

Excerpt: *Tiger Island*, Daan Remmerts de Vries, pages 7–20

This is India.

This is where I want to start; this is where I went.

What was I doing here? To be honest, I didn't know anymore...

I'd had an idea about it before I came here. But, Jesus, it had all gone so differently than I'd expected...

Everything always turns out differently. But I – I'd just like to point out – had actually travelled here because I was looking for something.

This! This is what I was looking for.

I don't mean the screen. I mean the tiger.

I deliberately drew this picture like that and put it here. Because that, I think, is how I started my search: at my computer. In my room, in the attic of our house in Apeldoorn.

PART 1

1

So, let me tell my story (because that's probably what you're waiting for). One morning, it was still early and I was awake again. That often happened. I slept okay, usually, but once I was awake I couldn't stay in bed.

And so I sat there, in my pyjamas. Looking at animal websites. I flicked, clicked, then clicked again. Not because I was so frantically searching or anything like that. But mostly, I reckon, because I didn't want to think about things.

Humpback whales...

Albatrosses...

Tasmanian devils...

Clouded leopards...

Red pandas...

Maned wolves...

Tigers...

Maybe searching always starts with not wanting to think anymore. Because thinking is not the same as doing (and when you're thinking, nothing actually *happens*). But whatever the case, those sites were distracting me quite nicely.

Because animals are great. I'll just say that right now. In fact, animals are fantastic. I've always thought so.

Animals are free, you know? *Wild*.

Animals sometimes try to look bigger or smaller than they are – but in fact they're always perfectly whoever or whatever they are.

Animals are the wildest, most honest things in existence.

All the animals I saw that morning also appeared to exist somewhere else. Somewhere in a place without people (just the occasional photographer).

And then I thought: So *that's* the real world.

And, what's more, I thought I understood all about the real world, just by looking at those pictures.

It's that easy when you're using a computer. No sweating, no slogging. Nothing vague about it. Everything you want to see instantly comes flying or walking past. With short, clear captions, so you know exactly what you're looking at.

“The Sumatran tiger is an endangered species.”

And suddenly that Sumatran tiger was standing there, right in front of my nose. I could see it. But actually, as I now know, I couldn't see a bloody thing. Because, no matter how beautiful the photo was, the animal left me cold.

Because a photograph is not an animal.

What I was actually longing for was to see a creature like that for real.

I'd managed to learn the names from those websites, though. With my dad. I'd been practising English with him. Night after night, he'd explained to me how to translate certain words. He'd made me read out sentences. He'd even written things down for me. He was patient back then, a really good dad.

"My goodness me!" he'd said to me in English one time. "How clever of you, Tijs, being able to read all of that. That's great! Well done!"

"Thank you, Dad," I'd replied, also in English.

I'd never heard him laugh as loud as the time he got me to translate this one English sentence into Dutch. The sentence went like this:

"The man was brave in the war."

"Okay then," my dad said. "How would you say that in Dutch?"

"Simple," I said. And I thought it was simple, because it looked just like a Dutch sentence. "De man was braaf in de war," I said.

And then he started laughing this rasping smoker's laugh, which got louder and louder. Seriously, he was *peeing* himself. And I couldn't help myself – I started laughing too. I hadn't seen him like that for ages.

Then he explained about false friends and told me that "brave" wasn't the same as the Dutch word "braaf", which means "good" or "obedient". The Dutch "in de war" is something completely different too, about being confused or in a muddle. It's got nothing to do with military campaigns and stuff like that. And the two of us had another good chuckle about it.

"But actually," he said then, "you kind of had it right. Because, in a way, the two things are pretty similar."

Huh? That's rubbish, I thought when he said it.

But yeah, anyway, that's what I didn't want to think about.

But you still do it, don't you? Constantly. Whenever that evening went through my mind, I couldn't help smiling for a moment. But then I felt miserable. And yet again I asked myself: How could he do a thing like that?

That was something else he explained, that same evening.

“Tijs...” (he'd suddenly said) “your mum and I... It's kind of, well, over, I guess. I just don't know how we can move on from here. Because, well, Jesus, it's not as if it's fun anymore... Yeah, well, you must have noticed that... And two parents who are arguing the whole time, well, no one wants that, do they? You could say we're both 'in the war', if you know what I mean...”

He suddenly came out with it, just like that, as he lit up his umpteenth cigarette. He was smoking more than ever.

It was the first time he'd complained about it to me. That he'd even mentioned it, I mean.

And I just sat there nodding because I didn't know exactly what he was expecting from me.

It was only later, after he'd moved out, that I realised it might have had something to do with me too. Perhaps I'd given him reason to be so unhappy. Like always leaving my stuff lying around the house. Because my dad really hated that – and I knew it. He liked neat. Tidy. Organised. And then there were the blueprints...

Jesus, yeah, the incident with the blueprints. My dad's new architectural plans. He'd drawn them by hand, on his drawing board. He'd been working on them for days.

Then, one afternoon, he'd put them down on the kitchen table for a moment because he was going to take them to a meeting.

And I'd gone and chucked a jar of baked beans all over them.

It was an accident – of course! But the jar exploded like a bomb. And my dad literally shrieked, with his hands in the air.

And then my mum had yelled that he shouldn't leave his "bloody crap lying around on the kitchen table". And my dad had stormed out, with an almighty slam of the door.

Ow, that's a painful memory! Worse than painful. One I'd be glad to forget. Because that door banging shut was a kind of ending – or a beginning. Since then my dad hadn't come up to the attic to practise English with me.

And I'd had this weird tight feeling in my chest. I don't want to whinge about it... But yeah, I'm just saying, since then it had felt as if sometimes there was something stopping me from breathing.

I hadn't said anything about it, not to anyone. Not to my dad, and certainly not to my mum. After all, they had enough to worry about.

And, that morning at my computer, after I'd thought the whole thing through, all over again, after the same old song had played inside my stupid head yet again, I knew it was high time I put some clothes on.