

Tiger, Tiger

by Casey Robb

An Arctic devil of a storm is whirling up ahead to the north. You watch it from your middle seat on Flight 459, leaning left to the window across the empty seat. The mammoth cloud is a muddy blue-black, shimmering in the final slice of Pacific sun sinking in the west. No lights below. *Must be over the Gulf of Alaska.* You drop your *Guns & Ammo* magazine onto the empty aisle seat to your right. *A little drizzle. I've seen worse.* You yawn and stretch your arms. You imagine Wendy in Anchorage. *She's probably on her way to the airport now, heading west on Route 1 and on to...*

The screech of grinding gears shoots up from the floor, jarring your boots, your seat. You jerk forward to grab... at anything—an instinct. The squeal sputters, then fades. The engines hush down to a soothing hum. *It's nothing.* You exhale, ease.

“Beverage?” The flight attendant pulls the cart to your row. Her wiry red hair is slicked back in a spidery clip.

“No thanks.” You nestle back in the seat while your mind drifts, floats, dreams of Jessica waiting back home. You told her you're off to Vancouver, that your mother is ill, her heart again. *Well, it's true, you think, she is ill. But Jessica's too smart for that.*

You flinch, remembering the fight Jessica launched last night when you told her about this trip and, when both of you were spent with shouting, how she crawled into bed and turned her back. You joined her, propped up on your elbow, and caressed her orange hair flaring like flames on the pillow. “You're always leaving me,” she whispered. “It's Wendy again.” You leaned back on the bed and sighed. *Dammit, you thought, constantly accusing me!* Your stomach

clenched in knots. You wanted to tell Jessica every tender thing—how you’d be back soon, how you could start anew, with just her, Jessica... wanted to tell her you adore her, how small you feel when she’s holding you, that you can’t lose her, how, without her, you could die. But you didn’t. You turned your back. *Why? Why?*

The girl behind you kicks the seat. *Stop kicking me!*

You squint to block the overhead lights, and the blame still biting at you—you the accused, the tried, the convicted. *How could Jessica know?*

The attendant pulls the cart close. “Trash?” Some of her frizzy strands have come loose. You shake your head.

You recall your first sight of her—*Jessica*—stepping out from that ruby convertible, her bushy mane of orange and gold rippling in the wind, and you, amazed, itching to get your hands in it. *But that was three years ago.* You sigh. *So much has happened since then, and now that we’re...*

The plane slams into turbulence. You jolt forward. The seatbelt sign flashes red. The captain’s voice quivers in the crackling air: “Return to your seats. Return to your seats.” The plane lurches. The attendant is tossed onto the fat man’s lap across the aisle, her spider clip shaking free. She pushes up straight and hurries the cart down the aisle past the curtains. A crack of lightning ruptures the sky, an electric lattice ripping across blue-black. The plane surges, plunges into the muddy cloud, shudders. The windows go dark. Bullets of rain pelt the blackened glass.

Your mouth turns dry. You run your stocky fingers over your receding hair, combed to cover that annoying bald spot. The stubble on the back of your neck prickles. Your skin tingles like jungle flesh, reminds you of those nights back in ‘Nam—the sullied sky drizzling down a

crown of vines, soaking bodies bleeding in the shadows. The earthy reek of sweat, of moldy boots and dread. The sucking sound of hot mud. Cold click of metal bolts in black brush. The grinding whirl of an inky sky loaded with choppers.

The plane arcs up its nose and levels as if floating. Your stomach rises to your throat. The captain's voice booms through the intercom: "Stay calm... remain seated..." The static turns to a sizzle and a *hissss*. Your forehead turns clammy, drips.

The plane leans into an unplanned dive to the sea. Its hull wavers in a long descent to the deep. You know the feel—a helicopter dodging fire, the floor dropping beneath your feet, leaving your rifle, your stomach, to hover like wounded wings.

The plane hauls up again and swerves. You stiffen and press against the back rest.

Jessica. "You have no heart," she said last night. *No*, you think. *I have too much heart—heart for Jessica... heart for Wendy in Alaska who's on her way to the airport now*. You breathe out. *Too much heart? Really? Or am I beaten down to a shriveled core, slashed, ripped and bleeding? Jessica doesn't know me. Or maybe she does and loves me still. She doesn't deserve this*. You turn to see rows and rows of seasick faces. You hear it again—*no heart, no heart*—an echo in a hollow hull of plastic and steel.

The storm thickens. The wings weave, hurl the plane to the left. You grab the armrest—a perfect fit for your brawny hand. Reminds you of the comforting grip of your M-16, of your Marine buddy Mac with his easy laugh, his way with women (even the whores in Saigon liked him enough for a little extra) and that last week in 'Nam, the night you heard Mac's crackling voice through your radio: *Tiger... Tiger...*

The echo repeats: *no heart, no heart*. Your pulse throbs in your neck. *I do love Jessica. I'm sure of it. I will tell her. Soon.*

Lightning hits. The bolt—an eerie blue—jolts the plane and runs its luminous breaker down the body from tail to cockpit, now in a deeper dive. The girl behind you screams. The boy beside her heaves, his breath raspy and full. Somewhere in the tail section a man sobs.

A young woman staggers down the aisle, grasping at seatbacks. Her brown eyes are vacant with fear. She slips. Her body is tossed at you. You grab at her to cushion her fall. She clutches at your headrest. Her nails graze your bald spot. You flinch. Clipped to her navy blouse is a gold conference name tag: 'Betsy.' Her tear-drizzled face is pale against her dark braid and navy headband.

“Sit down!” you shout.

Her eyes flicker, come to life. “Who are you to order me?”

“I’m a pilot,” you lie.

You twist her around and yank her into the empty aisle seat to your right. She stares ahead. She squeezes your hand. Her pink nails dig in. You wrap both arms around her and shift her close. A crash of lightning pitches the plane.

“Our Father... who art...” she mumbles. You feel her warm, quick breath on your neck and remember the day the priest came, the *Father*. Your old man was called to the phone and left the room. The priest sat on the couch, cupped your hand in his and called you “son,” pulled you close and slipped his hand in your pants, breathing hot breath on your neck. You were eight. You wanted to hurt. Or cry. You didn’t. You never told. Helen’s face appears, that straw-haired girl in second grade you wanted to marry, the one who smelled like apples. You tried to kiss her during recess. She said you were ugly and dumb. You still loved her, but you hated her. Then your old man’s voice slithers up from the soil, all the way through the storm and into your delicate brains. “You idiot,” the old man mutters, again. You feel him slam your head against your bedroom wall

with his tattoo arm. You were three... five... no, maybe ten... who cares how old? Time can travel. Your mind can still break. *Am I really dumb? Dumb? Dumb?*

The plane jolts. A torrent of rain slaps at the window. Reminds you of that wet, sloppy night near Khe Sanh, how your radio crackled—*Tiger! Tiger!*—how your buddy Mac blasted through the airwaves, choking, how he did, in fact, mean the real thing—*tiger!*—not the Cong, but a real-life black and orange cat. You dashed off the trail, boots sucking in the mire, and caught a glimpse in the shards of moonlight—“Mac!”—his legs caught in a low tangle of trees and vines—“Mac!”—the scent of blood swirling like a dark eddy—then a flash of orange in a maze of murky green, and it was gone. You fired the shot... too late. *How could I miss? Dumb!* You crouched down, ran your fingers along Mac’s face, made out the gashes in his fatigues, his collar, saw how the beast had sprung at him from behind, sunk in his teeth, and dragged him by the neck across that moonlit muddy path and into the other dark.

Heart, heart. Your stomach clenches. You heave. *Mac! Buddy! Why?*

The plane trembles, dips. The floor lights flicker, then burn off. Blackness rolls down the rows, flooding and sealing every crevice like the closing of a tomb. The fat man across the aisle hacks and moans. The plane quickens, curves, bows to an ugly angle.

Heart: Jessica. Wendy. Mac. You snatch your jacket, wad it, clutch it close.

Betsy crawls onto your lap, conforms to the curve of your arm, shivers. *Jessica.* You open your jacket and swaddle her bracing body like a shroud. You cleave to her, your arms a cradle. Gravity bends you both. You flex. You fold. You both grow small. You get a whiff of her hair, of vanilla cologne... you smell water... and salt...

You have always been here: the deluge, the deep. The sea must part.

You reach to brace. The armrest. The feel of the grip, the M-16. *Mac, wait! This time I won't miss!* The tiger appears, saunters up the path, orange and black, his belly bloated. He stops, licks a paw, lifts his head. His eyes fix on you, flash—a tawny-green.

You hoist the barrel, hook him in the cross-hairs, finger the trigger... Fire—!