection. I noticed his jowls next. The canines were the length of a grown man's finger, and as thick as a shotgun barrel. The white of his teeth was the same stark white clouds at high noon. Just staring at him made me

wonder how many lesser creatures' lives had ended at the tips of this illustrious beast's razor-sharp teeth.

My partner and I looked at each other, stunned at the form standing in our sights. I quickly shook off my enamored state and immediately pressed the rifle butt up against my right shoulder. I gazed through my scope with great intensity. You would have thought I was looking for another sniper during a firefight. An anxious chill slithered down my spine like a frozen serpent. As I focused, I brought the enormous creature in my crosshairs. As I did this, the majestic animal looked up. I had him. I took the safety off, placed my hand on the trigger, and gently rested my finger against it.

Right there, I could see his eyes. His great big amber eyes. They were beautiful, full of intensity, age, and wisdom. This tiger had been through a great deal, enduring all life's obstacles. Looking closer at the beast, I noticed details that were invisible to his presence initially. I noticed numerous scars from violent altercations with other tigers. Curiously, the most intriguing of these marks was a small bullet sized scar angled off from his eye. This cat had been shot at before.

"Shoot!" whispered James, "What are you waiting for?"

"Blasted! Give me a moment," I responded.

"Don't tell me you've lost your nerve!" said James, his quiet speech evolving into a throaty whisper.

I hesitate. Continuing to marvel at the beast. I watched as its muscles rippled as it moved. Pushing and pulling at its fur like liquid pools of orange, black, and white. The beast barred its teeth at nothing. Perhaps it could sense me. Maybe it knew its life was in danger.

"Come on!" said Alexi, "I can't get paid unless you kill the beast."

Then I began to think. This aged feline had been through several trials, including almost being killed by a hunter such as myself. What right did I have to take the life of such a majestic creature? Yet, as I

peered down the barrel of my rifle, I was encouraged by my partner to shoot, to make the kill, to take what we had set out to claim. Oddly enough, as I looked at this creature, I saw myself in the coming years. I saw the scars left behind from a hard youth, a weary old beast just trying to stay ahead of life, making the best out of declining situations.

I saw myself growing old and being alone like this big cat. No one to share life's treasures and stories. No one to teach, no one to grow old with. I realized at that moment that I could not take this precious animal from the face of the Earth. So, I did the next best thing, still being pestered by my partner to take the shot I pulled the trigger several feet higher from where the big cat stood. The loud burst rattled through the valley. A crack eliminating the silence. By the time I lifted my head from my scope, the big cat had vanished into the thick woods of Lake Baikal. Hopefully, to never again be seen by any other hunters, left alone to live out his days in peace.

CHAPTER 4

Connor finished telling his story. He looked up to see his children John and Eloise, intently listening to their father's story inside of their small drab establishment.

"So, feeling bad for wasting poor Alexi's time. I paid him double what we promised him. Under the table of course. His employer didn't need to know. Then there was James. After that trip we never spoke. He was too mad at me for not taking the shot. On that trip, I was humbled. I had never been spoken to by how Alexi did. No one had ever spoken to me like that before. Then seeing that animal! It changed me. Right then and there. Oh, what a beast may teach us," Connor said, "Life's teachers don't always take the shape you expect them too. Without that experience in Russia hunting that tiger, I sincerely doubt either of you would be here right now. I've never told you this, but right after I returned from my travels, I went home, met your mother, we got married, and a couple of years later you two were born. We had a dream of owning a cozy business out here in the wild..."

Connor lingered on his dearly departed and his dream for a sad moment, "I told myself that once you two were old enough I would tell

you that story. The encounter with something so fierce and beautiful. To engage with a beast who had been through all sorts of trials and tribulations, to make it as far as he had. I just couldn't end his story there. I realized the value of his life was more than just a spot on the wall in my hall of trophies. I hated the idea of it being gawked at by passersby who would only see a stuffed head. Not knowing the true power and ferocity of the animal itself! Hopefully, it will make you realize that life is not just about pursuing passions but valuing life and sharing those passions with loved ones. To pass those lessons to those younger than yourselves."

"Wow dad," said John.

"Yeah, dad. I had no idea. I mean, we both knew you hunted. You've never kept that a secret. Mom never even told us about Russia."

"I told her I would tell you all my hunting stories one day, but this one was special. So, I saved it for the last. Seeing as you two are moving on soon, leaving our little town and me to begin new lives, I wanted to pass on one more lesson to you both."

"Oh, dad, we're not leaving forever!" said John. His eyes suddenly grew sad.

"You know we'll come visit," said Eloise, "and there is a good chance we will bring company with us."

Connor smiled, "Yes, more family to meet and watch grow up."

His grown children smiled at him kindly. They embraced their father, said, "see you tomorrow" to their dear old dad, and made their way back to their respective homes for the night. Connor was pleased with how his children turned out. They hadn't become drunkards like most people from this town in the small Podunk region of Alaska. They had become productive members in society. Even though those who lived here sometimes didn't value their talents and contributions. He was most grateful, however, for the opportunity to share his lesson

that he learned from a Siberian Tiger in the thick brush, by a lake called Baikal, in the country of Russia so many years ago.