

# one story

*Tiger*

*Nalini Jones*

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The trouble with the cats, Essie believed, was entirely her son-in-law Daniel's fault. They first turned up on the day that Gopi was expected to come shake the coconuts down from the trees. It was mid-morning, a January day without too much Bombay haze, and early enough for the children to play outside without Marian worrying about the heat. Still, she insisted on hats for them. Essie said nothing when her daughter called the girls to the front veranda steps, just sat and helped Marian rub their limbs with lotion to protect them from the sun. Both were fair-skinned, though darker than Daniel, whose pale, pinkish skin reminded Essie of chicken not cooked long enough.

Marian went upstairs to help the servant Ritu wash the children's clothes, but Essie stayed to keep an eye on the girls. They were five and six only, babies still by Essie's reckoning, and it was her belief that Daniel did not pay close enough attention. She knew better than to approach him directly, of course; he would only turn to her with his blank American look and smile

his blank American smile. It was all too soft and spongy for Essie, who had wondered when she first met Daniel whether he fully understood her. Who was this man her daughter had married? Did he know proper English? Were his mental faculties intact? She had adjusted her speech in his presence, talking loudly and slowly, using smaller words. But her efforts had no effect and eventually she realized that conversation with her son-in-law would always have a shapeless quality, like sinking her fingers in a lump of dough.

She had prayed for guidance and patience, as she had once prayed for her daughter to come home again and marry an Indian Catholic boy from their own neighborhood. Such nice-looking boys! Essie had kept her eyes open to suitable possibilities. And then, the shock of this Daniel and his soft American answer: “Well, not exactly Catholic.” There is no exactly in this matter, she’d informed him. A person is Catholic or not. She had confessed her disappointment to all the parish priests. But one after the other, they disappointed her too. What to do, they said, but accept?

Now when Essie was troubled by his American ways, she took her concerns straight to Marian. But her daughter, so clear-eyed in her girlhood, so close to Essie that they had seemed two limbs of the same living thing, had gone a bit soft herself after so many years in the States. When Essie pointed out that Daniel was too relaxed with the girls, Marian looked down, or away, or said, “Oh, Mum,” as if Essie were one of the children, acting up and tiring her.

For a little while, the girls practiced badminton, a game their grandfather had played when he was young. Daniel, Essie noted, did not have good form with his swing. But everything had to

be cleared away before Gopi arrived and coconuts came pelting down into the compound. Daniel pulled up the stakes of the net and the girls were collecting shuttlecocks. Nicole, who was older, flung her racket onto the lawn and ran up and down the garden wall, checking under leaves and behind the roots of trees as though hunting for Easter eggs. But it was Tara, a year younger, who found the cats behind a thick clump of bamboo and called for everyone to come and see.

“Look at that! Kittens!” Daniel peered into the corner where a mother cat and two half-grown kittens had been hiding. All three were alert and staring.

“Don’t touch!” Essie said quickly, drawing Tara back. “They’ll scratch.”

“No, they’re nice,” Nicole decided. She squatted on the ground and held out her hand. One of the kittens made a tentative move closer and Essie inhaled sharply, a sound meant as a warning.

“So dirty, baby! See their fur? They don’t live with people.”

“They don’t look too bad,” Daniel said. The mother cat was thin and dingy, with white fur that reminded Essie of yellowed muslin and patches of gray and ginger. One of the kittens was spotted, half its face shadowed in gray, and the other was ginger-striped, as if the mother had poured some part of herself into each of them.

Nicole extended her arm as far as she could and Daniel put a hand on her shoulder.

“Not too close, you’ll scare them.” He began to call the animals with a whisperry noise.

“These aren’t your American cats,” Essie said. “They could carry disease.”

But Tara was spellbound. “One kitten for each of us...”

“Your grandmother’s right. These cats don’t like to live inside with people.”

Nicole looked up at her father, stricken. “But we have to take them inside. Gopi is coming!” The danger of the falling coconuts had been impressed upon her all morning; she must hold someone’s hand when Gopi did his work, she must stay safely beneath the veranda roof. Otherwise, tuk! Her grandfather’s fist had knocked against her head. (Essie had watched this display with disapproval and scolded her husband. “Such a thing to clown about, Francis! Have some sense.”)

Now she hastened to reassure Nicole. “These cats are wild, darling. Like tigers. They like to look after themselves. See the mummy cat? She won’t let anything happen. She’ll hear Gopi and they’ll all go running.”

“Where?” Tara was solemn, all eyes and wonder.

“They have places they like to go.” The girls were clearly unconvinced, Tara’s eyes reproachful. Essie spoke brightly. “Maybe they’ll go to the fish market, for a nice piece of fish!”

“Maybe Ritu has a little fish she can give them,” Daniel suggested. “Let’s see if they want something to eat.”

“Not in the house,” said Essie at once, but the girls were already scrambling up, naming the cats, begging them not to run off, promising to be back in another minute, *stay, stay*, their voices high as fevers as they called from the staircase and Essie watched while Daniel followed, letting them run up the steps without holding the railing, not saying a single word to slow them down.

The next hour was given over to the cats. They were easily lured

into the garden with pieces of cheese, and step by step, the girls coaxed them up to the outdoor landing with saucers of milk. This was the main entrance to the upper storey, by means of a staircase that began on the far side of the veranda and ran up the side of the house beneath a narrow wooden roof. The small square landing at the top led directly into the front room, and the heavy wooden door was kept open all day long to let in light and air. The cats, Essie thought grimly, were literally at her doorstep.

It was some small satisfaction, at least, that Marian greeted this development with dismay.

“Babe, what could I do? Their father told them to feed the cats. I cannot contradict him. All I can do is tell him the way we live here, but,” Essie paused. “What could I say?”

“Well,” Marian said. “At least they don’t look like they have fleas.”

“Fleas are too small to see. We’ll only see the bites.”

The girls were alone on the landing, the kittens playing near their feet while the mother cat perched a few steps below. Daniel joined Essie’s husband Francis, who had switched on the test match the moment he returned from a morning at his club. Daniel was new to cricket. He leaned forward to ask a question, a glass of beer in one hand, and Essie eyed him sharply to be sure he didn’t put it down on the wooden arm of the chair.

She raised her voice to be heard over the television. “Marian, you were scratched by a cat when you were small—you don’t remember. A bad scratch, on your cheek. I had to rub oil every day so you wouldn’t scar.”

Daniel did not turn from the screen but Marian sighed. “The kittens seem harmless enough.” One had been lured into Nicole’s

lap. Tara, warned to be gentle, was stroking the other with exaggerated softness.

Essie grunted. “They’ve been eating in rubbish piles, God knows what they might pass on. And what is keeping Gopi? Maddening, these fellows! *Yes, yes, I’ll come*, he says, and what? I’ve let the whole morning go waiting for him!”

“Let them play awhile.” Marian said. “When Gopi comes, the girls will want to watch and the cats will run off on their own.”

But Gopi never came. By lunchtime, the girls had names for all three cats—even the mother, a wild, skittish creature who kept her distance until she saw a chance of food and then came creeping up the stairs, low on her haunches as though she were hunting.

“That one is Tiger,” Nicole told Essie. “She’s the mother.”

“What is this one called?” Essie tried to enter the spirit of things. “Is this Panther?”

“No,” Tara said. She was squatting, perfectly balanced on her heels. “That’s Smoke.”

“And the little ginger one is Fire?”

“That one is Ritu.”

Essie felt strangely dissatisfied. She had never liked cats, all hiss and tooth and claw, slinking like vermin among the market stalls. She would not want the girls to name one for her, but it did not seem right that Ritu should be singled out.

The real Ritu was bringing plates of food to the table, a chicken dish from the day before, a new fish curry. She heard her name as she was setting down a steaming bowl of rice.

“Who is Ritu? Oh! See, bhai, chota Ritu! Thank you, Baby, thank you, Chota Baby.” She laughed, using the same sing-song

the girls used when they remembered their manners. Ritu called both little girls Baby, but Tara, smaller, was Chota Baby. “Baby is taking care of Chota Ritu, and Ritu is taking care of Chota Baby. Come, food is waiting.” She stooped to pick up Tara but Essie stopped her.

“Have you brought the curds to the table?” she said, picking up Tara herself. Ritu made fresh yogurt daily, which the little ones ate with their meals to cut the spice. “Come, darlings. Come and eat.”

Nicole held one of the kittens to her chest, her voice pleading. “Can’t we eat out here?”

“Girls.” Marian used her warning voice. “Grandma says lunch is ready. Let the cats be, they’ve had enough.”

The girls did not disobey but dragged themselves to their feet.

“Come,” said Essie. The men had got up from their seats near the television but were still focused on the screen, standing as though anchored. She spoke in a loud, ringing voice. “We’ll clean your hands first, lots of soap. Those cats must have been filthy.”

That was the beginning. The cats returned the next day, just as lunch was being served, and again the day after. By the third day, Essie had agreed that the girls could leave milk for them on the back balcony. “At least let them be out of our way,” she said. She could not have people coming up and down with stray cats on the landing, and the days were filled with visitors, neighbors, tradesman. But even after she had banished the cats to the kitchen balcony, they seemed to creep into her days, pushing from one minute into the next, curling around the arms and legs of the children as though they were entwined. There were ten days left,

a week, five days. Already the children had gone to the market for the last time, and the beach at Juhu. The banana man had come on his weekly round and had given the girls a full bunch as a present; he would not meet them again. Marian had begun to arrange all her packing in piles, and Daniel had taken the suitcases down from the tops of the wardrobes. The cases lay on the floor, flopped open like wide hungry mouths. Francis began to stay home from his club in the evenings, waiting for the girls to be bathed so they could pad out in bare feet and flowered gowns and say good-night. Essie read to them from the Bible at bedtime, longer and longer stories, until they had collapsed against her shoulders or across her lap. Still the girls went running whenever the cats appeared, no matter what other treats Essie planned for them. In the late afternoons, while she and Marian entertained guests in the front room, she could hear the sounds of the girls' voices drifting in from the kitchen balcony as though from someplace other than her house, as though the balcony had torn free and no longer belonged to her but to the cats—the pirate cats with their patches and hooked claws, their grinning white teeth, their narrow eyes, floating slowly away with Ritu and the children, who were laughing as they left her.

Four days before Marian and her family were set to depart, Essie was soaping herself and felt the lump, a hard knot where her breast sloped toward her under-arm. She checked again and again, feeling the way it seem to roll beneath her fingers. Then she checked her other breast: nothing. She stood for a moment, still and dripping, in the afternoon sun. They bathed out of buckets, one hot and one cold; now both faucets were off and

instead of running water, Essie could hear the clear bright calls of birds. She leaned against the tile wall, slick but not cool. It was a thick afternoon, unseasonably warm, and she had come for a quick bath before the girls woke from their naps. She had not intended to wash her hair so she'd caught it back in a braid and flicked it over one shoulder or the other, out of the water. Now she pulled the damp tail of it to the front, over her breast, and slowly removed the elastic. She kept her hair carefully dyed, a flat tarry color that did not quite take on the living quality of her youthful black, but she was not yet willing to be gray. She had only two grandchildren, after all; her sons, one living abroad, one posted in Delhi, had not yet married. For the first time, she thought of letting the dye fade. She poured a dipperful of water over her head. Another. Another. Then she seized handfuls of her hair and wrung them like fruit, imagined the dye running down her chest and thighs in rivulets, staining the floor, pooling at the drain where a rubber stopper kept the cockroaches from climbing up the pipes. Slowly, carefully, she washed her hair. She did not rush, even when she heard the children wake and call for her.

She waited until the girls were asleep that night—dinner and baths and wet hair combed, heavy heads against her chest, both children in her lap, one last story, a moment's pleading, one more last story. Grandma, tell us about trains, tell us about Gopi, tell us about Mum when she was little. She went with Marian to tuck them into bed and pull the mosquito netting down like drapes.

She waited until Daniel had taken her suggestion and accompanied Francis to his gymkhana, Francis puzzled but with the same foolish bland smile on his face as Daniel's. Off they went

together, to cards and whiskey and long-running tabs and friends Francis didn't bring to the house. Essie leaned out the front window and watched them go with relief. What help could the men give her? Let them at least be out of the way.

She waited until Marian sat quietly, writing letters to aunts and cousins in other parts of India, letters Essie would post for her. Essie watched her daughter. Even now, folded into a chair, no proper jewelry, Marian was a beautiful girl. She had lovely skin, a delicate jawline. She might have married anyone, might have had her pick of the best neighborhood boys. She might have lived all her life only a few steps away.

"You must cancel your ticket," Essie told her.

Marian stopped writing, looked up briefly. "We can't, Mum. You know that. Don't make it harder."

"I'm not making anything!" her voice rose against her will; she wanted to stay calm, a woman prepared for whatever came next, a woman with her daughter beside her. "I have something here," she put a hand near her breast.

Marian's voice sharpened. "What do you mean, something? A pain?"

"Not a pain." Essie considered. "Perhaps it's a little tender. But not a pain only. I can feel something hard, under the skin. This is just what happened to Aunty Ann, you remember? One day she was fine and six months later she was gone. Totally diseased. Nothing the doctors could do."

"You have a lump? When, Mum? When did you find it?"

"Today only." Essie's eyes filled with tears; here, at last, was the daughter she had been missing, Marian alert and focused keenly on her, Marian sharing her secrets. "What to do, babe?"

"We'll go to the doctor. I'll take you tomorrow, we'll go first thing."

"But I have no appointment—"

"We can wait until he sees you. Daniel can watch the girls."

"No, babe, no need. We can make an appointment properly and go later in the week, you can extend a week or two and take me."

"Mum." Marian came to sit next to Essie on the couch, put an arm around her shoulders. "We should see him right away, okay? It could be nothing. But let's get it checked as soon as we can. I don't want you to worry."

Essie felt Marian's arm tightening around her, Marian's head resting softly on her shoulder. The letters lay abandoned in Marian's chair. Essie wondered, she truly wondered, if she was dying. She believed she was. But it was a distant idea, more faint than she expected. The more palpable question was how long her daughter might stay.

The doctor pierced her with a needle, extracted fluid, sent it off to the lab. "In a few days we'll know more," he told them. Marian sat next to Essie, holding her hand, her face tight.

The plane tickets could not be changed without exorbitant fees. Daniel had to go back to work. The girls could not miss another week of school. "We may hear from the doctor before the flight," Marian said, a limp offering.

Essie did not bother to answer.

"Mum, let's sit down with Dad and tell him."

Essie shut her mouth firmly, again said nothing.

"I can tell him if you're nervous. But he should know what's happening. Maybe he can help."

Essie snorted. Marian crouched on the floor before Essie's chair, looking up at her like a child. "The doctor says there's a good chance nothing is wrong. But listen—" she held Essie's knees—"I don't want you to feel alone while you're waiting."

Essie could think of nothing to say to this beyond the obvious. So she said nothing.

Marian put her forehead on her mother's knee. "You understand I have to go? I wish I didn't, Mum. I wish I could stay."

"What good is wishing?" Essie asked, and her daughter didn't answer.

The night Marian and her family flew home, Essie hired two taxis to take them to the airport so that there would be room for her to see them off. She held Nicole in her lap until the last moment—after Daniel had unloaded all the suitcases, even after Daniel said, "Come on, girls," and Marian counted all the tickets and passports.

"Check again," Essie told her, kissing the top of Nicole's head, her arms tight around the child's chest. "Check the date to be certain."

The girls were dressed in blue jeans and long-sleeved shirts, as though they had already left her for another climate. It was nearly eleven o'clock, long past their bedtime, and in the harsh lights flooding the airport entrance, they looked pale and drawn. They had already said goodbye at the house: to neighbors who had come to wish them goodbye; to their grandfather; to Ritu. *But where are the cats? Where are the cats?* Both began to cry. It was no good explaining that cats come and go, that the mother

cat must put the kittens to sleep, that Grandma would find the cats tomorrow and deliver all their messages. "We have to say goodbye to the cats!"

They had stopped crying by the time they reached the airport but their faces seemed strangely hollow and serious, as if the past few hours marked the onset of a wild acceleration and they had already begun to grow older—girls Essie would hardly recognize in a year or two when she saw them again, if she saw them again. Did she have a year or two? They had not heard back from the doctor. When Marian called his office that afternoon, she was told the results weren't yet back from the lab.

"Mum, you'll be fine," Marian kept saying. "I'll come back. I'll come back if anything happens."

"Something has already happened," Essie told her.

"Just see what the doctor says, Mum."

Essie shook her head, a parrying motion. What was the point? She knew where things could lead. Daniel, she noted, said nothing.

"I'll come back."

Her daughter was crying, the way she cried sometimes as a girl, streaming tears and silence. For a long while she clung to Essie, shoulders shaking, then she moved away, a sleeve to her face. Essie's spectacles were useless, the airport lights blurred and flaring through the wet lenses. She took them off and tried to rub them dry. She must have a last good look of her daughter. By the time she put them on again Marian and her family had moved the few steps from the curb to the departure hall. No visitors were permitted inside but Essie watched the doors swallow them up, the girls looking small and forlorn, Marian still in tears, turning to wave a last time. After a few minutes, Essie climbed back into her cab.



At home the mosquito netting was still draped over her bed, where the girls had slept with her for their last nap. The cotton cover was rumpled from their bodies. Francis had slept in another room for years but Essie could hear him snoring and the evidence of his peaceful rest at such a time filled her with bitterness. The windows were thrown open and outside she could hear cats brawling, a tangle of raw-throated screeches and howls.

A few hours before dawn she switched on the light to begin a letter to Marian. She tried to chronicle all that had happened in the scant hours since they had parted: the impatient cab driver, rushing her departure from the airport, the vacant hours sitting up by the telephone in case the flight was cancelled. She described the dark house and Francis's useless snoring, the cramp in her hand from writing, her prayers for their swift return; she described the way the knowledge of her own death was stealing over her, a certainty she could feel in her bones and her muscles and yes, in her breast—she did not have to wait for the doctor to tell her what her body already knew—and even then she could not stop. Here was the way to keep Marian tethered to her, a stream of confidences no one else could share, a comfort mother and daughter might only find in each other. Words poured from her, a spill she could not check—her fear that she would slip away before seeing her daughter or sons again, her dread of disease, of her body rotting away from the inside—did Marian remember visiting Aunt Ann in the nursing home, did she remember the rattling cries, the smells? She wrote about the solace she found in placing herself in the Virgin Mary's hands. *You too might have done this, my girl—place yourself at the mercy of Mary and not worry so much about the costs of things. Who knows how God*

*would have provided if you had decided to stay?* She wrote about her faith in being reunited with both her parents, the father she had lost when she was only a girl, the mother who had raised her; she leapt ahead generations and wrote about all her hopes for her granddaughters. *You must bring them up in the church, so that they too have a light in these darkest times.* Eventually she began to reprise the terrible shock of Marian's decision to marry an American—the fainting spells, the long nights of weeping, the visions of this very moment, sick unto death with no children beside her. *Even now I can hardly believe you are wrenched from me at this crucial hour, she wrote. We may never see each other again. But these are the nights I foresaw when you married, which you did not.* She filled twenty pages before her eyes began to ache, and even when the room was dark again, Essie lay in bed, her mind turning with what she was too tired to write.

The late night at the airport had upset Essie's routine and she woke later than usual, the departure lingering like a hangover. Her ankles seemed swollen, her calves like rods, her limbs so heavy they might have been waterlogged. The world made its swollen turn, slow and stupid, senseless with miles. The day throbbed with hours. Everywhere she looked, something needed cleaning or putting away, but she sat in her chair, a pad of letterpaper in her lap, and watched dust tumble through dry shafts of sunlight like tiny shavings of wood. She imagined that splinters, fine as hair, worked their way into her skin every time she pushed through the air of the empty house.

She was alone. Francis had disappeared to his club, frowning at nothing. Ritu had dressed in salwar kameez and gone to the shops, viewing this as a treat since Essie usually insisted on going

herself. Essie had intended to continue her letter to Marian but her efforts in the middle of the night seemed borne of a feverish energy, a kind of blood-letting. She sat in her chair now, depleted and drained, and listened without interest to whatever passed beneath her window, the mild traffic of a morning underway. Women's chirping voices, cars moving slowly past the rut in the road, a stiff volley of barking from the dog next door. Birds screeched like policemen with whistles, squawking over nothing; a motorcycle stuttered past, the sound loose as a chest cough. Essie ignored the long drifting calls of vendors, flung out like fishing line. She ignored the bell at her gate which set off the neighbor's dog again, and eventually she jotted down a few desultory lines. But the letter began to seem flat and useless. It would not reach Marian for two weeks at least. Marian herself would not arrive home for another day—that's how wide the world was. And even in her passion the night before, Essie found she could not express the full sweep of her thoughts. Each memory had eight or ten more at its back—a dozen, a hundred—too many to record so that anyone would understand how quickly and powerfully they came upon her. She could write and write, letters enough to span the globe; she imagined the lines of longitude and latitude in her own handwriting, floating gently over green and blue. And still it would not be enough to record the longings of even a single moment. Everything she hoped for was connected to everything she remembered and everything she had lost—a web spreading in all directions. Words moved in single file.

Essie pushed the letter aside and closed her eyes. She fell briefly to sleep, upright in her chair. When she woke she was still alone but light blazed in the window. Francis would soon be home and

she was not up to cooking. *I have very little appetite*, she thought of writing to Marian. *This may be a sign of what is to come*. She must see what could be warmed for lunch.

The refrigerator was old, full of jars she had not labeled, but on the top shelf was a glass of fresh yogurt. *The house is full of reminders that you are gone*, the letter in her mind continued. *Everywhere I look I find something that pains me—even the curds I made for the girls*. She paused, wondering how best to convey the pathos of the uneaten yogurt. *I should not have made more with so little time left. But it is so difficult for a mother not to feel hopeful. Up to the last minute, I felt certain, in the circumstances, you would change your mind. Daniel had to go back to work, that is one thing. But would a few days more have been such a sacrifice, knowing what I am going through?* She imagined the way she would describe her pleasure in seeing the girls eat, how much she already missed pulling chicken from the bone to feed them by hand.

*Now here is the chicken dish they liked. I've shown you how to make it but I don't know what spices you can get there. Last night, you remember, Daniel took three big pieces so there is not enough for today. Never mind, I can go without.*

A faint scraping jolted Essie from her thoughts. She turned, expecting to find a rat. Instead she saw the ginger kitten, scratching an empty sack of rice. The gray was close behind, sniffing the whisk broom Essie had left in the corner; the mother was nowhere to be seen.

“And what are you doing back again?” she said aloud. “No one wants to see the likes of you,” she told them. “All your friends have gone.” Still she made no move to chase them away. The gray cat abandoned the broom and began to investigate the

rough black surface of the grinding bowl. The ginger, the cat named Ritu, stood perfectly still and stared up at Essie, one of its claws still hooked in the burlap. Essie had the strange and unwelcome impression that the cat was awaiting instructions, or perhaps the opening of negotiations.

A sudden soft leap, and the ginger perched on top of Ritu's grinding stool.

"Tcha! Get down from there."

The cat drew its legs together on the small surface.

"Go on. Get down." Essie clicked her tongue and after a moment's hesitation, the cat dropped to the floor. The gray sidled closer, reminding Essie of the way Tara sometimes reached for Nicole's hand.

"Such nonsense," she said, but in a warmer tone. The gray stretched up its head on its thin neck; the ginger made a plaintive noise. "Little beggars, the both of you." The cats watched as she returned to the refrigerator and snipped open a container of milk. "Outside," she told them, and they followed her onto the balcony, crowding near her heels as she stooped to leave the bowl for them.

For the next several days Ritu was permitted to feed the cats. The kittens always turned up first, leaving the mother cat to brood below in the shady corner of the garden. She would only join them after a slow, stealthy advance. Essie would not admit to her own part in this uneasy truce; she refused to pay any attention to their comings and goings and made a point of complaining about the price of milk. When Marian called to say they had arrived safely, Essie reported that the cats were sleeping on the balcony.

"You see, babe, what happens? Every day they come, bold as you please."

"What about the doctor? Have you called the office again?"

"Why should I call? He can call when he has his results. Until then, I know what I know."

"Mum—"

But she refused to discuss the knot in her breast, refused to give Marian that satisfaction. Birthdays, anniversaries, feast days, school concerts, sports matches—the parade of moments she might have shared with her family if they lived near—all thinned to voices on a phone line. But she was not willing to accommodate such distance in the matter of her dying. Marian had left; very well, let her feel the consequences. The Marian of her letters, the Marian to whom she revealed all the movements of her soul, seemed a different person than the Marian on the phone. The Marian of the letters was the daughter Essie thought she had raised, the daughter who would have stayed.

"The girls miss you so much," Marian told her. "They loved being in India. On their first morning home Daniel made them tea but both girls cried. They said the tea didn't taste the same."

"Use the tea I packed for you," Essie urged. "Make it yourself. Your husband doesn't know how to do it properly."

They could not talk for long; the rates were too high.

"Wait, babe—so much to tell you! Daddy is up to his old tricks, every night at the gymkhana, so everything falls into my lap. Even the coconuts—this fellow Gopi still hasn't come."

Marian had begun to say goodbye, her voice hollow.

"Just let me say a quick hello to the girls."

But Marian had put them to sleep. The connection was

scratchy with a slight delay; words tumbled into their echoes. “Tell them I send tight hugs. I pray for them every night. Tell them to read their Bibles. The breast is paining a bit, but only slightly. Pray I’ll be taken quickly, without too much pain.”

“Please call the doctor, Mum. Don’t put yourself through this.”

“Ask the girls to pray for me.”

“The girls will write soon. Lots of love.”

Essie’s voice rose, high and cracking over the static. “Tell them not to worry, Grandma is looking after their cats. Only they must come back soon.”

“Goodbye, Mum.”

Essie held the receiver until she heard the click. “Hallo? Hallo?” she said loudly, just in case, but the line had gone dead and after another moment she put down the phone. She went into the kitchen, where Ritu was washing up with a bucket of hot water and where Essie could see the cats on the balcony, napping against the balustrade. The mother shot instantly to her feet, whisking down the stairs, but the kittens only yawned, showing small sharp teeth, and stretched up their heads to greet her.

Days passed slowly, sagging with heat. Blossoms dried to soft brown skins and trees hung heavy, fruit swelling like goiters. Essie bathed her limbs each night with cold water and slept on top of her bed. *This heat wave has given me a rash. You remember your brother used to have them as a baby?* By now addressing her thoughts to Marian had become habit, as though all that passed through Essie’s mind was part of a letter she was composing to

her daughter. *I should stay out of the sun but then who will do the marketing?*

A batch of notes came from Marian and the family, all in a single envelope. Marian’s was rushed and glancing; she was busy with programs for the girls’ school, she would call again soon. Daniel had enclosed a postcard he wrote during their layover in the Frankfurt airport, which Essie examined but decided was not pretty enough to save. Nicole wrote on colored paper that was printed with flowers, each word with round, careful letters. *How are the cats?* Essie read. *We have no cats here. We love you.* Tara drew a picture of the cats with sharp triangle ears and whiskers stiff as bristles.

A week later, another fat bundle arrived from Nicole’s first grade class. Marian had just visited their classroom, wearing a sari and telling the children about life in India. The teacher hoped Mrs. Almeida would not mind if the children wrote to her with some of their questions.

Essie emptied the packet onto the dining table. All the letters were written on rough, grainy paper, scored with solid and dotted lines to guide the children’s pencils. Essie sifted through them, looking for Nicole’s and picking out a line here and there.

*What do you eat for breakfast?*

*How many languages do you speak?*

*Do saris* [printed over a streak of grimy erasure marks] *ever fall off?*

*Dear Grandma,* she found at last. *Have you ever seen a real tiger?*

Essie put down the letter. *Once,* she thought. *Once* when Marian was nearly two, they had gone to visit Essie’s uncle, a

conservator of forests in the south. They were driving through a protected stretch of jungle with six others packed in a small car, moving slowly, cautiously, around the blind turns. *Do you remember, my girl?* Essie sat with Marian on her lap, hot and sweaty, tired of jolting along bad roads when they suddenly rounded a corner and saw a tiger reclining on the side of the road. It lifted its huge head to stare at the oncoming car. *Quiet! Everyone, quiet.* They braked, not daring to pass. Essie could still remember the feel of Marian struggling to stand on her lap and see. She had caught the child's fists in her own hand, preventing Marian from thumping on the window. For three hours they waited while the tiger slept. After a time Marian fell asleep, her skin sticking to Essie's. The tiger had stretched in a shady patch near the side of the road, protected by a thick canopy of trees until the sun bore down overhead. *See, Essie's uncle whispered.* The tiger remained in the sun a few minutes, so still it seemed dead, then suddenly, with a lazy roll, it stretched, rose to its feet, and ambled back into the trees, out of sight.

*You only woke up when we were driving again and then you wanted to go back and find the tiger!* It seemed to Essie that she could still feel her daughter sleeping against her chest, the hot breath against her neck, the sure damp weight of one who belonged to her.

That evening the phone rang while Essie was in the kitchen with Ritu. Marian, she thought at once. Her fingers were oily; she looked for a rag and couldn't find one, then tried to hold the receiver against her ear with just the palm of her hand. "Hallo?"

It was the doctor. "So sorry for the delay, Mrs. Almeida. The

results were misplaced in the lab. But they've come at last and it's good news. Nothing malignant, totally benign. Come back in again this week and we'll drain the fluid. You see, Mrs. Almeida, I knew you'd be a good patient!"

She shifted the phone against her ear and nearly dropped it. "But the pain, doctor? And you don't know the history. This very thing happened to my aunt and she—"

"No, no, I'm telling you. You're in perfect health. The pain is from the fluid only. It's very common. There's no danger at all, you mustn't worry. Okay? Right then, come by this week. That will be that." He laughed and rang off.

Francis had drifted to the table, the way a dog might sniff at its empty bowl. Essie found she could not bear his expectant air. "Dinner's not ready," she snapped. "Another twenty minutes at least."

"Who was calling?"

She shook her head, too annoyed to answer.

"Was it the doctor?"

She stared at him.

"Marian said you had a...pain of some kind. A lump. What did the doctor say?" When she didn't answer, he moved closer and put a hand on her arm.

"I'm covered in oil." Her voice was frayed; she was on the verge of tears she could not explain. "The doctor says it's nothing serious. I have to go back next week to remove fluid, or some foolishness, I don't remember exactly."

He grasped her arm for a moment, then let his grip loosen and patted her gently. He kept his eyes on the place where his fingers touched her skin. "I can go with you."

“No need,” she said. They stood quietly. When he released her she moved past him to the kitchen. “Twenty minutes,” she said. “Go find something to do until then.”

The phone rang again after Francis was in bed. Essie had been waiting in her chair. For a while she had watched television, then she turned it off and waited in the dark. It was all over, she would tell her daughter. A fright, nothing more. They had prayed and their prayers had been answered.

“Have you spoken to the doctor?” Marian asked.

Essie paused. She felt the phone lines between them like tight ropes, felt the moment sharpen to a single shaved point upon which she must balance. She felt herself falling.

“There’s no news, babe. He hasn’t called.”

“Oh, God, Mum. It’s been two weeks! Give me his number, let me call him myself.”

“No, no! No need! I—” but she stopped. “I’ll go myself next week. He’s out of the office now, on leave, but after the weekend I’ll go myself and ask.”

“You promise, Mum? I mean, this is crazy, making you wait so long. I’m sorry I’m not there to go with you. Maybe Dad—”

“Stop pulling your father into my affairs,” Essie said. “I’m perfectly capable of going on my own.”

“Mum.” Marian’s voice was suddenly so small, so close to tears, that for a moment Essie imagined Nicole or Tara had come to the phone. “Mum, tell me honestly. Do you think it’s serious?”

Later she wished there had been time to pray, time to beg Mary for an answer or for the strength to answer. How badly

she wanted to reassure her child, to promise, no, no, nothing will happen—but how badly she needed to say yes, to show her daughter some part of the strain she had endured alone. “I don’t know,” she said, and her voice broke, and she began to weep.

It would only be a little while, Essie told herself after they had said goodbye. In a few days she would tell Marian all was well, and nothing more need come of it. But she felt jittery, agitated, a churning in her stomach. She went to the kitchen for a glass of water, moving quietly. Ritu slept on a roll of bedding in one corner of the kitchen balcony, just beyond the spiral steps that led to the garden.

She heard the cats before she saw them, a dark rustle, and flicked on the light. Blinding yellow for a moment, then the kittens twining near the empty rubbish pail, sniffing the rich dark stains. She could not see the mother at first, but then the cat leapt from the counter to the floor with a soft thud and stared up at her, so impudent, so fearless that Essie felt a surge of unaccountable fury. She caught up a whisk broom and beat the cat away with it.

“Out, go on, out! Back you go!”

“What, bhai? What, what?” Ritu had woken, lifting her head from her pallet and rubbing her eyes in the moonlight, but Essie kept after the cats—“Away with you!”—poking the broom until she had driven them onto the metal stairs. The mother cat dropped down two steps, turned and hissed before she retreated, her tail lashing, her body curling sinuously around the central pole of the staircase, her half-grown kittens close behind her. At the bottom she leapt softly into the damp patch of earth where

wash-water was thrown and stalked slowly, fearlessly into the garden.

The next day only one of the kittens appeared. It sat, thin and piteous, near the threshold of the kitchen and made a noise that sounded like crying.

“The mother is gone,” said Ritu, looking worried. But by midday Tiger had emerged from a tangle of undergrowth. She could not, however, be lured up to the balcony.

“Offer a bit of chicken, she’ll come.”

But the cat remained in the garden. Finally Ritu took food down to her, moving slowly down the spiral steps. The cat hissed when she ventured too close, but ate hungrily once Ritu had gone back up to the balcony.

“See, bhai, Mummy is hurt.” Ritu pointed to a fresh wound on the cat’s shoulder.

By late afternoon, the ginger kitten had curled to sleep in the corner where Ritu kept her bedding but the gray kitten had still not returned.

Essie felt a dull certainty that there was nothing to be done and that she herself was culpable. “Just go and look for it,” she told Ritu. She waited until the girl had gone down one side of St. Hilary Road before she set off toward the shops in the other direction.

The sun was still unseasonably hot and St. Thomas Road was in a state of upheaval. Men were shoulder high in pits, putting in new pipe, while women carried away baskets of rubble. Shoppers clambered past as though on river banks and Essie had to slowly pick her way past clots of clay and bits of broken pavement.

At the juncture near St. Jerome’s, three cows were ravaging a rubbish pile and she thought of what the girls would say to that, the funny, loud, slow, American way they would say cows. She walked as far as the market and back along the shore where the Varuna fishermen lived, narrow winding streets that teemed with cats. She searched the next day and the day after that, but they never saw the gray kitten again.

At the end of the third day, she sat in her chair and tried to answer Nicole’s letter. She described the tiger in the road, other tiger hunts she had seen with her uncle, and then she stopped writing, not certain how to continue. The evening had rusted to night. Marian would not call.

He had given her daughter the good news. Perfect health, Essie said, and listened to Marian’s flood of love and relief. She had tried to take pleasure in her daughter’s words, tried to catch and hold them, to savor them later, but whatever Marian said had slipped away. The whole episode hardly seemed real. Essie felt empty and drained, as if the doctor’s needle had taken more than he intended.

*I never saw a tiger family,* she wrote in reply to Nicole’s question. *A tiger likes to live alone.*

Ritu came from the kitchen to clean the front room. Usually Essie would leave her to her task, but she felt rooted to her chair. She watched as Ritu brushed the dust and crumbs into cottony piles and flung them from the stair landing. Then, with a damp rag in one hand and the tail of her sari draped over the other, Ritu squatted on her heels and began to swab the floor. Essie sat in silence, listening to the soft kiss of the rag dipped into her pail, the trickle of water as it was wrung, the whisper of cloth sponging

over the tile. The wet floor met the dry floor in a scalloped line, lapping forward as Ritu advanced on her toes. She crept just behind the slick edge, pressing it further along the tile, fanning her arm in wide swaths before her. Essie thought of the tiger hunts she had seen as a girl, with beaters who tamped down the grasses for the rifle-bearers.

*Once I saw a tiger killed, but that—* She stopped. What could she tell a six-year-old about population control? *—was a big and old tiger. A naughty tiger who liked to frighten children. Would she give the child nightmares? There are no tigers in America. And none in Bombay, so you can come back soon. Only in the jungle.*

Dip and wring, dip and wring. At times, the scratch of the bucket as Ritu dragged it behind her. Her toe ring clicked against the floor like a fingernail tapping; past the table, the sofa, Essie's own feet in slippers, all the landmarks of the room until she had reached the kitchen and then she peered onto the balcony.

*Chota Ritu is staying, bhai. But Mummy is gone.*

Ritu hung the rag over her wrist and picked up the bucket to swab downstairs, her bare feet leaving cloudy marks on the floor which had already begun to dry in streaks.

Essie wrote, *The only tiger here is your Tiger.*

Not true, of course. *What to do, babe? I've looked and looked.* But there was no one to witness all her searching, no one to appreciate her effort and penance, no one to share what she had always imagined she would share with her daughter. It came to Essie then, as she had not felt since she was a child, that there were parts of her nobody would know or understand, thoughts too numerous to record, adrift and orphaned, with no one to hear them. She closed her eyes and tried to pray, to imagine God the keeper of all her secrets, but all she could think of was the

sleeping tiger. She had wondered then if God could see her and what exactly He saw: the light picking through a tangle of trees, her uncle's hands, tense on the wheel, her own gold cross at the base of her throat, the child asleep in her arms. She wondered if He saw all that would happen once the tiger had awakened, if He knew now where the gray kitten had gone, if the mother had died.

A few minutes later she picked up her pen again. *Your cats are well and happy, darling,* she wrote to Nicole. *All three are fast asleep, happy here with me.*

The next day, nearly a month after he'd promised, Gopi turned up at last to harvest the coconuts. Essie had been sitting upstairs, replying one by one to the letters from Nicole's class, when he arrived: a small, dark-skinned man from Kerala, his leather strap slung over his shoulder. He waited until she had finished scolding him and then he lifted his hands. His wife just had a baby, he told her in Hindi. The baby came early—so small. Gopi held his hands apart, the size of a breadfruit. For three weeks, no one knew what would happen. But now—he smiled suddenly, a flash of light in his dark face—the baby was fine. A son, his first son. A son will stay, he told her. Daughters grow up and marry and go, but a son will stay with his family.

A few minutes later Gopi climbed the first tree. Essie had imagined standing with the girls beside her, watching the way he shimmied up, the strap looped around his waist, his bare feet curved around the trunk until he was lost in the thatch of palms at the top. She had already counted out the money she would give Gopi as a gift for the child.

For the first time in years, she did not oversee the coconut harvest. Instead she went to the back of the house, down the



narrow winding steps of the kitchen balcony. The sun never penetrated that one shady corner of the property, and she sat on the lowest stair, elbows on knees, feeling the cool soft mud on the hard skin of her feet. In the front yard, she could hear Gopi climbing, the leather strap slapping against the tree as he hoisted himself up. The gray kitten, Smoke, was gone, the Tiger-mother nowhere to be seen, but the ginger, Ritu, was picking a delicate path along the garden wall, and Essie had brought a piece of fish down from the kitchen especially. She lured the kitten right to her, caught safe in her lap when the coconuts came raining down.

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To read an interview with Nalini Jones about "Tiger," visit the stories section of [one-story.com](http://one-story.com). To discuss the story with other subscribers, visit [one-story.com/blog](http://one-story.com/blog).

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