

# Sumatra's a Type of Tiger

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From birth Sumatran was defined in writing, his character carefully calculated, tables were referenced, time and date taken into account. Every piece of paper, every prediction painted on his in-progress portrait led to the same number, s̄an, three. The word penetrated the surface of his skin, entered his body and permeated there, a taboo tattoo. He was born in the year of the tiger, 1998 sometime in February; no one in the family's quite sure of the exact date. According to folklore, the tiger came third, struggling to swim against the tide in the race to have a place on the calendar, unable to beat the ox and the rat. He was his father's third son, the name that hung at the end of the list, almost adjacent.

In the water he struggles, suffocates as he turns, his body hitting the tiles and head knocking against the ropes. When he surfaces, he rushes to the stopwatch, desperate to save seconds. But he knows he wasn't fast enough. The rat's already out of the water, watching from afar. Sumatran glances at him, sees the gleam in his black eyes. Sumatran ignores the hands extended towards him, pushing their help aside as he pulls himself out of the water. He kneels on the damp tiles; he was a minute slow.

The rat's treading water, moving between the lanes, perfecting his form. As a spectator Sumatran sees it, he sees how his rival's body almost pierces the water, carving the waves. He notices how quick he catches his breath, fills his lungs mid-turn. Sumatran wants to look away, but he can't; the jealous predator inside him wants to learn, to grow, become stronger. To notice how when he gets to the other side he pauses before he kicks off into another lap. He could have knelt there for hours, he could look desperate, but tigers shouldn't learn the secrets of rats, they should learn how to be better tigers.

At home, his grandmother is out on the porch, fanning her face. She sees him and her face cracks like clay and like a flower unfurling at the sight of the morning sun he opens up. When he rushes to meet her, her face twists and she's no morning sun.

“Shǎ háizi! You're dripping water everywhere, stand on the flowers.” So, he sits on the edge of the porch with his feet in the soil. She asks if he's beat the rat and he tells her he hasn't. She nods her head, the universal symbol of faux wiseness. Inside Sumatran, an unwelcome guest answers his mother's eager question, tells her his time. She didn't turn to face him, there were no more words till dinner time.

Silence is a harsh form of discipline. But it's tough love, that's what his Grandmother called it whenever he came crying. Tough love is how a tiger mother cares for her tiger son. She wraps her claws around her young to keep them safe. Sumatran leant over his plate, looking around him as his mother and grandmother ate in silence. He tried talking to his grandmother, tapping the side of his bowl. She didn't answer him, didn't take a sip of water, didn't rearrange the contents of her plate in warning. Whatever was coming his grandmother believed it was necessary.

“You're sick” his mother laid down her fork, “that's why you've been underperforming. You need to see a doctor...tonight. We're going now.”

They were about to close, the signs had been taken in, the doctor was halfway through turning off all the lights so Sumatran stood half in shadow, half under the light of a lone lightbulb. The doctor's face was waxy, and it almost gleamed like lipid under light. Behind him small wooden boxes were stacked on top of each other clustered together like hornets in a nest. The doctor slides on a pair of black rubber gloves, they squeak when he picks through his ingredients. He asks for his name, age, problem and what year he was born into.

“The year of the tiger.” He nodded as if that was all he needed to know. There was no rhythm, no organization to the drawers he was opening, he'd reach for one and then grab another. He pulled out bones, scrapings of ginger, lotus leaves and garlic cloves. He threw them over a low flame, his eyes watering as the scent of a thousand things in different stages of decay strengthened.

Apparently Sumatran was out of balance, his soul restless, fighting itself. If he wanted to be able to perform well, he would have to drink the liquid darkness presented to him and then rest, for one night and one night only. The mixture sedated the tiger inside of him and

Sumatran's mother paid up. She'd placed all her trust into those paper hands. If he didn't improve the doctor wasn't a scam, the traditions, ancestors weren't a scam.

Before his mother unlocked the door, she turned and did something she hadn't done in years, she reached out, claws retracted, and ruffled Sumatran's hair. He could mistake her for a sister when she's like this, all attributes of motherhood dropped like the tiger persona was merely a mask.

He won his next race. His body twisted and coiled through the water like a cottonmouth viper. He pounced on the stopwatch, ripped it from his trainer's hands. He was a whole minute faster. The rat stopped mid-race and was wading towards him, treading carefully. "What time did you get?" Sumatran turned and told the rat with a smiley snarl set on his face. The rat's swallow-tail eyes flicked from Sumatran to his own watch which he stopped with a hesitant, barely confident flick of one finger. His open mouth curved into a scant smile, "Well congratulations you've been working hard."

In the bathroom Sumatran sits, still holding his stopwatch. He watches the rat, who for the first time was quiet, shuffling towards the shower. The bathroom was fitted with an energy-saving bulb that illuminated the room in blue light, so the two boys looked like they were still in the water, still racing. Sumatran watched the rat open his locker, stalked its insides, the all-cotton jerseys stacked on top of referral papers, old gear and dusty trophies. He caught himself in the mirror, caught how his smile had fallen without him realising. Sumatran hated the guilt that was forcing itself to grow, he didn't sow it, didn't want it. Couldn't he be granted an hour of shallow bitterness, of prideful bragging, couldn't he humble his competition? He could and he would. Sumatran finished changing and left without saying goodbye, letting the rat cry for some sympathy.

For the first time in seventeen years Sumatran comes home a son, no, he's more than that now, he's a man and in two months he'll be a man with a medal. That night Sumatran had his first beer, he sipped it on the kitchen floor while his mother split open the plastic pouch of herbs, preparing another dose.

But the rat got faster, he dove faster, held his breath for longer and longer until when he won he didn't have the breath to gloat. He didn't have the energy to raise his fist in victory, he had to be dragged, pulled out of the pool and yet it didn't matter that the rat was beginning to fold in on himself, that his spine pressed against his skin threatening to split it. Numbers were numbers with numerical weight and winners were winners.

During the day Sumatran dragged himself through the water, at night he swallowed it, poured himself spoonfuls of yin pretending it was whiskey. A deep, once silent part of him whispers, rattles around in his ribcage, it tells him to do what the rat does, grow small and slim, wait for a moment before you push off into another lap. It tells him the only way to beat the rat is to become one. He was supposed to be a tiger, confident, brave, stubborn and optimistic. Sumatran was a type of a tiger, the type that ends up with its skin on some white man's floor.

Before the final race Sumatran hides in the locker room. He knows what's going to happen, it's been predicted, written down, calculated and conspired. He'll surface knowing the rat has already won, knowing his mother didn't bother to show. Sumatran sinks, his forehead scraping down the wrought iron locker, he holds his breath. In his dazed disillusioned state he spots something white. A container sticking out of a familiar bag. He reached out and curled his hand around the container. Orange and black pills spill and scatter over the wet floor, steroids.

Off in some distant room Sumatran hears someone fire a starting gun, he hears a crowd. Sumatran leaves the bathroom and walks towards the pool; he sees a boy starting his second lap. Sumatran opened his mouth and roared.