

A Tiger Too Many

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Eskdale Publishing
www.antonywootten.co.uk

Eskdale Publishing , UK

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Eskdale Publishing,
North Yorkshire

www.antonywootten.co.uk

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A Catalogue record for this book is available from the British
Library.

ISBN: 978-0-9537123-1-1

I would like to thank the late Clinton Keeling, the zoological historian who became my unofficial advisor while I was writing this novel. Clinton's detailed memories of London zoo, as well as events in the wider world during the war, which he willingly and patiently shared with me, were valuable beyond words.

Chapter 1

Adults tried not to show us they were scared about the war. But we already had our gas masks, and we'd helped with the preparations, like putting up the blackout curtains, and sticking tape across the windows to stop glass flying around if a bomb landed nearby. How could we not be scared? We just had to carry on as normal though. The war started on the 3rd of September 1939, and for me, everything changed the very next day. Even though it would be almost a year before the Germans came, that was the day the killing started.

Pete, my brother, was much older than me. He was a grown-up, and sometimes people thought he was my dad. But my dad had died when I was a baby. Pete worked in London Zoo, and whenever I could, I went with him to help. It was a Monday, but my school, and most public places, were closed, in case of bombing raids. The zoo was closed too, but only to the public. There was still lots of work to be done there. Mum was a housemaid for a rich lady in town, and she had to go to work as normal, so she said I'd better go with Pete. I'd be safer there than on my own at home. It was sunny, but I had a dreadful sick feeling in my stomach. I could see the silvery barrage balloons in the sky. I liked the way they stayed up

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there, like kites, swaying peacefully, and changing shape very slightly in the wind. But I knew they were supposed to stop the Germans flying their planes low over London to drop bombs, and that made me feel afraid.

Pete was Junior Keeper in the Lion House. Mr Florey was in charge, but today he'd gone up to Whipsnade. The Lion House was a long, brick building. Outside, there were enclosures where some of the animals could walk about, but lots of animals were kept inside too. It wasn't just lions in the Lion House. There were jaguars, tigers, and cheetahs too. There were even two giant pandas, Tang and Ming. They were so soft and friendly-looking, I loved watching them. I loved all the animals. But my favourite was Ronny, the oldest tiger. His orange stripes were the same colour as my hair. I thought he looked wise and gentle, and I felt sorry for him because he was getting old and was often ill.

But today, something was happening in the Reptile House. I could see it from outside Ronny's cage. It was at the other end of Broad Walk, the wide path which ran through the middle of the zoo. I'd seen the keepers coming and going with boxes, and the man in the suit with his clipboard, and the lorry parked outside. I followed Pete round for ages, getting in his way, asking him what they were doing. Eventually, when we were having a break in the

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keepers' room upstairs, he told me.

And I couldn't believe it.

"Why do they have to *kill* them?" I gasped.

"Jill, sugar," Pete said softly, putting his big hand on my shoulder. Pete always called me sugar. He called other people 'honey'; well, girls and ladies anyway. But 'sugar' was just for me. "I know how you feel," he said, stooping so his blue eyes were right in front of me. "But, you know, there's a war on now, the zoo could get bombed. If any of those snakes got out, it would be really dangerous. If one of them bit someone... Some of them can kill, you know."

I knew Pete was right, and I'd been coming here with him for long enough to know that sometimes animals had to be killed if they were sick or injured. But killing healthy animals seemed so unfair. They couldn't help being poisonous. The lump in my throat wouldn't go away, even when Pete hugged me. He stroked one of my plaits. "I wouldn't have brought you today if I'd known. No-one tells me anything. Anyway, it's not all bad. I've got a surprise for you a bit later. You'll love it. I promise." He squeezed my cheek. Pete knew I hated it when other people did that, and he only did it as a joke. Usually I'd laugh, and then maybe punch him in the arm. But today I just turned, and went outside.

"Don't do anything that'll get me the sack!" Pete called.

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I didn't want to help Pete today. I just wanted to wander around, looking at the animals, and trying to forget the poor snakes and the war. I had my heavy gas mask hanging at my side. The string was already digging into my shoulder, but Mum said I had to carry it wherever I went.

I could smell a bonfire somewhere. The zoo was almost deserted, and Ronny was pacing backwards and forwards in his enclosure. I leaned on the barrier and watched him through the thick wire mesh. He always had his head down these days. He seemed sad, and tired. Pete said the enclosures never got any sun, and the cold North Wind could blow right into them. That's not good for a tiger. I wished I could save him, take him somewhere warm to live. He looked at me. I loved it when he did that. Some of the other animals never seemed to notice you, as if they couldn't even see the people outside their cages. But Ronny always looked at the visitors. Sometimes he growled at them, or jumped at the side of his enclosure, making it shake and rattle, and the people scream. I gazed back at Ronny's dark eyes. I knew he was only teasing.

I could hear the howler monkey whooping now, and the chattering of the birds in the nearby Bird House. But when the zoo was closed like this, it always surprised me how quiet the animals really were.

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Opposite Ronny's enclosure were the wolves. They paced up and down all the time, and the wind ruffled the fluffy hair on their backs. I watched them for a while, then wandered up onto Broad Walk. I was going towards the big pond, to see the penguins, when I heard a gunshot. I recognised it straight away. That's how they killed the bigger animals. Surely not snakes though. Pete hadn't said any of the bigger animals were being killed today.

There was another gunshot. It was close by. I suddenly wondered if maybe it wasn't the zoo-people at all. I froze in terror. Had the Germans come here already? But why would the Germans come and attack the zoo? No, animals were being killed. With my gas mask box banging against my side, I ran back past the wolves, towards the Antelope House. I was sure the noise had come from there.

I could already see the zoo lorry parked outside the front. Six men came out of the building, carrying a large, dead animal in a sort of canvass hammock. It was like a big deer, with a ruddy-brown back and stripes on its legs. An eland. They swung it up onto the back of the lorry, making it bounce as the animal landed. They pulled the hammock out, and went back inside with it. A few minutes later they came back out again. This time they had a smaller animal, with short horns. It was a zebu. Soon it was on the

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lorry beside the eland, its legs sticking up in the air at an angle, like dead trees, and the men were mopping their brows.

I couldn't understand it. I knew about the snakes, but these two animals were so gentle. They wouldn't hurt anyone even if they did get out. Why did they have to die?

A man in a suit came out next. He was holding a clipboard. He had an old-fashioned bowler hat on and his gas mask box strung across his body. I wiped my eyes, took a deep breath and walked right up to him.

"Excuse me," I said, all calm, like my mum when she gets cross with someone. "Please kindly tell me why you are having these animals shot." I had my hands on my hips.

He looked down at me. "Hello, young lady," he said. "Pete Larch's little sister isn't it?" I nodded. He sighed, and looked around at the other men. They all just looked away and started talking.

I carried on looking up at him, trying to be stern.

He crouched down in front of me and smiled. "My, you're a bold one, eh?" he said, and squeezed my cheek. I just looked back at him, without reacting. He stopped smiling. He sighed again, and said, "My dear, sometimes, so others can go on living, some have to be..." He didn't finish, but I knew what he meant.

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“Why?” I said.

“It’s... complicated.”

“But... they’re not even dangerous like the snakes.”

“No.”

“Were they ill then?”

“Er... They were old and... they needed a lot of medicine. It’s... it’s a lot to do with money. It’s very complicated.” He cleared his throat.

But suddenly I had a horrible thought. “Are you going to kill all the dangerous or old animals?”

“Not all of them, no. Of course not.” He smiled again.

“What about the tigers?”

“Well...” He stood up and looked around at the others. He waved one of them over, and whispered something to him. I heard what he said. He’d sent for Pete. The other man hurried off. I could feel tears pricking at my eyes. I shook my head. I couldn’t speak. I walked away slowly. “Come back,” the man in the suit said. I didn’t, so he tried again, more firmly this time, like a teacher. But I kept walking.

I was about to break into a run when I saw Pete coming towards us. He must have already been on his way to find me. “Pete,” I shouted as I ran up to him. He hugged me, lifting me up.

“What’s wrong, sugar?”

“It’s Ronny. They’re going to kill him.”

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I'd expected Pete to be horrified. But he just lowered me to the ground and held my hands. "I know. I've just found out."

"Well..." I began. "Well... aren't you going to stop them?"

"I wish I could. I wish I could. But it's for the best."

I didn't know what to say. For a moment, I just stared at him with my mouth wide open. How could he let this happen? I hated him suddenly.

But if he wasn't going to do anything, I'd have to.

I looked around at the other men, who seemed to be watching me as if I was one of their dangerous animals and needed to be captured. The man in the suit gave me a kindly smile, but it didn't work. I ran again. This time I knew where to run to. I'd only ever heard of Doctor Barker, the man in charge of the whole zoo. I didn't really know what he looked like, but I knew his office must be in the big building on the other side of the zoo. Somehow, I would stop the killing. I would save Ronny.

Chapter 2

I held my gas mask box still as I ran. Past the Camel House. Across the big courtyard, past the main restaurant and the Tea Pavilion. My chest and legs were sore now. I got faster where the path sloped down towards the tunnel under the road. The offices were on the other side. I was nearly out of control. My feet hurt from the hard cobble stones and my steps echoed as I sped through the tunnel. I could hardly breathe now, but I wouldn't stop. Another lorry at the end of the tunnel. Men unloading sand-bags there. I darted between them. Some of them called after me.

The path sloped up, away from the tunnel, making my legs ache even more. I was on the other side of the road now. Past the Insect House, and there was the office building. I heaved the door open, and went inside. There was an old lady behind a desk. She asked where I was going and I told her, as calmly as I could, I needed to see Doctor Barker. She shook her head and said something about a meeting, but I ran past her and up the wide staircase. I was on a landing now, which smelt of polish and old carpet. There were doors on either side, with names on. I was panting for breath and I could hear the lady coming up the stairs behind me.

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I carried on along the landing, slowly though, so I could read the names on the office doors at the same time. My face was sweaty and burning hot. I didn't want to meet Doctor Barker like this, but I had no choice.

Suddenly, a door in front of me opened, and I ran straight into the big man who stepped out. He grabbed onto me and managed to stop us both from falling over.

"Young lady," snapped the man. Then, the woman chasing me, sounding all out of breath, said, "Doctor Barker, I do apologise for this."

"Doctor Barker?" I said. I couldn't believe my luck. My heart was beating fast from my run, but I was excited now too. I had found him. I would make him listen. I would save Ronny!

I looked up at him. He was fat and tall. He had white hair and spectacles and was wearing a black, pin-striped suit. He looked very confused and a little bit cross.

"Yes. And who might you be, young lady?"

The woman was beside me now. She was red-faced from running. "So sorry, Doctor Barker," she said. "I tried to stop her, but she just ran past. She said she needed to see you, but I told her you were—"

"It's quite all right," he said sharply. He looked down at me. His face was stern. "Who are you?"

I quickly told him I was Pete's sister, but I didn't

Chapter 2

mention Ronny yet.

“And you were looking for me?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Well, come on child, spit it out. What do you want?”

“They’re going to shoot Ronny!” I said, still trying to get my breath back.

“Ronny?”

“The tiger. Ronny the tiger! They’re going to shoot him!” I couldn’t think what else to say.

He looked confused for a moment, but then he said, “Ah yes, and about time too. The poor creature’s been a drain on our finances for years. Now, run along. This is no place for a child.”

“What? No, no, they’re going to *kill* him. Don’t you understand?”

The lady started trying to pry me away from Doctor Barker now. She spoke softly to me, but I ignored her.

“You can’t let them do it!” I gasped. “It’s not fair!”

“Sadly, my dear, life is not fair,” Doctor Barker said. “That is a lesson you had better get learned, and fast. There’s a war on now, you know. Things are likely to get a darned sight more unfair. If you came running up here every time I gave the order to kill one of the animals, you’d soon wear out my carpet. And if I listened to you, and withdrew my order, the whole place would be overrun with sick, weak, infirm

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and elderly creatures who would no more wish to be here on this Earth than the public would wish to see them. The place would be a shambles and a disaster. A forest cannot thrive without a good fire every once in a while, did you know that?”

I shook my head. My mouth was open wide.

“Well now you do. Good day to you. Would someone please escort this young lady back to wherever she came from?”

With that, he strode off down the corridor.

I was helpless. I heard a couple of distant bangs. I wasn't sure if they were gunfire. I felt sick and exhausted. And *angry*. I couldn't believe what had just happened. Was I dreaming? Had Doctor Barker really said all that about Ronny?

“He's a lovely old tiger,” the lady said. “I am sorry. Come on, I'll take you over. We'll find your brother.”

*

We walked back to the Lion House. I didn't run. I knew I couldn't save Ronny now. If I ran, I'd only get there in time to see him getting shot. We'd heard a few gunshots already. As we came up the slope from the tunnel, I let the bright, painful sunlight burn into my eyes.

It seemed to take forever. We passed the camels who were just standing there as if nothing was wrong. They didn't know about the war and they didn't know about the killing.

Chapter 2

I could see from a distance the lorry was already outside the Lion House. I stopped. I felt really sick.

"Maybe you should wait here," the lady said. "I'll go and get your brother over."

I couldn't speak, but I shook my head and started walking again. My eyes stung. I didn't want to wipe them because I didn't want the lady to know I was crying, but after a while I could hardly see. I just let her lead me by the hand. Eventually, I had to blink. Big tears fell and my eyes cleared. Pete was standing outside the Lion House with his head down. He must have known I wouldn't want to look at him. I could see that same group of men with sweaty faces, and the man in his bowler hat and suit, writing on a clipboard. Mr Florey, the Lion House head-keeper, was there too now.

Ronny was lying on the lorry, next to the Zebu and Eland. His tongue was hanging out.

I let go of the lady's hand. Pete came over to me, but I walked past him, and all the others. I stood beside the lorry and looked up at Ronny's dark eyes. I reached up and stroked his leg. His fur was soft and warm. He smelt of wet grass. I'd never touched him before. He'd have eaten me of course, but still, I wished I could have touched him when he was alive. Then I turned away. I walked back past everyone, and into the Lion House. I went upstairs, to the keeper's room, and sat down on the old wooden

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bench.

Pete came up the stairs just as the lorry's engine started. He stood in the doorway for a moment, as if he was nervous of me. Then he came and knelt in front of me.

"I'm so sorry," he said. Suddenly I realised he'd been crying too. That was when I knew there was nothing he could have done to save Ronny. "He was old, sugar, and he wasn't well," he said. "It was nothing to do with the war." I didn't want to hate him, so I let him hug me. Pete was right. I knew Ronny had been sick for ages, and was very old, and probably wasn't happy any more. I always loved him more than the other animals because of it. I knew zoo animals were usually killed when they got like that though. I just hated it. "He's in a better place now," Pete said softly. "He isn't limping anymore you know. I'll bet you he's happier than ever." It seemed like ages before he let go of me.

Mr Florey had come up the stairs by now. He smiled at me, but it was a sad smile, not like his usual one. He was a round, jolly man, and his black hair was starting to go silver at the sides. He had spectacles and a moustache, and whenever I saw him he was wearing his old blue boiler suit and Wellington boots. I wiped my eyes and tried to stop sniffing.

"Hello, Jill," he said, and sat at the large desk.

Chapter 2

There was nothing much else in the room, just a tall wooden wardrobe for coats, a tiny sink in one corner and a black stove with a kettle on top in another. "It's been a tough day, mm?" I nodded. "If I'd known they were going to do that today, dear, I would have insisted Pete didn't bring you. It's not nice to see something like that. We're all going to miss him, you know. I loved him myself. There were quite a few damp eyes out there, I can tell you. Grown men an' all, and I count myself among them." I sniffed, and tried to smile. "Well now, Pete," Mr Florey said, opening the big ledger book he always wrote in, and dipping the pen in the ink well. "Have you shown Jill what I brought from Whipsnade?"

Pete shook his head. "I want you to see something," Pete said to me. "It'll make you feel better."

How could anything make me feel better after what had happened? Pete turned and went back downstairs. Wiping my nose on my sleeve, I followed him. I couldn't imagine what he was going to show me, and it felt wrong for me to be interested in something else at a time like this. But I was. I couldn't help it.

Downstairs was a wide passageway called the service corridor behind all the animal enclosures, the inside animals on one side and the outside animals on the other. There were some big

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cupboards, and an enormous refrigerator which all the meat was kept in for the animals to eat. There were windows into the enclosures, but the only two outside windows in the service corridor were in the doors at each end. Like all windows, they had tape across them, and there were blackout curtains too, but they were open. Still, the corridor seemed darker than ever.

Pete opened the door to one of the empty indoor enclosures, but I didn't follow him.

"Come on, sugar," he said.

I shook my head. "I don't want to." I tried to see round him anyway, but it was too dark.

Pete closed the door again.

"Why not?"

I just looked at the floor.

"Ronny won't mind, you know. He won't think it means you're not sad about him, or that you've forgotten him." He stroked one of my plaits again. I nodded. He opened the door and I followed him inside. I couldn't help it, I was curious. We were standing in the dark sleeping-space. It had a tiny window, so you could see in from the service corridor, and a low opening at the other end that led out into the larger enclosure.

I couldn't see much at first because it was dark. Then I saw a wooden crate on the floor, with its front off. There was straw all over the place.

Chapter 2

"I told you I'd have a surprise for you," Pete said.

I still couldn't see what it was. I crouched down. I could smell that tiger-smell of grass and warmth and straw. There was a tiny bundle of fur in there. I could barely make it out, but I'd already guessed what it was.

"He's from Whipsnade Park Zoo. His mother rejected him," Pete said. "It happens sometimes. He's the runt, and he's sick, so she doesn't want him." After everything that had happened today, I wanted to hate Pete's surprise. But I couldn't, of course. Nobody could. "They sent him here because our infirmary's got better facilities for looking after him. Mr Florey brought him down. Got here while you were out there causing trouble." It didn't make sense. I thought today was a day for getting rid of animals, not getting new ones. "Reckon Mr Florey and I will need some help looking after him. Can you think of anyone who'd be up for the job?" I didn't want to smile, but in the end I couldn't help it. I hoped Ronny would forgive me.

The little tiger cub was sleeping all on his own. I stroked his soft fur with the back of my fingers, gently, so I wouldn't wake him. I could feel his warmth.

"Is he going to get better?" I said.

"Mr Florey says they think so. He's going to need medicine though. Runts often do. And a bit of extra

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love won't do him any harm either." He grinned. "If they thought he was a lost cause, they'd have..." I knew what they'd have done. Pete didn't need to say it. "He's going to wake up for a feed soon," Pete said. "I'd better go and prepare his bottle."

Chapter 3

I loved him straight away. He was so small, bigger than a kitten though, about the size of a puppy. He was heavy too, and floppy. Mr Florey said I could be the one to name him, so I called him Ronny the Second, but we didn't always say the 'Second' bit, so really it was just Ronny. He walked as if he was half asleep, staggering a little, and bumping against things a lot. I was usually allowed to go into his enclosure, and when I pulled him onto my lap, he lay there, breathing softly. He even purred! That surprised me. I don't know why, but I hadn't expected tigers to purr. His purr was like a little, contented growl. He was so soft and warm, and his eyes were dark brown, like Ronny the First's.

But even so, I had a sick feeling in my stomach the whole time. People had been building air-raid shelters wherever they could. There were ten in the zoo, including the tunnels under the road which had been partly blocked with sandbags at both ends. One had been built in our school playground long before the war started, so we all knew the Germans were going to come and drop bombs on us. People built air-raid shelters in their gardens, but we lived in a first floor flat in Princess Terrace, and we didn't have a garden. So we had a Morrison shelter, which was

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like a cage under the kitchen table. In fact, the whole table was made of metal. It felt cold all the time, even through the table cloth. The worst thing about it was that you couldn't sit at the table properly anymore. The cage stopped you being able to put your legs under. You were supposed to take the sides off when you were using it as a table, but we didn't.

Ronny the Second wasn't scared of the war though. I suppose he didn't even know there was one. He was always so happy. He loved playing, jumping about and chasing my hand, or the end of a bit of straw. School was open again now, but lots of children had been evacuated to the countryside, where they'd be safe away from the German bombs. Some of my best friends had gone. I missed them, but as soon as the bell went at the end of the day, I would head up to the zoo as fast as I could. It wasn't far. Our flat was only a few yards away from the school gate, and the zoo was just a few minutes from there. Mum was always still at work, so she didn't mind me going up to the zoo, as long as I told her beforehand. She said she was happier knowing I was with Pete, rather than alone at home. I always ran. Up Princess Terrace, past the pub where Pete often met his friends, across the road and past the old stone church, then I'd stop and watch for cars before crossing Prince Albert Road. The heavy cardboard box with my gas mask in banged against my side all

Chapter 3

the time, and the string dug into my shoulder, but I didn't care.

The zoo was at one end of Regent's Park. If you were walking in the park you could see some of the animals over the walls, and through the fences. But the zoo's front entrance was right there on Prince Albert Road. While the zoo was still closed to the public, Pete would wait for me and let me in the staff gate. Sometimes he was late, or wasn't there, but there was usually someone else around. If it was Pete, we'd walk the rest of the way, and chat. But if I was alone, I'd start running again, round the corner and over the bridge that crossed the canal. The boats below were full of coal, and their steam engines made blue smoke, just like trains. It was strange that the canal went right through the zoo, but at least it meant that the men on the barges could get a little peek at some of the animals as they chugged on through. Then, I'd pass the offices where Doctor Barker worked. I wouldn't even look at them in case he was there. The rest of my journey always reminded me of that horrible day. I hoped Ronny the First knew how much I missed him.

Mr Florey always let me give Ronny the Second his evening feed. I held the little tiger cub on my lap, tummy-up. I loved his warmth and his smell. Some days, he didn't seem to want his milk, but when he did, he would go all still in my lap as I placed the

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bottle in his mouth. He'd make little squelching noises as he sucked at it, and he even sometimes burped. When he'd finished, he would either creep slowly back into his crate, or stay lying there, on me. I would rock him to sleep as if he really was my baby.

But one day, as I went along the corridor in the Lion House, I heard voices coming from Ronny's enclosure. One was Mr Florey's, and the other... I pushed open the door. I saw Doctor Barker standing there, with his hands on his hips, looking down at Ronny. Ronny was curled up in the straw, sleeping. Doctor Barker raised his eyebrows when he saw me coming in. Pete was standing beside Mr Florey, with his hands in his pockets. He smiled at me, but I could tell something was wrong.

"Ah, young lady," Doctor Barker said. "We meet again." He talked too loud, and I thought he might wake Ronny. "I hear you've taken a shine to this little feller."

"She's been quite an asset," Mr Florey said. He looked worried, and I could tell he wanted me to go.

"Well, young lady. Keen on animals are you?" I nodded. "Jolly good. However, if you do want to keep coming here, there are some home truths you need to learn. I can't have you causing trouble every time you see something you don't like."

"Oh, Jill's no trouble," Mr Florey said.

Ronny stirred, and stretched his front legs.

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Doctor Barker bent down and put his hand on my shoulder. He removed his spectacles, and I saw his eyes were smaller than I thought. "This tiger is sick, young lady. That is why his mother rejected him. Sometimes he doesn't take his milk for days, and when he does he often doesn't keep it down." I felt cold with fear, but I knew what he was saying was true. I'd just never thought it was anything to worry about. I knew babies were often sick, and some animals too. It wasn't always something serious. But Doctor Barker sounded very serious. "He needs medicine every day, and that medicine costs money. Money that could be spent on feeding and breeding healthy animals. I'm afraid if he doesn't start showing an improvement soon, he will be K.B.O. That means killed by order. My order. There are too many other wonderful creatures in this zoo for me to waste money on a lost cause. Especially now there's a war on. If you want to come to my zoo, and spend time with my tiger, you must be strong enough to accept the fact that it is for the best." My legs felt weak. I could not believe what he had just said, and I certainly would never accept it. "Can you do that?" he said. I had no choice. I felt as if I was betraying Ronny, but I nodded, and hoped my tears didn't show. "Good," he said, and put his spectacles back on. "Three times a day, Mr Florey," he said, and Mr Florey nodded. Then Doctor Barker left. I listened to

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his shoes on the concrete, and then the outside door opened and closed.

“Jill, sugar,” Pete said, and stroked my arm.

Mr Florey smiled at me, but I couldn’t smile back. I knelt down next to Ronny. He looked so peaceful and happy. I stroked his paw and he stretched out his toes.

“Sorry you had to hear it like that,” Mr Florey said. “I should have told you myself.”

“Yer, so should I,” Pete said. “I just hoped it was nothing too serious.”

I couldn’t reply.

And now the war wasn’t the only thing I felt sick about.

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