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Opening extract from

The Tiger Rising

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Published by

Walker Books Ltd

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chapter

1

That morning, after he discovered the tiger, Rob went and stood under the Kentucky Star Motel sign and waited for the school bus just like it was any other day. The Kentucky Star sign was composed of a yellow neon star that rose and fell over a piece of blue neon in the shape of the state of Kentucky. Rob liked the sign; he harbored a dim but abiding notion that it would bring him good luck.

Finding the tiger had been luck, he knew that. He had been out in the woods behind the Kentucky Star Motel, way out in the woods, not really looking for anything, just wandering, hoping that maybe he would get lost or get eaten by a bear and not have to go to school

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ever again. That's when he saw the old Beauchamp gas station building, all boarded up and tumbling down. Next to it there was a cage, and inside the cage, unbelievably, there was a tiger – a real-life, very large tiger pacing back and forth. He was orange and gold and so bright it was like staring at the sun itself, angry and trapped in a cage.

It was early morning and it looked like it might rain; it had been raining every day for almost two weeks. The sky was grey and the air was thick and still. Fog was hugging the ground. To Rob, it seemed as if the tiger was some magic trick, rising out of the mist. He was so astounded at his discovery, so amazed, that he stood and stared. But only for a minute; he was afraid to look at the tiger for too long, afraid that the tiger would disappear. He stared, and then he turned and ran back into the woods, towards the Kentucky Star. And the whole way home, while his brain doubted what he had seen, his heart beat out the truth to him. *Ti-ger. Ti-ger. Ti-ger.*

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That was what Rob thought about as he stood beneath the Kentucky Star sign and waited for the bus. The tiger. He did not think about the rash on his legs, the itchy red blisters that snaked their way into his shoes. His father said that it would be less likely to itch if he didn't think about it.

And he did not think about his mother. He hadn't thought about her since the morning of the funeral, the morning he couldn't stop crying the great heaving sobs that made his chest and stomach hurt. His father, watching him, standing beside him, had started to cry, too.

They were both dressed up in suits that day. His father's suit was too small. And when he slapped Rob to make him stop crying, he ripped a hole underneath the arm of his jacket.

"There ain't no point in crying," his father had said afterwards. "Crying ain't going to bring her back."

It had been six months since that day, six months since he and his father had moved from Jacksonville to

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Lister, and Rob had not cried since, not once.

The final thing he did not think about that morning was getting onto the bus. He specifically did not think about Norton and Billy Threemonger waiting for him like chained and starved guard dogs, eager to attack.

Rob had a way of not-thinking about things. He imagined himself as a suitcase that was too full, like the one that he had packed when they left Jacksonville after the funeral. He made all his feelings go inside the suitcase; he stuffed them in tight and then sat on the suitcase and locked it shut. That was the way he not-thought about things. Sometimes it was hard to keep the suitcase shut. But now he had something to put on top of it. The tiger.

So as he waited for the bus under the Kentucky Star sign, and as the first drops of rain fell from the sullen sky, Rob imagined the tiger on top of his suitcase, blinking his golden eyes, sitting proud and strong, unaffected by all the not-thoughts inside straining to come out.

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chapter

2

"Looky here," said Norton Threemonger as soon as Rob stepped onto the school bus. "It's the Kentucky Star. How's it feel to be a star?" Norton stood in the centre of the aisle, blocking Rob's path.

Rob shrugged.

"Oh, he don't know," Norton called to his brother. "Hey, Billy, he don't know what it's like to be a star."

Rob slipped past Norton. He walked all the way to the back of the bus and sat down in the last seat.

"Hey," said Billy Threemonger, "you know what? This ain't Kentucky. This is Florida."

He followed Rob and sat down right next to him.

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He pushed his face so close that Rob could smell his breath. It was bad breath. It smelled metallic and rotten. "You ain't a Kentucky star," Billy said, his eyes glowing under the brim of his John Deere cap. "And you sure ain't a star here in Florida. You ain't a star nowhere."

"OK," said Rob.

Billy shoved him hard. And then Norton came swaggering back and leaned over Billy and grabbed hold of Rob's hair with one hand, and with the other hand ground his knuckles into Rob's scalp.

Rob sat there and took it. If he fought back, it lasted longer. If he didn't fight back, sometimes they got bored and left him alone. They were the only three kids on the bus until it got into town and Mr Nelson, the driver, pretended he didn't know what was going on. He drove staring straight ahead, whistling songs that didn't have any melody. Rob was on his own and he knew it.

"He's got the creeping crud all over him," said

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Billy. He pointed at Rob's legs. "Look," he said to Norton. "Ain't it gross?"

"Uh-huh," said Norton. He was concentrating on grinding his knuckles into Rob's head. It hurt, but Rob didn't cry. He never cried. He was a pro at not-crying. He was the best not-crier in the world. It drove Norton and Billy Threemonger wild. And today Rob had the extra power of the tiger. All he had to do was think about it, and he knew there was no way he would cry. Not ever.

They were still out in the country, only halfway into town, when the bus lurched to a stop. This was such a surprising development, to have the bus stop halfway through its route, that Norton stopped grinding his knuckles into Rob's scalp and Billy stopped punching Rob in the arm.

"Hey, Mr Nelson," Norton shouted. "Whatcha doin'?"

"This ain't a stop, Mr Nelson," Billy called out helpfully.

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But Mr Nelson ignored them. He kept whistling his non-song as he swung open the bus door. And while Norton and Billy and Rob watched, openmouthed and silent, a girl with yellow hair and a pink lacy dress walked up the steps and onto the bus.

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