Tiger, Tiger

Stephen Connolly

Come. Sit down. I won't bite, I promise. You've done well to get this far, to track us down. I salute you.

Now take a look around. Be honest, I can tell it's not what you were expecting. Instead of a tablecloth, butcher's paper from a roll. Faded menus in scratched plastic sleeves, ketchup in enormous plastic tomatoes, the reek of cheap cooking oil. An ordinary truck stop, no different from a hundred others across the City.

Relax! The food is safe enough, although not very inspired. Omelettes, steak, pasta. The usual suspects. Local versions of dishes from across the globe. Served with chips.

Why are we here? Because tonight could be special. Tonight, the Tiger may call. Perhaps he's already here, it's so tempting to barge into the kitchen and investigate. That door, there, see? Where that girl just went in. But first we eat. The proof of the pudding, as it were. You are of course free to leave at any time. But I hope you won't.

Still here? Good. Now lean close, for my words are not for the uninitiated.

We've been tracking him for years, this Tiger. Day by day, month by month, collating the sightings, puzzling out his schedule. Weeks go by without a trace and then POW! Last Tuesday, that Brasserie behind the station, you know the one? Wednesday, the Pizzeria across from the museum, the one that stays open late. Friday, a Noodle bar in the theatre district, that one with the pink neon signage. Run-of-the-mill places, with no reputation for quality. But for one night only, for a few precious hours, the food superb. Every meal cooked to an absolute perfection. And all because the Tiger deigned to visit.

Such skepticism on your face. But also . . . excitement?

Next day, everything's back to normal. And even if you'd read a review or heard someone raving or you just happened to choose the Brasserie or the Pizzeria or the Noodle Bar it would be too late. Before you'd picked up a menu, before you'd even sat down, the magic would have already vanished, the Tiger gone.

For this Tiger is a nomad. Just another anonymous chef who walked in off the street and asked for a shift during the evening rush. Vanishing without a word at the end of the night. Not even waiting for his share of the tips.

Imagine it! Circling the City, night after night, restaurant to restaurant. Never the same place two nights running. And never the quality establishments, either. Always the small, the mediocre, even the chains! Nameless and faceless this Tiger, forgotten almost as soon as he's left the premises. But possessing such genius with meat and vegetables, such delicacy with herbs and spices. An artist of

oven and saucepan. Night after night feeding the undeserving, the proles. While those of us—I hope I may count you among our number—with the palate to truly appreciate his skills must go without.

Now do you understand our frustration, our eagerness to find him?

Some fools still insist this Tiger is a myth, all these wonderful meals mere coincidence. Run-of-the-mill chefs having a good night. But we know better.

For we're a motley crew, we who hunt the Tiger. Look behind you. Recognise him? Food critic for the Citizen. Over there, he was with the Times. And those two in the corner used to be on Television. Our ranks include scientists, statisticians and gamblers. Volunteers, all ready at a moment's notice, to rush to the scene of a sighting and bear witness.

But you know all this, surely? Your enquiries have not gone unnoticed. Or did you think our meeting here tonight mere coincidence? You wish to join our ranks—please, no protestations of innocence! But I must warn you it's not a decision to be taken lightly.

Not for nothing is our Tiger named for the fiercest of predators. Our Tiger is cursed. Every time he calls, he leaves a victim: every visit exacts its price. The woman who ate at the Brasserie then fell downstairs to her death. The man who ate at the Pizzeria only to be killed by a drunk driver on his way home. The woman who tripped as she left the Noodle bar and broke her neck on the pavement.

A culinary Flying Dutchman, condemned to wander the City, preparing extraordinary meals but leaving death in his wake. Coincidence, you say? The statistics don't lie. We have contacts everywhere. The police, the hospitals. Even the insurance companies.

So, there you have it. There is nothing more to tell, only the questions we are desperate to ask him. Where did he come from? Where did he train? How did he become so good? Above all, what did he do to draw death so close behind him? Are the two linked in some Faustian pact? What could his story be?

Sometimes I wonder if it's we who are cursed. I mean, look at us. Risking our very lives as we wander the City in pursuit of a phantom. Neglecting our families to chase rumours of soufflés and sauces. I can almost see him in your eyes, an image of the Tiger as clear and as real as I am. Do you really want to join us?

How close have I ever come? A good question. Just once, I think. Chasing a hunch to that Bistro by the Old Bridge, out of business now, sadly. Snatching a dirty plate from a waiter's hand. A smear of sauce, a fragment of fish and even cold, the taste . . . extraordinary. I'm sure it was him. Who else could it have been?

One day we will find him, I know it in my heart. Perhaps you will be the one to tip the balance, your palate enough to trigger a meeting? One day one of us will be in the right place at the right time. To meet him face to face, help him break the curse and cease his wandering. To settle down somewhere and open a restaurant. A cozy Trattoria perhaps, its whereabouts known only to our brotherhood. Or some grand Michelin-starred affair where selected guests may hope to be entertained.

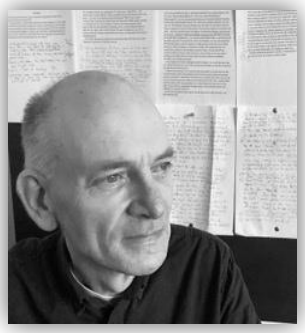
The proles have had their chance. It's our turn now.

But until that day we must continue the hunt, in hope. Our sacred Quest: to dine with the Tiger, though we risk our lives in the process. Though the faces of our loved ones grow ever fainter, our lives lose ever more scraps of meaning.

But one must be philosophical about these things, don't you agree? In order to enjoy the best, it seems only right that you should be prepared to risk everything. Why else are you here? I see the hunger in your face, don't attempt to hide it. One addict can always recognise another.

So. What do you think? Will you join us and prove yourself up to the challenge? Will tonight be the night, this humble truck stop the place where history is made? Do you need a moment before deciding? Behold, the waiter approaches. Please try to ignore the state of his fingernails.

It's time to make your decision. You've heard my tale and you know what's at stake. You've studied the menu. What looks tempting? What would you like for supper?



Stephen Connolly was born in Canada, grew up in Scotland and South Africa but now lives in the Cotswolds, where he does all the cooking. Primarily a playwright, he graduated with an MA in Scriptwriting from Bath Spa University. His radio play *Sky Pilots* won a BBC competition while his stage play *Parzival* was workshopped by Bristol Old Vic. His short stories have appeared in *Far Off Places*, *Fictive Dream*, *Leaf Books*, *Stroud Short Stories*, *Retreat West*, *DoubleSpeak,* and *Flash Flood*. Current works in progress include a novel about magic and a stage play about Scott of the Antarctic, set in 2012 instead of 1912.