

## Tiger Story

I met an older woman named Crystal in the public day room at the homeless shelter where I volunteered and she told me she had worked with tigers in a circus. She ran off with her boyfriend at age 16. He ditched her a month later, leaving her with the bill at a one-star motel on the west coast of Florida.

Rather than fly home to Mom and Dad, she found work as a lady roustabout with a wintering circus. After the circus management ... or what passed for management ... realized she couldn't pound a three foot tent stake into the ground with three whacks of a long handled maul, they put her on the crew of the food truck. There she met the lion tamer. But the circus could no longer afford lions, so he was now a tiger tamer and was working on his act over the winter. He'd show up at the food truck for lunch, lay his whip on the counter and order a hot dog, "medium rare and free of all condoms and mints." She laughed and said it was love at first sight, even though she was unsure if the tamer or his whip was the larger attraction. His name was Wesley. His whip's name was Saint Francis.

"That's an unusual name for something so cruel," I said.

"He was a very religious man," she said.

The circus loaded up and headed north in the spring. At their first set-up north of the Florida border, on a wonderfully warm Friday evening as she recalled, the alpha tiger attacked Wesley and bit off his head in front of the entire student population of the Ellabell, Georgia Elementary School. All the kids had a good laugh, thinking it was a neat trick.

I stopped her at this point and said this was just too much.

"Well," she said, "maybe only half of the school's children."

I looked at her intently. "I mean, did the tiger really bite off Wesley's head?"

"Of course it did," she said.

"OK, then go ahead. What happened next?"

"The tiger spit his head back out," she said.

"I hope you're kidding me," I said

"Oh no. Spit it right out and it rolled on the ground."

"Really?"

"You didn't think he was going to swallow it, did you?"

"I never considered whether a tiger would swallow a head," I said.

"Well, certainly not Wesley's head," she said. "He was a smoker."

"What about the kids?"

"Even though there were no violent video games back then," she said, "kids have always refused to believe what they don't want to believe."

"That just can't be," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Of course, I speak only of the first few seconds after Wesley was chomped. Then the teachers and a few parents screamed."

I nodded. "I'm glad somebody got it, the gravity of the situation."

"You mean other than Wesley?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

"And me."

"Yes, I'm sorry. That must have been traumatic."

"I prayed so hard to St. Francis for Wesley."

"Yes, I understand," I said.

"He couldn't pray for himself,"

"No, of course not," I said.

"I'm not a very religious woman, but I picked up that whip and started praying to it."

"I admire you," I said. "I would have run as far away as possible."

"But I was prepared for it," she said. "Wesley always told me it was a 'Hazard of the trade.' He'd say. 'No gold fillings for me. Not when they'll wind up in Bunnie's stomach.'"

"Bunnie?" I said.

"The alpha tiger," she said. "She was one nasty tiger. She'd bite your head off ... so to speak."

"I understand."

"Or your arm. Two years before, Bunnie jumped through the hoop of fire as Wesley stood holding it up wearing the asbestos glove up to his armpit. Bunnie took his arm with her as she flew through the hoop."

I was incredulous. "She bit his arm off?"

"To his shoulder, asbestos and all."

“So, before he lost his head he was a one-armed tiger tamer?”

“Pretty much. With a prosthetic left foot.”

“That’s hard to—“

“Kind of balanced him up ... no left foot, no right arm.”

“Wait a minute,” I said in protest. “This killer tiger bites off your lover’s foot, then his arm, and he gets back in the ring and she bites off his head?”

“No, no.” she said. “He lost his foot when the elephant stepped on it. That’s when he gave up elephant training and took up tigers.”

“I don’t believe—“

“And that’s when he bought St. Francis.”

“—who didn’t help him keep his head,” I said.

“He never learned to use it correctly,” she said.

“You never actually hit a tiger with the whip.”

“You don’t?”

“Of course not. Are you kidding me? You’re standing in front of a 500 pound killing machine and you’re gonna hit it with a whip? Not a very smart move.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

“You snap the whip to the side of the tiger. Scares ‘em.”

“I’ll bet,” I said.

“Wesley never got it right. He hit Bunnie in the eye a few times. Even took off a piece of her ear.”

“No wonder ...” I said.

“Yeah, I warned him. ‘Wesley,’ I said, ‘you gotta stop antagonizing that tiger.’”

“With St. Francis,” I said.

“He said he’d pray about it. He was a very religious guy.”

A man approached us wearing a dark grey suit, a black shirt and Roman collar. Crystal said to me, “Meet Wesley, my husband.”

“Thank God you’re alive, Wesley,” I said.

Crystal smiled broadly. “I was telling him about your life as a tiger trainer, dear.”

“I’m a miracle,” the man said.

I laughed. “I’d say so, what with your head bitten off.”

“Took almost an hour for them to sew it back on,” he said.

“Is this an act you two practice on unsuspecting strangers?” I asked.

“I’m actually an Anglican priest,” said Wesley, “and I’ve never even met a tiger.”

I looked at Crystal and she responded.

“The most exciting thing I ever did in my life

was to become a part time court stenographer,” she said.

“Why are you here?” I said.

“I’m a new volunteer,” said Crystal, “just like you.”

“She used to dress up as a clown to entertain people,” said Wesley, “but when her outfits wore out and the price of clown make-up just kept spiraling upward ...”

“And we’re retired,” said the woman.

Wesley nodded his head. “Yes, we have to be careful with our pennies.

“So, instead,” said the woman, “I tell wild stories. It’s cheaper, easier and far more fun.”

“Except for that time in Albany when you tried playing an old hooker,” said Wesley.

Crystal gasped and girlishly put a hand to her smiling mouth. “Who knew I’d get so many offers?”

“Like the John who kidnapped you before I arrived to drive you home.”

“I was gone only for six months, Wesley.”

“Leaving me to put up with Bunnie,” he said.

Crystal’s eyes lit up as she stared off in the distance, somewhere past me and the next continent.

“I was taken overseas on a tramp steamer,” she said to me, “to ride sea turtles in a carnival that traveled across the Baltic states.”

“You took St. Francis and left me defenseless with a tiger,” he said.

They stopped their conversation abruptly. Both turned to look at me.

“I’m not a very religious man,” I said.

They continued to stare at me.

“And I’ve never used a whip,” I said.

They said not a word, but continued to look at me.

“Of course,” I said, “there was the time when I mapped the side of a Himalayan mountain and lived with the Sherpa alpine guides for a season.”

“Yes,” said Crystal. “Yes, go on.”

“I had to learn to fly a helicopter all by myself and ....”

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