

# THE MAN WHO DREW CATS

by

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Old Tom was a very tall man. He was so tall he didn't even have a nickname for it. Ned Black, who was at least a head shorter, had been 'Tower Block' since the sixth grade, and Jack, the owner of the Hog's Head Bar, had a sign up over the door saying 'Mind Your Head, Ned'. But Tom was just Tom. It was like he was so tall it didn't bear mentioning even for a joke: be a bit like ragging someone for breathing.

Course there were other reasons too for not ragging Tom about his height or anything else. The guys you'll find perched on stools round Jack's bar watching the ball game and buying beers, they've known each other for ever. Gone to Miss Stadler's school together, got under each other's Mom's feet, and double-dated together right up to giving each other's best man's speech. Kingstown is a small place, you understand, and the old boys who come regular to Jack's mostly spent their childhoods in the same tree-house. Course they'd gone their separate ways, up to a point: Pete was an accountant now, had a small office down Union Street just off the square and did pretty good, whereas Ned, well he was still pumping gas and changing oil and after forty years he did that pretty good too. Comes a time when men have known each other so long they forget what they do for a living most of the time because it just don't matter: when you talk there's a little bit of skimming stones down the quarry in second grade, a bit of dolling up to go to that first dance, and going to the housewarming when they moved ten years back. There's all that and more than you can say so none of it's important 'cept for having happened.

So we'll stop by and have a couple of beers and talk about the town and the playoffs and rag each other and the pleasure's just in shooting the breeze and it don't really matter what's said, just the fact that we're all still there to say it.

But Tom, he was different. We all remember the first time we saw him. It was a long hot summer like we haven't seen in the ten years since and we were lolling under the fans at Jack's and complaining about the tourists. And believe me, Kingstown gets its share in the summer even though it's not near the sea and we don't have a McDonalds and I'll be damned if I can figure out why folk'll go out of their way to see what's just a peaceful little town near some mountains. It was as hot as hell that afternoon and as much as a man could do to sit in his shirt-sleeves and drink the coolest beer he could find, and Jack's is the coolest for us, and always will be, I guess.

And then Tom walked in. His hair was already pretty white back then, and long, and his face was brown and tough with grey eyes like diamonds set in leather. He was dressed mainly in black with a long coat that made you hot just to look at it, but he looked comfortable like he carried his very own weather around with him and he was just fine. He got a beer and sat down at a table and read the town *Bugle* and that was that.

It was special because there wasn't anything special about it. Jack's Bar isn't exactly exclusive and we don't all turn round and stare at anyone new if they come in, but that place is like a monument to shared times and if a tourist couple comes in out of the heat and sits down nobody says anything and maybe nobody even notices at the front of their mind, but it's like there's a little island of the alien in the water and the currents don't just ebb and flow the way they usually do, if you get what I mean. But Tom he just walked in and sat down and it was all right because it was like he was there just like we were, and could've been for thirty years. He just sat and read his paper like part of the same river and everyone just carried on downstream the way they were.

Pretty soon he goes up for another beer and a few of us got talking to him. We got his name and what he did. Painting, he said, and after that it was just shooting the breeze. That quick. He came in that summer afternoon and just fell into the conversation like he'd been there all his life, and sometimes it was hard to imagine he hadn't been. Nobody knew where he came from, or where he'd been, and there was something very quiet about him, a real stillness. Open enough to have the best part of friendship but still somehow a man in a slightly different world. But he showed enough to get along real well with us, and a bunch of old friends don't often let someone in like that.

Anyway, he stayed that whole summer. Hired himself a place just round the corner from the square. Or so he said: I never saw it, I guess no one did. He was a private man, private like a steel door with four bars and a couple of six-inch padlocks, and when he left the square at the end of the day he could have vanished into thin air as soon as he turned the corner for all we knew. But he always came from that direction in the morning, with his easel on his back and paintbox under his arm. And he always wore that black coat like it was a part of him, but he always looked cool, and the funny thing was when you stood near him you could swear you felt cooler yourself. I remember Pete saying over a beer that it wouldn't surprise him none if, if it ever rained again, Tom walked round in his own column of dryness. Just foolish talk, but Tom made you think things like that.

Jack's Bar looks right out onto the square, the kind of square towns don't have much anymore: big and dusty with old roads out at each corner, tall shops and houses on all the sides and some stone paving in the middle round a fountain that ain't worked in living memory. Well in the summer that old square is just full of out-of-towners in pink towelling jumpsuits and nasty jackets standing round saying "Wow" and taking pictures of our quaint old hall and our quaint old stores and even our quaint old selves if we stand still too long. And that year Tom would sit out near the

fountain and paint and those people would stand and watch for hours.

But he didn't paint the houses or the square or the old Picture House. He painted animals, and painted them like you've never seen. Birds with huge blue speckled wings and cats with cutting green eyes and whatever he painted it looked like it was just coiled up on the canvas ready to fly away. He didn't do them in their normal colours, they were all reds and purples and deep blues and greens and yet they fair sparkled with life. It was a wonder to watch: he'd put up a fresh paper, sit looking at nothing in particular, then dip his brush into his paint and just draw a line, maybe red, maybe blue. Stroke by stroke you could see the animal build up in front of your eyes and yet when it was finished you couldn't believe it hadn't always been there. And when he'd finished he'd spray it with some stuff to fix the paints and put a price on it and you can believe me those paintings were sold before they hit the ground. Spreading businessmen from New Jersey or somesuch and their bored wives would come alive for maybe the first time in years and walk away with one of those paintings and their arms around each other, looking like they'd found a bit of something they'd forgotten they'd lost.

Come about six o'clock Tom would finish up and walk across to Jack's, looking like a sailing ship amongst rowing boats and saying yes, he'd be back again tomorrow and yes, he'd be happy to do a painting for them. And he'd get a beer and sit with us and watch the game and there'd be no paint on his fingers or his clothes, not a spot. I guess he'd got so much control over that paint it went where it was told and nowhere else.

I asked him once how he could bear to let those paintings go. I know if I'd been able to make anything that right in my whole life I couldn't let it go. I'd want to keep it to look at sometimes. He thought for a moment and then he said he believed it depends how much of yourself you've put into it. If you've gone deep down into yourself and pulled up what's inside and put it down, then you don't want to let it go: you want to check sometimes that it's still safely tied down. Comes a time when a painting's so right and so good that it's private, and no one'll understand it except the man who put it down. Only he is going to know what he's talking about. But the everyday paintings, well they were mainly just because he liked to paint animals and liked for people to have them. He could only put a piece of himself into something he was going to sell, but they paid for the beers and I guess it's like the old boys in Jack's Bar: if you just like talking you don't always have to say something important.

Why animals? Well if you'd seen him with them I guess you wouldn't have to ask. He loved them all, is all, and they loved him right back. The cats were always his favourites. My old Pa used to say that cats weren't nothing but sleeping machines put on the earth to do some of the human's sleeping for them, and whenever he did a chalk drawing he'd always do a cat.

Once in a while, you see, Tom seemed to get tired of painting on paper, and he'd get out some chinks and sit down on the baking flagstones and just do a drawing right there on the dusty rock. Now I've told you about his paintings, but these drawings were something else again. It was like because they couldn't be bought, but would just be washed away, he was putting more of himself into it, doing more than just shooting the breeze. They were just chalk on dusty stone and they were still in these weird colours but I tell you children wouldn't walk near them because they looked so real, and they weren't the only ones, either. People would just stand a few feet back and stare and you could see the wonder in their eyes and their open mouths. If they could've been bought there were people who would have sold their houses. And it's a funny thing but a couple of times when I walked over to open the store up in the mornings I saw a dead bird or two on top of those drawings, almost like they had landed on it and been so terrified to find themselves right on top of a cat they'd dropped dead of fright. But they must have been dumped there by some real cat, of course, because some of those birds looked like they'd been mauled a bit. I used to throw them in the bushes to tidy up and some of them were pretty broken up.

Old Tom was a godsend to a lot of mothers that summer who found they could leave their little ones by him, do their shopping in peace and maybe have a soda with their friends and come back to find the kids still sitting quietly watching Tom paint. He didn't mind them at all and would talk to them and make them laugh, and kids of that age laughing is one of the nicest sounds there is. They're young and curious and the world just spins round them and when they laugh the world seems a brighter place because it takes you back to the time when you knew no evil and everything was good, or if it wasn't, it would be over by tomorrow.

And here I guess I've finally come down to it, because there was one little boy who didn't laugh much, but just sat quiet and watchful, and I guess he probably understands more of what happened that summer than any of us, though maybe not in words he could tell.

His name was Billy McNeill, and he was Jim Valentine's kid. Jim used to be a mechanic, worked with Ned up at the gas station and did a bit of beat-up car racing after hours. Which is why his kid is called McNeill now: one Sunday Jim took a mite too fast and the car rolled and the gas tank caught and they never did find all the wheels. A year later his Mary married again. God alone knows why, her folks warned her, her friends warned her, but I guess love must just have been blind. Sam McNeill's work schedule was at best pretty empty, and mostly he just drank and hung out with friends who maybe weren't always this side of the law. And I guess Mary had her own sad little miracle and got her sight back pretty soon because it wasn't long before Sam got a bit too free with his fists when the evenings got too long and he'd had a lot too many. You didn't see Mary around much anymore. In these parts people tend to stare at black eyes on a woman, and a deaf man could hear the whisperings of "We Told Her So" on the wind.

One morning Tom was sitting painting as usual and little Billy was sitting watching him. Usually he just wandered off after a while but this morning Mary was at the doctor's and she came over to collect him, walking quickly with her face lowered. But not low enough. I was watching from the store, it was kind of a slow morning. Tom's face never showed much, he was a man for a quiet smile and a raised eyebrow, but he looked shocked that morning, just for a moment. Mary's eyes were puffed and purple and there was a cut on her cheek an inch long. I guess we'd sort of

gotten used to seeing her like that and if the truth be known some of the wives thought she'd got remarried a bit on the soon side and I suppose we may all have been a bit cold towards her, Jim Valentine having been so well-liked and all.

Tom looked from the little boy who never laughed as much as the others to his mom with her tired unhappy eyes and her beat-up face and his face went from shocked to stony and I can't describe any other way than that I seemed to feel a cold chill across my heart from right across the square. But then he smiled and ruffled Billy's hair and Mary took Billy's hand and they went off. They looked back once and Tom was still looking after them and he gave Billy a little wave and he waved back and mother and child smiled together.

That night in Jack's Tom put a quiet question about Mary and we told him the story and as he listened his face seemed to harden from within, his bright eyes becoming flat and dead. We told him that old Lou Lachance who lived next door to the McNeill's said that sometimes you could hear him shouting and her pleading till three in the morning and on still nights the sound of Billy crying for much longer still. Told him it was a shame, but what could you do? Folks keep themselves out of other people's faces round here, and I guess Sam and his roughneck drinking buddies didn't have much to fear from nearly-retireders like us anyhow. Told him it was a terrible thing, and none of us liked it, but these things happened.

Tom listened and didn't say a word. Just sat there in his black coat and listened to us pass the buck. After a while the talk sort of petered out and we sat and watched the bubbles in our beers. I guess the bottom line was that none of us had really thought about it much except as another chapter of small-town gossip and Jesus Christ did I feel ashamed about that by the time we'd finished telling it. Sitting there with Tom was no laughs at all at that moment. He had a real edge to him, and seemed more unknown than known that night. He just stared at his laced fingers for a long time, and then he began, real slow, to talk.

He'd been married once, he said, a long time ago, and he lived in a place called Stevensburg with his wife Rachel. And when he talked about her the air seemed to go softer and we all sat quiet and sipped our beers and remembered how it had been way back when we first loved our own wives. He talked of her smile and the look in her eyes and when we all went home that night I guess there were a few wives who were surprised at how tight they got hugged and who went to sleep in their husband's arms feeling more loved and contented than they had in a long while.

He'd loved her and she him and for a few years they were the happiest people on earth. Then a third party had got involved. Tom didn't say his name, and he spoke real neutrally about him but it was a gentleness like silk wrapped around a knife. Anyway his wife, it seems, fell in love with him, or thought she had, or leastways she slept with him. In their bed, the bed they'd come to on their wedding night. And as Tom spoke these words some of us looked up at him, startled, like we'd been slapped across the face with pain. Rachel did what so many do and live to regret till their dying day. She was so mixed up and getting so much pressure from the other guy that she decided to plough on with the one mistake and make it the biggest in the world. She left Tom. He talked with her, pleaded even. It was almost impossible to imagine Tom ever doing that, but I guess the man we knew was a different man from the one he was remembering.

And so Tom had to carry on living in Stevensburg, walking the same tracks, seeing them around, wondering if she was as free and easy with him, if the light in her eyes was shining on him now. And each time the man saw Tom he'd look straight at him and crease a little twisted smile, a grin that said he knew about the pleading and he and his cronies had had a good laugh over the wedding bed and yes I'm going home with your wife tonight and I know just how she likes it, you want to compare notes? And then he'd turn and kiss Rachel on the mouth, his eyes on Tom, smiling. And she let him do it.

It had kept stupid old women in stories for weeks, the way Tom kept losing weight and his temper and the will to live. He took three months of it and then left without bothering to sell the house. Stevensburg was where he'd grown up and courted and loved and now wherever he turned the good times had rotted and hung like fly-blown corpses in all the cherished places. He'd never been back.

It took an hour to tell and then he stopped talking a while and lit a hundredth cigarette and Pete got us all some more beers. We were sitting sad and thoughtful, tired like we'd lived it ourselves. And I guess most of us had, some little bit of it. But had we ever loved anyone the way he'd loved her? I doubt it, not all of us put together. Pete set the beers down and Ned asked Tom why he hadn't just beaten the living shit out of the guy. Now no one else would have actually asked that, but Ned's a good guy, and I guess we were all with him in feeling a piece of that oldest and most crushing hatred in the world, the hate of a man who's lost the woman he loves to another, and we knew what Ned was saying. I'm not saying it's a good thing and I know you're not supposed to feel like that these days but show me a man who says he doesn't and I'll show you a liar. Love is the only feeling worth a tin shit but you've to know that it comes from both sides of a man's character and the deeper it runs the darker the pool it draws from.

My guess is he just hated the man too much to hit him. Comes a time when that isn't enough, when nothing is ever going to be enough, and so you can't do anything at all. And as he talked the pain just flowed out like a river that wasn't ever going to be stopped, a river that had cut a channel through every corner of his soul. I learnt something that night that you can go your whole life without realising: that there are things that can be done that can mess someone up so badly for so long that they just cannot be allowed, that there are some kinds of pain that you cannot suffer to be brought into the world. And then Tom was done telling and he raised a smile and said that in the end he hadn't done anything to the man except paint him a picture, which I didn't understand, but Tom looked like he'd talked all he was going to.

And so we got some more beers and shot some quiet pool before going home. But I guess we all knew what he'd been talking about. Billy McNeill was just a child. He should have been dancing through a world like a big funfair full

of sunlight and sounds and instead he went home at night and saw his mom being beaten up by a man with shit for brains who struck out at a good woman because he was too twisted with ignorant stupidity to deal with the world. Most kids go to sleep thinking about bikes and climbing apple trees and skimming stones and he was lying there hearing splitting skin and knowing a brutal face was smiling as his mom got smashed in the stomach and then hit again as she threw up in the sink. Tom didn't say any of that, but he did. And we knew he was right.

The summer kept up bright and hot, and we all had our businesses to attend to. Jack sold a lot of beer and I sold a lot of ice cream (Sorry ma'am, just the three flavours, and no, Bubblegum Pistachio ain't one of them) and Ned fixed a whole bunch of cracked radiators. And Tom sat right out there in the square with a couple of cats by his feet and a crowd around him, magicking up animals in the sun.

And I think that after that night Mary maybe got a few more smiles as she did her shopping, and maybe a few more wives stopped to talk to her. She looked a lot better too: Sam had a job by the sound of it and her face healed up pretty soon. You could often see her standing holding Billy's hand as they watched Tom paint for a while before they went home. I think she realised they had a friend in him. Sometimes Billy was there all afternoon, and he was happy there in the sun by Tom's feet and oftentimes he'd pick up a piece of chalk and sit scrawling on the pavement. Sometimes I'd see Tom lean over and say something to him and he'd look up and smile a simple child's smile that beamed in the sunlight and I don't mind admitting I felt water pricking in these old eyes. The tourists kept coming and the sun kept shining and it was one of those summers that go on for ever and stick in a child's mind, and tell you what summer should be like for the rest of your life. And I'm damn sure it sticks in Billy's mind, just like it does in all of ours.

Because one morning Mary didn't come into the store, which had gotten to being a regular sort of thing, and Billy wasn't out there in the square. After the way things had been the last few weeks that could only be bad news and so I left the boy John in charge of the store and hurried over to have a word with Tom. I was kind of worried.

I was no more than halfway across to him when I saw Billy come running from the opposite corner of the square, going straight to Tom. He was crying fit to burst and just leapt up at Tom and clung to him, his arms wrapped tight round his neck. Then his mother came across from the same direction, running as best she could. She got to Tom and they just looked at each other. Mary's a real pretty girl but you wouldn't have believed it then. It looked like he'd actually broken her nose this time and blood was streaming out of her lip. She started sobbing, saying Sam had lost his job because he was back on the drink and what could she do and then suddenly there was a roar and I was shoved aside and Sam was standing there, still wearing his slippers, weaving back and forth and radiating the frightening aura of violence waiting to happen that keep men like him safe. He started shouting at Mary to take the kid back home and she just flinched and cowered closer to Tom like she was huddling round a fire to keep out the cold. This just got Sam even wilder and he staggered forward and told Tom to get the fuck out of it if he knew what was good for him, and grabbed Mary's arm and tried to yank her towards him, his face terrible with twisted rage.

Then Tom stood up. Now Tom was a tall man, but he wasn't a young man, and he was thin. Sam was thirty and built like a brick shithouse. When he did work it usually involved moving heavy things from one place to another, and his strength was supercharged by a whole pile of drunken nastiness. But at that moment the crowd stepped back as one and I suddenly felt very afraid for Sam McNeill. Tom looked like you could take anything you cared to him and it would just break, like a huge spike of granite wrapped in skin with two holes in the face where the rock showed through. And he was mad, not hot and blowing like Sam, but cold as ice.

There was a long pause. Then Sam weaved back a step and shouted, "You just come on home, you hear? Gonna be real trouble if you don't, Mary. Real trouble," and then stormed off across the square the way he came, knocking his way through the tourist vultures soaking up some spicy local colour.

Mary turned to Tom, looking so afraid it hurt to look, and said she guessed she'd better be going. Tom just stared at her for a moment and then spoke for the first time. "Do you love him?" Even if you wanted to, you ain't going to lie to eyes like that for fear something inside you will break. Real quiet she said, "No," and began crying softly as she took Billy's hand and walked slowly back across the square.

Tom packed up his stuff and walked over to Jack's. I went with him and had a beer but I had to get back to the shop and Tom just sat there like a trigger, silent and strung up tight as a drum. And somewhere down near the bottom of those still waters something was stirring. Something I thought I didn't want to see.

About an hour later it was lunchtime and I'd just left the shop to have a break and suddenly something whacked into the back of my legs and nearly knocked me down. It was Billy. It was Billy and he had a bruise round his eye that was already closing it up.

I knew what the only thing to do was and I did it. I took his hand and led him across to the bar, feeling a hard anger pushing against my throat. When he saw Tom, Billy ran to him again and Tom took him in his arms and looked over Billy's shoulder at me and I felt my own anger collapse utterly in the face of a fury I could never have generated. I tried to find a word like 'angry' to describe it but they all just seemed like they were in the wrong language. All of a sudden I wanted to be somewhere else and it felt real cold standing there facing that stranger in a black coat.

Then the moment passed and Tom was holding the kid close, ruffling his hair and talking to him in a low voice, murmuring the words I thought only mothers knew. He dried Billy's tears and checked his eye and then he got off his stool, smiled down at him and said:

"And now I think it's time we did a bit of drawing, isn't it?" and, taking the kid's hand, he picked up his chalkbox and walked out into the square.

I don't know how many times I looked up and watched them that afternoon. They were sitting side by side on the stone, Billy's little hand wrapped round one of Tom's fingers, and Tom doing one of his chalk drawings. Every now

and then Billy would reach across and add a little bit and Tom would smile and say something and Billy's gurgling laugh would float across the square. The store was real busy that afternoon and I was chained to that counter but I could tell by the size of the crowd that a lot of Tom was going into that picture, and maybe a bit of Billy too.

It was about four o'clock before I could take a break. I walked across the crowded square in the mid-afternoon heat and shouldered my way through to where they sat with a couple of cold Cokes. And when I saw it my mouth just dropped open and took a five minute vacation while I tried to take it in.

It was a cat all right, but not a normal cat. It was a life-size tiger. I'd never seen Tom do anything anywhere near that big before and as I stood there in the beating sun trying to get my mind round it it almost seemed to stand in three dimensions, a nearly living thing. Its stomach was very lean and thin, its tail seemed to twitch with colour, and as Tom worked on the eyes and jaws, his face set with a rigid concentration quite unlike his usual calm painting face, the snarling mask of the tiger came to life before my eyes. And I could see that he wasn't just putting a bit of himself in at all. This was a man at full stretch, giving all of himself and reaching down for more, pulling up bloody fistfuls and throwing them down. The tiger was all the rage I'd seen in his eyes and more and like his love for Rachel that rage just seemed bigger than any other man could know or comprehend. He was pouring it out and sculpting it into the lean and ravenous creature coming to pulsating life in front of us on the pavement, and the weird purples and blues and reds just made it seem more vibrant and alive.

I watched him working furiously on it, the boy sometimes helping, adding a tiny bit here and there that strangely seemed to add to it, and thought I understood what he'd meant that evening a few weeks back. He said he'd done a painting for the man who'd given him so much pain. Then, as now, he must have found what I guess you'd call something fancy like catharsis through his skill with chalks, had wrenched the pain up from within him and nailed it down onto something solid that he could walk away from. And now he was helping that little boy do the same, and the boy did look better, his bruised eye hardly showing with the wide smile on his face as he watched the big cat conjured up from nowhere in front of him.

We all just stood and watched, like something out of an old story, the simple folk and the wandering magical stranger. It always feels like you're giving a bit of yourself away when you praise someone else's creation, and it's often done grudgingly, but you could feel the awe that day like a warm wind. Comes a time when you realise something special is happening, something you're never going to see again, and there isn't anything you can do but watch.

Well I had to go back to the store after a while. I hated to go but, well, John is a good boy, married now of course, but in those days his head was full of girls and it didn't do to leave him alone in a busy shop for too long.

And so the long hot day drew slowly to a close. I kept the store open till eight, when the light began to turn and the square emptied out with all the tourists going away to write postcards and see if we didn't have even just a *little* McDonalds hidden away someplace. I guess Mary had troubles enough at home, realised where the boy would be and figured he was safer there than anywhere else, and I guess she was right.

Tom and Billy finished up drawing and then Tom sat and talked to him for some time. Then they got up and the kid walked slowly off to the corner of the square, looking back to wave at Tom a couple of times. Tom stood and watched him go and when Billy had gone he stayed there a while, head down, looking like a huge black statue in the gathering dark. He looked kind of creepy out there and I don't mind telling you I was glad when he finally moved and started walking over towards Jack's. I ran out to catch up with him and drew level just as we passed the drawing. And then I had to stop. I just couldn't look at that and move at the same time.

Finished, the drawing was like nothing on earth, and I suppose that's exactly what it was. I can't hope to describe it to you, although I've seen it in my dreams many times in the last ten years. You had to be there, on that heavy summer night, had to know what was going on. Otherwise it's going to sound like it was just a drawing. That tiger was out and out terrifying. It looked so mean and hungry. Christ, I don't know what: it just looked like the darkest parts of your own mind, the pain and the fury and the vengeful hate nailed down in front of you for you to see, and I just stood there and shivered in the humid evening air.

"We did him a picture," Tom said quietly.

"Yeah," I said, and nodded. Like I said, I know what catharsis means and I thought I understood what he was saying. But I really didn't want to look at it much longer. "Let's go have a beer, yeah?"

The storm in Tom wasn't past, I could tell, and he still seemed to thrum with crackling emotions looking for an earth, but I thought the clouds might be breaking and I was glad.

And so we walked slowly over to Jack's and had a few beers and watched some pool being played. Tom seemed pretty tired, but still alert, and I relaxed a little. Come eleven most of the guys started going on their way and I was surprised to see Tom get another beer. Pete, Ned and I stayed on, and Jack of course, though we knew our loving wives would have something to say about that. It just didn't seem time to go. Outside it had gotten pretty dark, though the moon was keeping the square in a kind of twilight and the lights in the bar threw a pool of warmth out of the front window.

Then, about twelve o'clock, it happened, and I don't suppose any of us will ever see the same world we grew up in again. I've told this whole thing like it was just me who was there, but we all were, and we remember it together.

Because suddenly there was a wailing sound outside, a thin cutting cry, getting closer. Tom immediately snapped to his feet and stared out the window like he'd been waiting for it. As we looked out across the square we saw little Billy come running and we could see the blood on his face from there. Some of us go to get up but Tom snarled at us to stay there and so I guess we just stayed there, sitting back down like we'd been pushed. He strode out the door and into the square and the boy saw him and ran to him and Tom folded him in his cloak and held him close and warm.

But he didn't come back in. he just stood there, and he was waiting for something.

Now there's a lot of crap talked about silences. I read novels when I've the time and you read things like 'Time stood still' and so on and you just think bullshit it did. So I'll just say I don't think anyone in the world breathed in that next minute. There was no wind, no movement. The stillness and silence were there like you could touch them, but more than that: they were like that's all there was and all there ever had been.

We felt the slow red throb of violence from right across the square before we could even see the man. Then Sam came staggering into the square waving a bottle like a flag and cursing his head off. At first he couldn't see Tom and the boy because they were the opposite side of the fountain, and he ground to a wavering halt, but then he started shouting, rough jags of sound that seemed to strike against the silence and die instead of breaking it, and he started charging across the square and if ever there was a man with murder in his thoughts then it was Sam McNeill. He was like a man possessed, a man who'd given his soul the evening off. I wanted to shout to Tom to get the hell out of the way, to come inside, but the words wouldn't come out of my throat and we all just stood there, knuckles whitening as we clutched the bar and stared, our mouths open like we'd made a pact never to use them again. And Tom just stood there, watching Sam come towards him, getting closer, almost as far as the spot where Tom usually painted. And it felt like we were looking out of the window at a picture of something that happened long ago in another place and time and the closer Sam got the more I began to feel very very afraid for him.

It was at that moment that Sam stopped dead in his tracks, skidding forward like in some kid's cartoon, his shout dying off in his ragged throat. He was staring at the ground in front of him, his eyes wide and his mouth a stupid circle. And then he began to scream.

It was a high shrill noise like a woman and coming out of that bull of a man it sent fear racking down my spine. He started making thrashing movements like he was trying to move backwards but he just stayed where he was. His movements became unmistakable at about the same time his screams turned from terror to agony. He was trying to get his leg away from something.

Suddenly he seemed to fall forward on one knee, his other leg stuck out behind him and he raised his head and shrieked at the dark skies and we saw his face then and I'm not going to forget that face so long as I live. It was a face from before there were any words, the face behind our oldest fears and earliest nightmares, the face we're terrified of seeing on ourselves one night when we're alone in the dark and It finally comes out from under the bed to get us.

Then Sam fell on his face, his leg buckled up and still he thrashed and screamed and clawed at the ground with his hands, blood running from his broken fingernails as he twitched and struggled. Maybe the light was playing tricks, and my eyes were sparkling anyway on account of being too paralysed with fear to even blink, but as he thrashed less and less it became harder and harder to see him at all, and as the breeze whipped up stronger his screams began to sound a lot like the wind. But still he writhed and moaned and then suddenly there was the most godawful crunching sound and then there was no movement or sound anymore.

Like they were on a string our heads turned together and we saw Tom still standing there, his coat flapping in the wind. He had a hand on Billy's shoulder and as we looked we could see that Mary was there too now and he had one arm round her as she sobbed into his coat.

I don't know how long we just sat there staring but then with one mind we were ejected off our seats and out of the bar. Pete and Ned ran to Tom but Jack and I went to where Sam had fallen and we stood and stared down and I tell you the rest of my life now seems like a build-up to and a climb-down from that moment.

We were standing in front of a chalk drawing of a tiger. Even now my scalp seems to tighten when I think of it, and my chest feels like someone punched a hole in it and tipped a gallon of iced water inside. I'll just tell you the facts: Jack was there and he knows what we saw and what we didn't see.

What we didn't see was Sam McNeill. He just wasn't there, you know? We saw a drawing of a tiger in purples and greens, a little bit scuffed, and there was a lot more red around the mouth of that tiger than there had been that afternoon and I'm sure that if either of us could have dreamed of reaching out and touching it it would have been warm too.

And the hardest part to tell is this. I'd seen that drawing in the afternoon, and Jack had too, and we knew that when it was done it was lean and thin. And I swear to God that tiger wasn't thin anymore. What Jack and I were looking at was one fat tiger.

After a while I looked up and across at Tom. He was still standing with Mary and Billy, but they weren't crying any more. Mary was hugging Billy so tight he squawked and Tom's face looked calm and alive and creased with a smile. And as we stood there the skies opened for the first time in months and a cool rain hammered down. At my feet colours began to run and lines became less distinct. Jack and I stood and watched till there was just pools of meaningless colours and then we walked slowly over to the others not even looking at the bottle lying on the ground and we all stood there a long time in the rain, facing each other, not saying a word.

Well that was ten years ago, near enough. After a while Mary took Billy home and they turned to give us a little wave before they turned the corner. The cuts on Billy's face healed real quick, and he's a good looking boy now: he looks a lot like his dad and he's already fooling about in cars. Helps me in the store sometimes. His mom ain't aged a day and looks wonderful. She never married again, but she looks real happy the way she is.

The rest of us just said a simple goodnight. Goodnight was all we could muster and maybe that's all there was to say. Then we walked off home in the directions of our wives. Tom gave me a small smile before he turned and walked off alone. I almost followed him, I wanted to say something, but in the end I just stood and watched him go. And that's how I'll always remember him best, because for a moment there was a spark in his eyes and I knew that some pain had been lifted deep down inside there somewhere. Then he walked and no one has seen him since, and like I

said it's been about ten years now. He wasn't there in the square the next morning and he didn't come in for a beer. Like he'd never been, he just wasn't there. Except for the hole in our hearts: it's funny how much you can miss a quiet man.

We're all still here, of course, Jack, Ned, Pete and the boys, and all the same, if even older and greyer. Pete lost his wife and Ned retired but things go on the same. The tourists come in the summer and we sit on the stools and drink our cold beers and shoot the breeze about ballgames and families and how the world's going to shit and sometimes we'll draw close and talk about a night a long time ago and about paintings and cats and about the quietest man we ever knew, wondering where he is, and what he's doing. And we've had a six-pack in the back of the fridge for ten years now, and the minute he walks through that door and pulls up a stool, that's his.