

# ***TIGERS BE STILL***

***By Kim Rosenstock***

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## **A Study Guide**

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**THE AUTHOR.** Kim Rosenstock studied playwriting at Yale Drama School. In addition to *Tigers Be Still*, she is the author of *Fly by Night*, a musical. She has also written for the hit television comedy series, *New Girl*.

About *Tigers Be Still* she has said, "I guess I am interested in depicting what I call 'the void'—the dark place we all sink into from time to time. Because I think it's important for people to remember that it's OK to go to that dark place and that it's very possible to come back. I'm also interested in watching characters demand happiness from their lives."

**THE SETTING.** The action of *Tigers Be Still* takes place, “Present day in a suburban town.” The playwright names neither the state nor the region, though one of the characters talks about having attended the State University of New York at Binghamton, and announces his hopes that his son will follow in his footsteps, suggesting a setting in the Northeast, perhaps in New York.

Many of the play’s 23 mostly short scenes take place in the living room of its main character, a young woman named Sherry. There we find “*a large couch covered with tissues and candy wrappers.*” Surrounding this piece of furniture are a television set, “*an array of video game systems, a karaoke machine and shopping bags filled to the brim with unseen items.*” This litter of objects suggests a life shaped by passive attachment to the mind-numbing pseudo experiences provided by electronic media. And the big couch, strewn with paper detritus, tells us that someone is spending a lot of time lying in its upholstered embrace. The setting announces a world of disorder and inertia, dominated by the forces of entropy.

And, in fact, we hear how the three women who inhabit this house—Sherry, her mother, Wanda, and her sister, Grace— have all recently been bedridden, not by physical illness, but by spiritual torpor and emotional paralysis. As the first scene begins, Sherry has just managed to drag herself out of this stupor, and as the play develops, we see the other two women rising from what the playwright has called “the void” that has enveloped their lives.

In addition to the messy living room, other locations also become scenes of the action: the office of the principal of the school where Sherry teaches; the principal’s home; a Walgreens drugstore, Sherry’s classroom, a pond in the woods. Minimal scenic elements evoke each of these places: one or two pieces of furniture, a few props, a change in lighting. The most important purpose of the settings is to be simple and fluid, allowing the many scenes to move freely from one to the next.

**THE PLOT.** Throughout the play, Sherry serves as a kind of narrator, directly addressing the audience at the beginning of scenes, informing them about what’s coming next. The playwright calls the first scene “Introductions.” In its course we meet all the characters in the play and learn something important about each. Immediately, Sherry tells us that, “This is the story of how I stopped being a total disaster and got my life on track and did NOT let overwhelming feelings of anxiousness and loneliness and uselessness . . . eat my brain.”

Sherry, who has recently spent months in bed hiding from the world, is not the only member of her family to face despair. Her mother, Wanda, has retreated to her bedroom and allows no one to visit her, while her sister, Grace, is sunk in misery over being jilted by her fiancé, and now divides her time between her bed and the messy couch.

But Sherry is about to break out of this cocoon of unhappiness as she begins her job as an art teacher at a public school. However, her first day at work is disrupted by an extraordinary event: the escape of a tiger from the local zoo. The school's principal, Joseph, then appears on stage to announce appropriate safety measures to contend with what he calls the "extreme danger" of the situation.

We next learn from Sherry that the principal has really hired her to serve as an art therapist for his troubled son, a 19 year old named Zack, who works at a CVS store and has difficulty with "anger management issues."

Zack will appear shortly for his first session with Sherry, an arrangement complicated by the fact that her sister, Grace, insists on occupying the littered couch while drinking bourbon and obsessing over her failed relationship with Troy, her ex-fiancé—an exercise which has become her chief occupation. Within weeks of marrying her, Troy took up with another woman, leaving Grace with a trunk full of wedding invitations, a wedding gown, and a bridal veil. By way of avenging herself on Troy, Grace has been stealing objects from his condo, including his pet Chihuahuas, both of which she has locked in the basement. For further revenge, she proposes sleeping with Mr. Cooper, their 75-year-old mailman.

After taunting Sherry for not having a boyfriend—in fact, for never having had a boyfriend—Grace finally agrees to relinquish the couch. But first she muses about the fact that Zack's father, Joseph the principal, was once their mother's high school sweetheart, their failed relationship having haunted both for decades. In fact, it was their mother who contacted Joseph and used her influence as his old flame to persuade him to hire Sherry as his new teacher.

Grace retreats to her room as Zack arrives, but he can't help overhearing her sobbing loudly as she listens to a Bette Midler song, a circumstance that makes his therapy session with Sherry somewhat awkward.

However, Zack doesn't realize at first that he is actually having a therapy session. He thinks he is meeting with Sherry to discuss his job as her classroom assistant, which is how his father has explained his relationship with the art teacher. Even more awkwardness ensues when he discovers the real reason for his visit. Sherry tries earnestly to apply therapy to Zack, but he is resistant. In fact, he abruptly terminates the session, explaining he must get to his job at CVS. But before he goes, Sherry attempts to run him quickly through an inkblot test. However, instead of actually looking at the inkblots and associating them with objects, Zack merely reels

off ten random nouns, which Sherry feverishly writes down. As he is walking out the door, Sherry proclaims that it has been a, “Good first session. Even if it was only . . . four minutes long.”

The telephone then rings—a call from her bedridden mother upstairs in her room—who wants to know how Sherry’s first day on the job went, and whether Joseph still has his striking head of wavy blond hair.

In the next scene Sherry tells us how it came about that, “Exactly one month ago, all of the women in my family were in bed. All the time.” Her mother began the migration to the mattress a year ago; Sherry followed suit several months later; and Grace slipped between the sheets four weeks previously. However there has been some progress. Not only has Sherry landed a job, but Grace has now moved from bed to couch, and makes frequent expeditions to her ex-fiancé’s condo to steal his belongings.

Otherwise, Grace spends her time watching the movie, *Top Gun*, “over and over again,” focusing on the moment when the song “You Take My Breath Away” is played.

Next Sherry tells us about her mother, Wanda, who fell ill about a year ago with an un-named “auto-immune disease.” The medications she took to treat it caused her to gain 60 pounds, which caused her to withdraw in shame into her bedroom and her bed, and refuse to allow anyone to enter and see her. Including her husband, who shortly thereafter left his family and, “just disappeared.”

Sherry herself retreated to her bed a few months later, after having completed a master’s degree in art therapy and, despite a massive job search, failing to find employment. “I ended up with nowhere to go and nothing to do. So I figured I’d just get some reading done. Just sit in my childhood bed and read for a while. And pretty soon, I was just sitting in bed *not* reading.” But then her mother intervened with principal Joseph, and now she is about to begin a new life no longer “terrified of putting my feet on the ground.”

The third scene brings us to Sherry’s art class, where, assisted by Zack, she shows her students how to make a basketball hoop out of a Popsicle stick. Zack’s attitude makes it clear that the lesson is a flop, and he asks the students to raise their hands if they would rather take “a field trip to the basketball court for research purposes.” When all the hands go up, Sherry must face the fact that her teaching needs work.

Sherry next has an interview with Joseph, the principal, in which they discuss Zack's therapy, Joseph's former relationship with Wanda, and Sherry's performance as a teacher. He demands that she acquire some emphatic self-confidence, and requires her to make a spoken affirmation of her abilities: "I am Sherry Wickman," she says, "and I am DAMN good at what I do."

After they high-five on that note, the action moves to Joseph's kitchen, where he is having dinner with Zack. Joseph has tried to cook Zack's favorite dish, but has failed to live up to the high standards established by Zack's mother—who has recently died. He also proposes merging his wife's large shoe closet with Zack's bedroom to give his son more space. Zack declines the offer, and they continue eating their unsatisfactory meal.

From Joseph's kitchen, we move back to Sherry's living room where Grace is wallowing in sorrow over her breakup with Troy, singing along with Bette Midler as "The Rose" plays on the karaoke machine. Eventually, wrapped in a blanket, she "*curls up into the fetal position,*" pillowing her head on a bottle of bourbon.

From this pathetic spectacle, we jump to the second therapy session between Zack and Sherry, conducted while they sit on the same couch on which Grace lies in a stupor. The session turns into a sustained critique of Sherry's teaching by Zack, who informs her, that, "Today three kids climbed out of the window and ran away while you were looking for your glasses in your purse." Sherry begs Zack not to quit his job as assistant teacher, assuring him that they will both improve. But Zack says he prefers his job at Walgreens—where he has taken employment since being fired at CVS. Sherry tells Zack about her failed attempts to find jobs at places like Walgreens and CVS, to which she sent resumes and academic transcripts. Zack mocks this approach as "retarded." He then hears the captive Chihuahuas barking as Grace wakes up. Sherry fills him in on the situation, including Grace's breakup with Troy and her campaign of theft from her ex-fiancé. Zack declares that holding the dogs captive is a heinous act of kidnapping in which Sherry is complicit. Then Wanda calls from upstairs, and Zack reels at the idea that Sherry's mother lives in her bed and communicates with her daughter—in the same house— by phone. As he exits on his way to Walgreens, Sherry assigns him to draw a house in his therapy journal in preparation for their next session.

Zack is not the only member of his family to criticize Sherry's job performance. She also finds herself being reprimanded by his father, Joseph, in the next scene. He scolds her for taking her class to a nearby pond for a spontaneous field trip. Joseph, stunned by this recklessness, points out that "tigers love ponds," including the escaped tiger that is still at large somewhere in the vicinity. But rather than firing Sherry for breaking "a major policy," he simply warns her not to do it again—a second chance he awards her because, he says, his son has praised her as

a “very good therapist.” He also reveals that, since his mother’s death, Zack has been spending a lot of time sitting in her shoe closet, sometimes falling asleep there with “his face inside one of her tennis shoes.” This bit of behavior, he suggests, should perhaps be the focus of some future therapy session. He also urges Sherry to tell his ex-sweetheart, her mother, “hello” from him.

Back in the living room some time later, Zack and Sherry are again seated on one end of the couch preparing to engage in therapy, while, again, Grace lies unconscious on the other end, drinking whiskey in her sleep. When the dogs’ barking interrupts their session, Zack suggests that they liberate them from their basement prison and return them to their owner. Claiming to be an expert lock picker, he proposes to unlock the cellar door, and set them free. When his attempt at lock-picking fails, he has one of his “anger management” episodes, and begins punching the wall. Frustrated, he gathers his things and abruptly exits, headed for home, but promising to return soon. Once again the phone rings, with Wanda calling from upstairs. Sherry tells her mother “hello” from Joseph, and Wanda tells Sherry to ask her principal about “Harold Ashman’s pants”. With that mysterious evocation of the past, the scene comes to an end.

The next scene begins with a re-enactment of “the love story of . . . Wanda and Principal Moore,” with Sherry in the role of her mother and Zack playing his father. Wanda and Joseph grew up one street apart and attended the same school together, not noticing one another until one day Joseph, while delivering the newspaper; hit Wanda in the face with it. This resulted in his catching a glimpse of her bra strap, which sent him into a hormonal storm, and led him to take her to the movies. One step led to another, and soon they were in each other’s arms on her bedroom floor, listening to The Beatles sing “Norwegian Wood.” They were crowned king and queen of the prom, and were getting along swimmingly, until a game of spin-the-bottle in Wanda’s basement resulted in Joseph’s kissing Allison Goldstein. Wanda was devastated and furious over Joseph’s infidelity, even though the rules of the game required it. She stopped speaking to him, went off to college, and by and by their high-school passion came to an end. They wound up living only “two towns apart,” but despite that didn’t speak for 35 years, until Wanda, learning that Joseph was the principal of a middle school, wrote to him “to see if there was a job for my depressed, unemployed daughter.” And so the long-severed connection was reestablished.

Following this detour into the past, the play returns to the present and takes us to Joseph’s house, where he is attempting to sew a button onto Zack’s shirt as his son fumbles around in a cabinet, looking for hammers. When he finds them, he hides them in his pants, his distracted

father not noticing this odd behavior because he is attempting to thread his needle. Zack exits walking backwards.

His steps lead him to Sherry's house, hammers in hand. His lock-picking having failed, he is now prepared to beat down the basement door to free the captive dogs. Sherry joins him in the assault, which Zack continues until he has smashed a hole in the door, his rage having once again gotten the better of him. He puts the liberated dogs in a bag, and heads for Troy's house to return them to their owner.

Grace then wakes up, and Sherry has a serious conversation with her, urging her to put her life back in order, but Grace just tells her to "shut the f\*\*\* up already." This silences her sister, and Grace proceeds to tell her she has in fact slept with the 75-year-old mailman, who let her call him Troy. At which point Grace falls drunkenly asleep again. The scene ends as Sherry gets a call from Zack on her cell phone about the dog delivery, which evidently didn't go well: "Uh, alright, don't panic. I'll be right there." As she heads for the door, the land-line rings—another call from the upstairs bedroom—which Sherry ignores.

She meets with Zack in the dark, in the woods near Troy's house, joining his search for the Chihuahua that got away in the botched attempt to return the dogs to their master. Perhaps the escaped dog will fall victim to the escaped tiger? As they ponder this possibility, they drift into therapeutic talk, with Sherry edging toward a conversation about Zack sitting in the shoe closet. She urges him to try to understand his father's concerns, and declares that he should share his grief over his mother's death: "I just think that maybe the two of you could get through it together . . ." At which point Zack drops a bombshell: his mother died in a car wreck when he was at the wheel and lost control during a rain storm. Not only that, but he accuses himself of intentionally causing her death: "And because of some self-preservation instinct I swerved the car, *on purpose*, to the passenger side so that she was the one whose entire body was broken." This revelation brings their session in the woods to an end.

Back at Zack's house on the same evening, his father is on the phone attempting to cancel his late wife's subscription to a yoga magazine, but he is clearly reluctant to give death as the reason. Zack enters, and watches his father dance around the issue, realizing that Joseph can't stand the pain of admitting that his wife is gone.

Meanwhile, we make a quick transition to Joseph's office, where Sherry has come to inform him that Zack has stopped showing up to work as her assistant. Joseph excuses this, saying Zack is sick. The conversation turns to Sherry's resemblance to the young Wanda, and from there to Wanda's present-day difficulties: her retreat to bed, her husband's desertion, and her

refusal to leave her room. Joseph says that Wanda, “needs someone to go up there and rescue her from herself.” Sherry invites him to try, but he demurs. Before leaving, Sherry—as instructed by Wanda—reminds Joseph of “Harold Ashman’s pants.” This sends him into a paroxysm of laughter, on which note Sherry leaves while Joseph continues laughing.

Following this moment of hilarity, there is a brief ghostly interlude in which Grace “*enters wearing her wedding veil and holding a chocolate cake in a box. . . . She takes the cake out of the box. She eats it. She stares blankly at the television.*”

Then we find ourselves in Walgreens, with Sherry paying Zack a visit at his workplace to ask why she hasn’t seen him since the night of the dogs. He is reluctant to reveal his feelings to her, and insists that she get out of “my Walgreens.” Sherry begs him not to quit his therapy sessions with her because, “This is the first job I’ve ever had and I can’t just like completely fail at it.” Zack points out that it is “massively unfair” to be saddled with “a needy therapist,” but seems to soften, giving Sherry hope that all is not lost.

Which brings us to another very brief scene, this one with Sherry alone on stage: “This is the story of why my dad left . . .” Following which, she has nothing to say. “*Finally she gives up and shrugs. Yeah, I don’t know.*”

Back in the living room, Sherry has decided to confront Grace about her self-destructing behavior. She turns off *Top Gun* and reveals the hole in the basement door, and the deliverance of the dogs. Grace persists in her grief over the loss of Troy, declaring, “I don’t know who I am without him.” But Sherry provides her sister with a method for reframing her image of Troy which will allow her to purge him from her life. Instead of picturing Troy as the Tom Cruise character in *Top Gun*, she needs to demote him to a minor supporting role. Grace tries this mental tactic, and, astonishingly, it seems successful.

At that point Zack, sporting a black eye, arrives to announce that he has been fired from his Walgreens job for “punching out” his boss—faulty anger management again. Zack is impressed by Grace’s seeming improvement, and she counsels him to rely on Sherry’s wisdom, since her sister’s recent advice has led to her spiritual rebirth. Sherry departs to drive Zack home, while Grace calls Troy to leave a message telling him off for his abominable behavior, and ending with a demand that he “continue to not contact me. Goodbye.”

At Zack’s house, we find him and Sherry sitting in his mother’s shoe closet as Sherry applies makeup to his eye in an attempt to hide his injury—and his violent behavior—from his father. When she successfully completes the job, he rewards her with a chocolate bunny, the theft of

which from Walgreens precipitated the fight with his boss that produced the black eye in the first place. Sherry warns him that he will develop a reputation as, “The guy who has those violent episodes.” To which he responds, “that would be better than ‘The guy who drove his mom into a tree.’”

He then gives Sherry a pair of his mother’s shoes—silver satin, which happen to fit perfectly. From another shoebox he pulls a batch of family photographs, and then produces his “Artist’s Journal” containing his sketches of his mother and other family members. One disclosure leads to another: Zack confesses to Sherry that, “you make me want to steal candy for someone besides myself and that’s never happened to me before.” When she starts to cry at this revelation, he divulges even more of his inner life, explaining that he sits in his mother’s shoe closet because, “It feels like something. . . . Everything else feels like nothing. When the accident first happened I thought the only thing I could do was kill myself.” But now he feels he has one other option: “to do something incredible.” Perhaps he will go to California to surf, or to Colorado to ski, or to some other distant place to change his life. “I just know that I have to disappear to *somewhere* for a little while.”

Sherry urges him to keep in touch with his father if he does go away, which, for whatever reason, leads him to observe that there are many songs that include the name, “Sherry”—one of which he plays on the iPod which he also has in the closet. He moves closer to her, tells her she’s beautiful, and seems about to kiss her, when Sherry moves away, saying, “That’s not gonna happen.” After an “*Awkward silence*” he smiles and says, “Whattup?,” ending the scene.

In the living room again we find Grace standing in front of the couch—rather than lying on it—“*surrounded by bags filled with stuff*” as Sherry instructs her to “say each item out loud like it’s a butterfly that you’re releasing back into nature.” The items are the various possessions belonging to Troy that she has filched over the past month. As she proceeds through the list of stolen goods, her recitation becomes almost liturgical, the litany of a brokenhearted woman ritually healing herself. Only the karaoke machine—which the sisters can’t bear to relinquish—will retain its place by the couch. With the bags of stuff slung over her shoulder, Grace heads out the door to return the stolen items, like some warped version of Santa Claus.

As Grace is unburdening herself, Zack comes on stage to tell us the story of his “escape.” Grabbing a suitcase, a box of cookies, and his father’s rifle, he made it as far as the town pond—the site of Sherry’s misguided field trip. As he stood wondering if he had the courage to continue his journey, he heard a growling behind him—the escaped tiger! As he was about to shoot the beast, he hesitated, seeing in the animal’s eyes a plea to be killed, the mute appeal of a tired, lonely, lost, “sad, broken” creature who has given up on life. At that moment, Zack

decided not to shoot. Instead, he says, “for him, I choose life.” The tiger walked away, Zack accidentally dropped the rifle, which went off, and the sound of the gunshot broke his spell of indecision. He picked up the suitcase, ran to the bus station, and so began his escape.

In the final scene of the play, Joseph—Principal Moore— comes to Sherry’s house for a therapy session of his own. More compliant than his son, he has actually done his assignment, and drawn a house. He also reports receiving a postcard from Zack bearing a mysterious one-word message, “Honeycomb.” Baffled, he and Sherry proceed to the next therapeutic step: Joseph climbs the stairs to Wanda’s room as the song “Norwegian Wood” plays—evoking Joseph and Wanda’s first intimate encounter on the floor of her teenage bedroom. Sherry ends the play by informing us, “This is the story of how my mother got out of bed.”

**CHARACTERS.** *Sherry* strikes us at first as a somewhat self-contradictory character. A trained art therapist, she is a certified “care giver,” one whose professional concern is directed toward others. And yet, for some six months, she lay passively in her bed, wrapped up in her own misery, oblivious to everyone but herself. Now that she’s out of bed, she seems to be trying to do penance for that spell of solipsism by spending all her energy in the service of others: caring for her mother and sister, teaching her students, helping Zack to get over his guilt and grief, patching up the long-broken romance between Wanda and Joseph.

We hear several times that she has no boyfriend; in fact, that she has never had a boyfriend, which seems to suggest that—except for her spell alone in bed—she has never spent much time attending to her personal life. She seems to move from extreme to extreme: professional altruism giving way to self-absorbed inertia, leading back again to altruism. As Zack says about her:

*You clearly believe in staying home and seeing things through to the end. Even if it means completely giving up on having a personal life and like, not dating, and not having any friends your own age, and not having the job you actually want. . . .*

And yet, despite this virtual declaration that there’s no there in Sherry, Zack seems to fall in love with her. Why? Because, for one reason, he finds her “beautiful.” Which means what?

We learn that she physically resembles her mother when the latter was in high school—the emphatically “hot” prom queen. But although she does look somewhat like her mother’s younger self, as Joseph notes she is perhaps not quite so striking. And Grace asserts firmly at the beginning of the play that neither she nor Sherry is “hot.” So, though she is attractive, her physical beauty is not overwhelming.

To understand the beauty that Zack sees in Sherry, we need to re-examine the circumstances that led her to her months of depression and inertia. Having completed her degree in art therapy, she proceeded to send out 50 job applications, and accumulated 50 rejections. But she had experienced rejection before in her life: her quest for employment while in college at places like CVS and Walgreens was also a total failure. In explaining her descent into bedridden passivity, the one specific causal factor she names is that, “I ended up at home with nowhere to go and nothing to do.” In other words, her major source of spiritual energy was cut off: the ability to be with and help other people. So it was the loss of caring connection, rather than excessive self-pity that led to her months of inaction. And it was the materialization of a job helping others that propelled her back into normal life.

So the beauty that Zack sees is an almost saintly quality—what is referred to in the Christian tradition as “agape,” the non-erotic love of others for their sake alone.

**Grace**—as we see her throughout most of the play—is Sherry’s antithesis. Caught up in self-pity, obsessed with a failed romance, determined to find revenge by sleeping with the aged mailman, often cruelly insulting toward her sister, she is the archetypal victim, the consumer—and rejecter—of help. She manages to make herself bearable, even attractive, as a character by her sense of humor, often self-deprecating, always mordant.

She rejects help because she needs to hang on to the remnants of what she has lost: her relationship with Troy. Why she should want to do so is something of a mystery, since he seems to have been both boorish and fickle. As to the former: on their fourth “anniversary” he gave her a book called “*Everyone Poops*.” As to the latter: in the midst of planning their wedding, she caught him “making out” with his podiatrist in Applebee’s.

But Grace is a clinger: she adheres to what’s lost by stealing Troy’s stuff and by endlessly re-watching *Top Gun*, which reminds her of her days with Troy. She even clings to her misery, which itself is a by-product of that failed relationship, and thus a reminder of her faithless fiancé. She drinks to obliterate her unhappiness, while at the same time surrounding herself with Troy’s belongings to keep the unhappiness alive and tangible.

That Sherry manages to extricate Grace from the coils of her misery seems nearly miraculous, involving as it does the simple act of mentally re-framing Troy as a bit player in her life rather than its leading man. Maybe the ultimate ease with which Grace is liberated from her enthrallment indicates that she was ready to let go of her obsession, and finally capable of freeing herself.

**Joseph** mirrors Sherry in many ways. Like her, he is constantly looking out for other people. When we first see him, he is arranging security measures at his school to safeguard his students and staff from the menace of the escaped tiger. His approach is somewhat comically exaggerated, but his motives are generous and good-hearted. He works at being a kindly mentor toward Sherry, as she struggles to improve her performance as a teacher, and even gives her a second chance after she takes her students on a field trip to what might well be a tiger-ridden pond—a worry that seems slightly farcical at the moment.

His major concern is the well-being of his son, Zack. Knowing that the young man's grief for his dead mother is compounded by his guilt as the driver of the car in which she was killed, Joseph hires a therapist to help him deal with these harrowing emotions. The fact that Sherry—totally inexperienced and short on self-confidence—is the therapist he picks adds another slightly comical twist to his character. And the specific ways he attempts to console Zack are also comic in their ineptitude. He tries to cook his son's favorite meal, but botches the job, turning out a nearly inedible dish. He decides to sew a missing button onto Zack's shirt, but fails because he doesn't know he's supposed to knot the thread to keep it from running through the cloth.

And in a final act of empathy, he steels himself to perform the forbidding task of climbing the stairs to Wanda's room, initiating the transformative process that will finally lead her back from her death-like sojourn in her mausoleum/bedroom.

**Zack**, like Grace, is self-absorbed in grief. He too has suffered a loss that has largely turned him in on himself and away from others. Hostile toward his employers, alienated from his father, his one point of positive contact with the world is Sherry. But a thread of hostility runs even through their relationship. He is constantly threatening to terminate his therapy, he is harshly critical of her performance as a teacher, and he orders her out of *his* Walgreen's. But Sherry persists in her attempts to bring him out of his prison of grief and guilt, and he is ultimately touched. When he gives her the chocolate bunny, he admits she has made him “want to steal candy for someone besides myself and that's never happened to me before.” Getting outside of himself is a major step forward for him, and represents one of the most important turning points of the play.

The playwright also makes it clear that Zack sees in Sherry a kind of Oedipal temptation. She is several years older than he, and he remarks that she looks like his dead mother. He slips one of his mother's shoes on her foot, like Prince Charming with Cinderella. And he then tries to kiss

her. Is Zack Sherry's son, or her would-be boyfriend? Sherry, leaving Zack free to move on to a new life, where he can be free of his mother's shadow.

When he confronts the tiger at the pool, he meets his demons head on, and rather than attacking them violently, he simply allows them to walk away, to vanish into the surrounding woods. Finally he can board the bus that will take him to the somewhere else he needs to be in order to escape from his troubled past.

**THE THEMES.** The title of the play can be read in two ways. *Tigers Be Still* could be taken as a sentence in the imperative mood, commanding tigers to shut up and leave us alone. Alternatively, it can be seen as analogous to the legend found on many old maps designating unexplored, and therefore dangerous, territory: "Dragons be here." In that case, the title is a warning, cautioning us to take care, because there are still tigers out there waiting to get you.

In either case, the "tigers" are both real and symbolic. Symbolically, they represent the dangers of life always lurking in the darkness, threatening us with unhappiness, loss, and ultimately death. The tigers have stricken the Wickman family, whose female members have taken to bed as a result of their wounds. They have attacked Principal Joe and Zack even more grievously, inflicting not just malaise and depression, but death itself, and all its destructive consequences for the living.

But those symbolic tigers are, in fact, stilled in the course of the play, though not by Tarzan, Clyde Beatty, or Siegfried and Roy, but by a most improbable tiger-tamer, Sherry Wickman, a 24-year-old who has never had a boyfriend or a job, and who has just spent six months in bed. But thanks to her, her sister gets off the couch, Zack escapes to a future "honeycombed" with possibilities, and Wanda and Joseph move toward a renewed romance.

So tigers, as Zack learns when he comes face to face with a real one at the pond, have their own weaknesses, and may themselves, like Wanda, Sherry, and Grace, succumb to despair and give up on life. As Blake reminds us, He who made the tiger also made the lamb. And sometimes, if we're lucky, tigers, like lambs, can be stilled.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the meaning of the title of the play?
2. Do you think Sherry is a good teacher?

3. Do you think Sherry is right in refusing Zack's kiss? If so why? If not, why not?
4. Why does Grace steal Troy's possessions?
5. Why does Grace watch *Top Gun* over and over again?
6. Have you ever responded to a loss or difficulty the way Wanda, Sherry, and Grace do?
7. Have you ever immersed yourself in movies, t.v., or music to escape your problems? Do you think many people do?
8. Do you think Zack really came face to face with the tiger, or is that just a story he tells to make sense of his decision to escape?
9. Why does Zack write the word "honeycomb" on the postcard to his father?
10. Why does Zack give Sherry a pair of his mother's shoes?