

A birthday boy, at large in the world

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NORTHAMPTON - One turns 12 years old only once in life. Still, what parent really thinks about this very deeply?

I don't remember much about my 12th birthday. I recall my mother made mine special by fixing my favorite food, pizza. I remember feeling old - 12 was nearly a teenager after all - and I know in hindsight that there were big changes around the corner for me: junior high school, my parent's impending divorce, a move away from the house in which I had grown up.

On my son's 12th birthday, I asked him what he wanted. Thai food, he said. I knew we would not be fixing that at home so my wife, daughter, son and I met at his favorite restaurant in Northampton. After the meal, my son and I set out for home along Bridge Street toward the Calvin Coolidge Bridge. (Mom and sister drove home in our second car.)

To my right, I noticed tents. Like a circus.

"How about a detour?" I asked.

"Sure," he said.

We turned into the Three County Fair, a 194-year-old, four-day extravaganza of animal husbandry, carnival rides and local color. Crowds were thin and admission was, well, free. We crossed the dusty, nearly empty parking lot by a wooden tower and hopped a fence together.

Immediately I sensed excitement at a corral just down from the carnival rides.

A tiger show.

Apparently, an outfit of tiger tamers had come to the Valley all the way from northern Illinois. There were a few Siberians and a Burmese. We made our way to the front row and sat cross-legged on the gravel.

The tamer emerged. Canned jungle music played on loudspeakers, a thumping African drum. Out came the tigers: up on stools, down on the ground, up two more steps to higher stools, down to the ground. Around and around, the enormous creatures crept, gracefully and without pause.

Then it was time to stop. But two tigers did not.

As the tamer chastised one for moving, another climbed down to bother the other one. The tamer tsk-tsked. The crowd laughed. It seemed so easy.

I realized that most of the awe and terror came from our imaginations. What happens when the tigers go berserk and you are in there all alone?

Finally, the tamer lined them up, six in all. A 900-pounder among them. Breathtaking. Flashes flickered.

Then, the hoop of fire.

The crowd ooo'd and ahhh'd. The flames grew higher. Could we actually feel its heat? A tiger jumped through the hoop, walked right by us on his return. Roared.

My son draped his arm easily across my shoulder. We watched through the widely spaced posts of the crowd-control gate, not far away at all. I felt his breathing, the warmth of his little body against mine, his sweet brave energy.

It came from earlier days, when he was a four or five year old. Blond and grinning. Smiling after he crossed over the log across the creek all by himself. Or held up the fish he caught, all by himself. The grin halfway between brave accomplishment and not knowing what to do with the slimy thing.

The tiger show ended soon as it had started.

We walked through the fair - the Ferris wheel, the neon-lit game hawkers, the Tilt-O-Whirl. A guy with a couple of 3-year-olds tried selling us his wristband for unlimited rides. I declined. The carnies were packing up and, besides, we had seen the tiger show.

We walked by them again on the way back to the car. They had come out of their cages. The tamers were speaking with the onlookers through the fence. The silly jungle music was still thumping and I wondered why they couldn't shut the thing off. Let us enjoy tiger yowl and yawn and a roar or two, if we were lucky.

The silence of a fair closing down on a warm, early-September night.

My son and I climbed the bleachers to the very top to look one last time at the tigers as the sun set behind us.

That night, I lay with my son in his bed. He thanked me for the dinner, which is not something he does every day.

In the darkness of his room - he outgrew his nightlight at 10 - I held his hand.

"Well," I said, turning to him, "That's surely something you don't get to see on every birthday."

"What?" he asked.

"A bona fide tiger show," I said.

"That's for sure," he said. "That was the first one I saw and I'm already 12."