



VLADIMIR

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“THERE’S A REPORT OF TWO CUBS down on a farm at Zolotaya Polyana.” Nine times out of ten you arrive at such a site to find out that, well, yes, there have been tigers here, and they are sure to come back, but the last sighting was, well, last week, but gosh, you’ve got to do something. Nonetheless, we have to check such reports out. A Canadian film crew, with us for this week in February 2001, is, of course, game. We send Sasha Reebin, a member of our staff, back for the capture equipment, just in case, and ask him to find Boris Litvinov or a member of his Tiger Response Team of Primorski Krai, the state entity that has legal responsibility for such situations and with which we work closely in all such encounters.

It takes nearly an hour to get to Zolotaya Polyana, where there are a number of “cottages” and agricultural

fields for people from Plastun village. We managed to find the decrepit-looking building that might be described as a farmhouse, and there were people outside, apparently waiting for us. I got out and approached them.

“We heard a report of some tigers around here?” I asked. This is normally when they tell you how you just missed them, they’re sure to come back, and it was only a few days ago that they were terrorizing them. Instead I got: “Yes, you want to see him?”

A woman came forward hurriedly and said, “He came here asking for help. You have to give him some medicine,” and then the whole family (or, I should say, the whole group of people, because it was hard to figure out who was related to whom and how—an older man, looking like he was getting towards his seventies, a not-unattractive

woman in her forties, and three kids, ages sixteen to twenty, perhaps) proceeded around the back of the house, with our entourage in tow. The house sat on the embankment of the Shepton River, and the foundation was exposed on the back side, with an opening in it for a door into the cellar. In place of a door, however, was a set of bedsprings laid on end to cover the doorway, with a metal pipe leaning against them, apparently to hold in the cub.

John Goodrich and I peered through the bedsprings. In one corner was a pile of pinecones (a good nut crop this year). A tarp hung from a post, hiding much of the corner but visible to the side of the tarp was the huge head of a tiger. “Oh my God” was all I could say. I stood there, almost frozen and speechless, waiting for the tiger to charge at us, obliterating the flimsy excuse for a cage door. The family was standing around, perfectly at ease in the presence of this tiger, excitedly telling us the story of how they had seen a tiger walking at the edge of their yard last night. Later, the old man had heard some noise down in the cellar and had gone down there with a flashlight, fumbling around, only to hear the growl of a tiger. He, of course, left quickly, with no bad consequences, and this morning put the bedsprings up. But there was another tiger, too, they said, that they also saw this morning, not thirty yards from the house. I’m looking at the tiger the whole time—its eyes are blinking, but it is showing no reaction to the nine people standing just outside this entryway—and I’m thinking that we don’t have any idea what his status is and that if he walked in here last night, he certainly has the strength in him for one last rush, one angry attack. And I am dumbfounded by the attitude of this entire family. They are not in the least bit frightened that a tiger is in their cellar—on the contrary, they are talking about it as if it is one of their dearest pets that fell ill and needs veterinary attention. I think they’re all nuts.

I ask everyone to back off and return to the front of the house. This is a potentially explosive situation. The old man takes John and me out to the edge of their yard and shows us tracks of where the tiger was seen last night. John notes that in a couple of places there are tracks suggesting that

another tiger walked nearby but then slunk back into the low oak-shrub fields surrounding the area. And they show us tracks where, this morning, the other tiger was just twenty or thirty yards from his or her son/brother/buddy in the cellar, seemingly waiting for him to get up and move on out of here. So not only do we have a tiger of unknown status in the cellar, but there is another one lurking somewhere nearby—potentially a defensive mother.

Sasha shows up with the immobilization equipment, but without Litvinov (in Vladivostok) or Anatoly Khobotnov (not home), so we send him off immediately to find Zheny Tsarapin (the other member of the response team) in Plastun. Meanwhile, we try to keep people from walking out back (“There’s no danger from him,” insist the family) or away from the farmhouse, where another tiger may be waiting.

Today is the first break in the miserably cold weather of this winter, and we can’t do anything on our own, so we lounge in the sun waiting, still stunned that there is a full-grown tiger lying in the cellar of the house in front of us.

It’s after 1:00 p.m. when Sasha returns with Zheny Tsarapin. John and Sasha prepare darts while I take Zheny out back and try to explain what is going on. I find myself having a hard time making sense of the situation to him—it’s just too surreal.

Sasha recommends that we drive my car around to the downstairs entry and back up to the door so that he can fire the dart gun out of the rear window. This sounds like a safe plan. Of course, the film crew wants to be down there, so we get them set up as far away as we can, and they do a good job of staying out of the way. When I’ve got Sasha backed right up to the door, he starts scanning the cellar room, saying he cannot find the tiger. I can’t see back there from the driver’s seat, but I say, “What do you mean you can’t see him, he’s right there on the pinecones.” No, he isn’t, says Sasha. The tiger has moved, and now we know he is still mobile and expect him to come lunging out from one of the corners that we cannot peer into. Sasha leans out the rear door to get a better view—I am waiting for that

explosive roar and powerful rush of an enraged and frightened predator. John and Zheny walk up on each side of the car and are peering through the bedsprings screen, flares and rifle ready. It is only now that they realize there is a second room built into the foundation. The tiger must be behind that wall.

Now what? We all agree you can't walk in there, in the dark—it would just be too risky. We discuss options but can't come up with a reasonable way to deal with this situation. Finally, we ask the family, "You don't, by any chance, have a trapdoor to the cellar?" Most root cellars in Russian homes are accessed through such a trapdoor, but this is not really a root cellar.

"No, but we can make one!" comes the almost gleeful reply, and within minutes they are ripping out their flooring and have the chainsaw revved up to cut through the main floorboards. As the saw roars upstairs, I am again stunned by the lengths to which this family is going for this tiger.

Sasha and I stand below, expecting to see a tiger come roaring out of that black back room, hell-bent on escape from the screaming chainsaw overhead. Our task, should that happen, is to keep him contained—how we would do that is not quite clear. But we see no tiger, and no sign of movement by him, despite the raucous din just above him.

They finally get the hole cut, and John can see the tiger now. He is not responding to the light or people above him, so Sasha goes upstairs to try to get a dart in him. The hole is small, and of course not in the right place—Sasha has to wedge himself into the hole up to his waist, hang upside down, and shoot the dart gun with one hand. He is expecting the tiger to leap at him in response to the ketamine dart, and now, with Zheny down at the doorway with me, we are again expecting the tiger to come charging out. But, Sasha later says, except for a slight flinch there was no response.

In just a few minutes, we walk in, still cautious, with rifle cocked and ready, but the tiger is immobilized, both with drugs and sickness. We carry him out into the light. He is a young male but fully grown, with the huge head that I first saw lying on the pinecones. However, he is the most

emaciated animal I have ever seen—a real bag of bones, every rib and every limb bone traceable through the skin and coat; his pelvis sticks so far beyond his emaciated muscles in the hindquarters it is almost grotesque. On all his legs the hair has been lost, probably due to mange.

We collect blood, take body measurements, and weigh him in at 186 pounds—a healthy animal of this size would weigh at least 250, maybe 300. I have the blood tubes in my hand and need to label them. I ask the old farmer, "What's your name?" and he tells me, "Vladimir." I write this name for this tiger on the tubes. One of the boys explains to his elder that the tiger has been named after him, and the old man seems pleased.

Now, what do we do? Our initial plan was to bring the tiger in the back of the pickup to Plastun, where Zheny has a cage that is nearly ready. We could bring him directly to Litvinov's, in the village of Terney, not much farther away, where they have constructed a cage especially for problem tigers. The warm midday sun is gone, and we're afraid our patient won't hold up well in the freezing wind in the back of a pickup, so we fold down the backseats and slide him into my jeep. We will have our hands full if he decides to get up in the next hour.

We get out of there as fast as we can and negotiate the icy roads quickly. Sasha is in back with the tiger, constantly testing it—ear twitches, jaw resistance, breath rate—for any sign of recovery from the drugs. When we are only five kilometers from Terney, Sasha thinks we need to provide a supplemental dose of ketamine. In town, we quickly add the final touches to the cage, fill it with hay, get a dish wired into the corner, and transfer the tiger into it. Meanwhile, John and Sasha pump a few liters of saline solution into the tiger subcutaneously. Ideally, we would have this patient hooked up to an IV and be feeding him glucose and a saline solution, but that is simply impossible given a wild tiger and existing supplies. Even before we can cover up the cage, people start arriving: "I've never seen a tiger in my life. Can I have a look?" Terney is a small village, and word does indeed travel fast.

John and I return home and eat our first meal of the day, then return for a final inspection just before dark. Vladimir is lying in the same position, his breathing labored. It is hard to tell where the effect of the drugs leaves off and the sickness takes over. Prospects look bleak.

In the morning, we see he has changed positions, but there is no indication that he has drunk any of the chicken broth that was provided last night. A couple of pieces of boiled chicken were thrown in, but it is impossible to tell if he ate them (later, we learn, surprisingly, that he did). Neither John nor I think this animal is simply starving to death, and we are both thinking of canine distemper, which is killing half the dogs in Terney. (One of the dogs at the farm was dragging both hind legs, and we later learned that he died the next day.) Canine distemper had wiped out half of the Serengeti lion population, and we are concerned about a potential outbreak of the disease in the wild tiger population, since there are reports of distemper in zoo tigers. John suggests that the greatest value of this animal may be in its ability to provide information about the illness afflicting it. In any case, we realize that it will require heroic efforts to attempt to save this life, and we are not equipped for it.

In the afternoon, preparations are made to send Vladimir to Ussurisk, where the Krai veterinarian clinic is situated and which is also, coincidentally, the home of the person who does necropsies of tigers for the Committee for Environmental Protection. With the crew driving there we send a set of specific questions to be addressed, including a request that they do a virus culture to look for distemper.

We load a small wooden crate into the back of the Ural truck. Just a month ago, this same crate had carried two tiger cubs to Vladivostok for transfer to Moscow Zoo. (Abandoned by their mother and captured by our team, they were also victims of this tough winter.) The cage is not strong enough to hold a healthy adult tiger, but it should do for this one. The main advantage of this cage is its smaller size, which allows the tiger to ride in the warmth of the back cabin of the truck.

At this point, just before the truck leaves, we search for remains of the boiled chicken in the cage and find that Vladimir not only ate but readily chewed up the bones. Just before they leave, I warn Kolya Reebin, Sasha's brother, who will be traveling down, to be careful opening up the back cabin—the tiger found the strength to walk to the rear room of the cellar yesterday and eat chicken last night, but the rest of the time he is in an almost comatose state. Perhaps sometimes he comes out of it, in which case he could be capable, and therefore dangerous, for short periods of time.

Such optimism and concern prove unnecessary. Just outside Dalnegorsk, one third of the way to Ussurisk, they stop to check on the tiger: no movement and no breathing.

The pathologist receives a fresh corpse to examine, and we are hopeful that, in time, we will learn more explicitly what happened to Vladimir. But I can't stop thinking about that woman back on the farm who kept saying, "He came to us humans asking for help. We've got to do something for him." It is reassuring to know that such people are still out there, living with the tiger, in an accepting, almost loving way. It was those people who had the right attitude toward this tiger, and it was I who had it all wrong, in spite of my good intentions. I feel as if we let her, and of course him, down. This time, it seems, there was nothing we could do, and I apologize to both of them.

DALE MIQUELLE was born and raised in New England, and received a B.S. at Yale University, an M.S. from University of Minnesota, and a Ph.D. from University of Idaho. He spent a year working on the Smithsonian Tiger Ecology Project in Chitwan National Park, Nepal, before joining the Hornocker Wildlife Institute's Siberian Tiger Project. Now country coordinator for the Wildlife Conservation Society's Russia Program, Miquelle coordinates Siberian tiger research and conservation in both the Russian Far East and nearby northeast China.