



THE LAST TIGER  
EDUARDO HALFON

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Eduardo Halfon was born in Guatemala in 1971. He is the author of fifteen books of fiction published in Spanish. Named one of the best young Latin American writers by the Hay Festival of Bogotá, he is also the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the prestigious Roger Caillois Prize. His latest novel, *Mourning*, won the Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger (France), the Premio de las Librerías de Navarra (Spain), the Edward Lewis Wallant Award (US), and the International Latino Book Award (US). In 2018, he was awarded the Guatemalan National Prize in Literature, his country's highest literary honor. – Address: Düsseldorf StraÙe 68, 10719 Berlin, Germany. E-mail: edhalfon@gmail.com.

*For me, the magic of the Wissenschaftskolleg takes place in the margins. All of us Fellows are there to do our own work, of course, to advance our research and our writing. But something else happens while we're busy working, almost without us noticing, at times in the middle of a conversation with other Fellows at dinner, at times during one of the many colloquiums or conferences, and at other times during an improvised afternoon walk. The staff knows very well that this occurs. They even have a name for it: serendipity – finding interesting or valuable things by chance, says the Cambridge English Dictionary. An unplanned fortunate discovery, says Wikipedia. The following piece, written during my year as a Fellow and originally published in The New York Review of Books, is the story of such a serendipitous encounter with another Fellow – my very own unplanned, fortunate, and beautiful discovery.*

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My grandfather killed the last tiger.

At least that's what I thought I heard Kullu say. We were walking in a Berlin neighborhood called Grunewald that is filled with mansions old and new and borders a forest home to foxes and raccoons and wild boar and a series of lakes where Berliners, continuing a late nineteenth-century German tradition known as *Freikörperkultur*, swim and sunbathe naked.

Jalambaba, Kullu went on. That was my grandfather's name. He died before I was born.

Badly parked on the street, in front of a beer tavern, gleamed a yolk-yellow Ferrari.

When I was a child, said Kullu, my grandmother used to tell me that one night in late 1964, Jalambaba hid inside his stable on the outskirts of Mukpat, our village, which is only a few kilometers from the Buddhist caves of Ajanta. Through a hole in the wall, Jalambaba could see the silhouette of his dead cow on the grass. A single-barrel shotgun in his hands, he waited for the predator that had killed his cow earlier in the afternoon to return, as he knew it would.

We stopped in front of the Grunewald train station. At the entrance was a small café with four tables on the sidewalk. I suggested we sit down for a few minutes to have a cup of coffee before we went up to the platform.

I'd love to, Eduardo, he said in his always soft-spoken, carefully measured way, as if he was never in a hurry to get to the end of his words.

I went inside and approached a tall, portly lady behind the counter. Lacking German, I held up two fingers and asked in English for two coffees. As she prepared them, I noticed behind her a long shelf with a series of antique dolls, perhaps thirty or forty of them, sitting in a row, all old and dirty and in bad shape. More than a few were missing a leg or an arm. Others had been mended with thread or tape. One was even decapitated, the frayed head lying beside it.

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His name is Kulbhusansingh Suryawanshi, but everyone calls him Kullu. We had both received writing fellowships from the Wissenschaftskolleg to spend a year among the forests and lakes of Grunewald. We were living in the same building, Villa Walther (whose original owner, the architect Wilhelm Walther, in financial ruin after building such an elaborate palace in 1917, hanged himself inside the tower). Kullu and his family would invite mine to their apartment for typical Indian breakfasts of poha, sabudana, and

chapati; we would invite them to ours for typical Guatemalan breakfasts of black beans, huevos rancheros, and tortillas. His daughter and my son attended the same German lessons, and played together in the swanky garden out back.

A renowned scientist in his field, Kullu had devoted the last fifteen years – his entire academic life – to work for the protection and conservation of the Himalayan snow leopard. Listening to him tell me about his field work in the most inhospitable regions of India and Mongolia and Nepal and Kyrgyzstan, and about the prolonged solitude and many dangers (several of his colleagues had died of hypothermia up in the mountains), I thought of Jorge Luis Borges's tale of an Aztec priest, who, locked in a stone prison by his Spanish captors, spends days observing and studying the rosette pattern on the fur of a jaguar locked in the neighboring cell. One night, after waking from a feverish dream, the Aztec priest believes he sees in the jaguar's fur a divine script. A magical sentence of fourteen words, writes Borges, that upon utterance would make the stone walls disappear and unleash the jaguar on his captors. Yet, in the end, the Aztec priest decides not to say them.

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After midnight, the clouds opened up and in the moonlight my grandfather caught a glimpse of a huge tiger eating the carcass of the cow.

Kullu paused and I took advantage of that pause to drink a last, already cold sip of coffee.

Very slowly, Kullu continued, so as not to alert the tiger, my grandfather raised the shotgun. When he pulled the trigger, the whole village heard the shot. People immediately began to gather at the Hanuman temple in the center of the village. They wanted to know if the tiger was dead. But no one dared to go near the stable where Jalambaba had spent the night, alone, waiting for it to return.

At the table next to us sat a couple of teenage girls: tattooed and shaved and fondling each other as they shared an illicit cigarette, hiding it under the table.

As a kid, Kullu said, I always asked my grandmother to tell me that story at bedtime. Jalambaba was my hero. Jalambaba, to me, was the strongest and bravest man.

He went to take a drink of coffee, but his cup was empty.

After that night, Kullu said, nobody ever saw another tiger in the forests around the village. My grandfather, I came to understand over the years, had killed the last tiger of Ajanta. I stopped asking my grandmother to tell me the story of Jalambaba. I stopped telling it to my friends at school.

Kullu stood up and, without asking me, said we should go to the railway platform.

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Gleis 17. That's what was written on the rectangular sign hung high in the Grunewald train station, in large black letters against a white background.

It's this way, Kullu said, pointing to the steps to the right.

I had been to that station many times, either taking trains to the city center or going through its long underpass to get to Grunewald's forests. I'd hardly noticed the sign and never stopped to ponder what Gleis 17 meant. But Kullu knew what it meant, and also how to get there. He'd been insisting for weeks on showing me, without telling me more or explaining why.

We walked up the steps and out onto a long, open-air platform. It was empty. On the other side of the rails was another platform, just as long and narrow. A father stood there in the darkness, addressing his young son in sign language.

Kullu was silent. I supposed he wanted me to discover the place slowly, by myself. At first, I saw nothing. But then I noticed that the ground beneath my feet was made up of a succession of huge cast-iron plates, each measuring maybe ten feet by five feet, and all perforated by rows of holes. On the uppermost part of the plate on which I was standing, I could see something written in rusty relief. I knelt down to read it: 14.10.1943/78 Juden/Auschwitz. I walked to another plate, knelt, and read: 10.01.1944/352 Juden/Theresienstadt. Then a third: 03.10.1942/1021 Juden/Theresienstadt.

There are 186 plates in total, on both sides, said Kullu, pointing to the platform opposite. They commemorate each one of the 186 trains that, beginning in October of 1941, transported Jews from here to the camps.

I kept walking and reading out loud, as if reading out loud would bring life to such a dead thing, until I came to a plate in the middle of the platform: 08.12.1944/15 Juden/Sachsenhausen.

Sachsenhausen, I whispered again in the night.

Could your Polish grandfather, Eduardo, have passed through here on his way to Sachsenhausen, Kullu asked me in his soft, reverent tone.

I couldn't answer him. I couldn't say anything. I could only stare at the little boy standing in the dark on the other side of the tracks. He made no noise. He didn't sign back. He only exhaled breaths of white mist in the already black night as he watched his

father's hands. The only thing that seemed to matter to him at that moment were his father's hands.