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Part 1: Fifty-one DeathsA little before five o'clock on the evening of October 18, 2011, as the day began to ebb away, a retired schoolteacher named Sam Kopchak left the home he shared with his 84-year-old mother and headed into the paddock behind their house to attend to the horse he'd bought nine days earlier. Red, a half-Arabian pinto, was
acting skittish and had moved toward the far corner of the field. On the other side of the flimsy fence separating them from his neighbor Terry Thompson's property, Kopchak noticed that Thompson's horses seemed even more agitated. They were circling, and in the center of their troubled orbit there was some kind of dark shape. Only when the
shape broke out of the circle could Kopchak see that it was a black bear. The Zookeeper Terry Thompson, 62, born and raised in Zanesville, Ohio. Kopchak wasn't too big as black bears go, and maybe because it was running away from him. He knew what he'd do: put
Red in the barn, go back to the house, report what he'd seen. This plan soon had to be revised. He and Red had taken only a few steps toward the barn when Kopchak saw something else, close by, just ahead of them on the other side of the fence. Just sitting there on the ground, facing their way. A fully grown male African lion. Kopchak had lived
around here all of his life. The road his and Thompson's properties abutted was named Kopchak Road after his great-uncle. Before he retired four years ago, he used to teach seventh-grade science. He didn't know too much about lions, but he had heard that it was unwise to challenge them by looking them in the eye, and that if you ran away they had
a tendency to chase you. So he settled on what he considered a brisk walking pace for himself and Red. He only looked back once, when they were about a third of the fence, though it was quite obvious that the animal could get over the fence anytime it
wanted to.Inside the barn Kopchak locked the doors, then telephoned his mother, sitting in front of the TV about a hundred yards away back in the house. There was, he told her, "a major problem." They'd long known that there were strange and unusual animals kept out of sight over the brow of the hill around Thompson's house—often they could
hear lions bellow and roar. "We didn't have any idea how many there were," Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from there, so the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from there, so the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from there, so the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from there, so the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from there, so the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that these two runaways must have come from the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed that the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak would later reflect. But they assumed the first thing Mrs. Kopchak 
what her son had seen, as though there was really nothing too strange or alarming about a lion and a bear running loose on an October afternoon in Ohio. But maybe she was a little rattled. When the 911 operator asked for her first name, Mrs. Kopchak answered "Dolores," the name on her birth certificate but one she never uses: "I've been called
Dolly for eighty-four years. "Her son remained trapped in the barn. From there, looking through a north-facing window, he watched the menagerie grow. Along came a wolf. And a second bear, this one much larger than the first. And there was the lion he had seen before, now pacing back and forth. And also a lioness, anxiously scuttering around. "And
then," he says, "I saw a tiger. I'm telling you, the lion is bad enough, and the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tigers are actually bigger than the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. The tigers are actually bigger than the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. The tigers are actually bigger than the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. I'm telling you, the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. I'm telling you, the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. I'm telling you, the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. I'm telling you, the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. I'm telling you, the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger. I'm telling you, the lioness is bad enough, and the bear, but...don't be around the tiger.
summons a couple of miles away in Zanesville, when the call came through about a lion and a bear on the loose. When he arrived, he could see, just inside Thompson's fence, a tiger, a black bear, and two lionesses. While he was waiting for Mrs. Kopchak to answer the door, he saw a large gray wolf running southward along the road behind him. He
set down his clipboard on the porch, where it would remain for the next few hours, ran to his patrol car, and followed on foot. By now the order had come over the radio: Put the animal down. It was about eighty yards away from him, but it fell at the first
shot. After the wolf went down, Merry fired a few more times to make sure. He was inspecting the body when word came over the radio that some colleagues had a lion cornered near the Thompson residence. He hurried back. He knew that his colleagues had a lion cornered near the Thompson residence. He hurried back. He knew that his colleagues had a lion cornered near the Thompson residence. He hurried back. He knew that his colleagues had a lion cornered near the Thompson residence.
side and the shotgun that is locked above their heads in the patrol cars—and that he was the only one with a rifle. Merry drove back up the hill, until he came across a deputy running back and forth near Thompson's driveway. Merry didn't know what was going on, so he stopped. As he got out of the car, he grabbed for his rifle on the passenger seat
but it snagged on the computer stand so he left it. That was when he saw the black bear, at first facing him and then running straight toward him. Now he only had his Glock. Not the weapon you'd want when you're facing down 350 pounds of charging bear. He got off one shot. The black bear fell about seven feet in front of Merry. He wouldn't ever
know where the bullet went, though he assumed he must have hit the brain. All he remembered was the sight of the bear's head coming at him, and he also remembered what had been drilled into him at weapons training: Shoot what you see. After that, Merry went back for his rifle. An African lioness crawled under the livestock fence and ran south
down the road then headed toward someone's home, so he shot her before she could go farther. Then he turned back, intending to deal with a black bear and a tiger along the roadway, but he was distracted by a cougar heading south, so he followed the cougar into another driveway where he met a male African lion coming the other way. He shot the
lion while some other deputies shot the cougar. Soon he was instructed to patrol the border between the Thompson property and Interstate 70, and over the evening he shot another wolf, two more lions, a tiger, and—later on, after its hiding place was revealed by a fireman's thermal-imaging camera—a grizzly bear. That's what it was like. Sheriff Matt
Lutz was settling into an evening in front of the TV. His son and wife were off to a literacy night so he was on his own. He'd already hung up his uniform and finished his dinner when, at around 5:20 p.m., he got the call reporting that Terry Thompson had an animal out. It didn't seem that big a deal—they all knew Thompson had animals and they'd
been called out there again and again, mostly for loose horses. Occasionally there were reports of more unusual creatures running free but nothing too bad had ever happened. Still, Lutz said he wasn't busy and would drive over. In the fifteen minutes it took him to get to the scene, as the reports he was receiving over the radio escalated, the
seriousness and strangeness became clear. Lutz instructed that if there were animals outside Thompson's property they needed to be shot. Never had to think twice about it. There was an apartment building just on the other side of the interstate that bordered Thompson's land. Maybe a mile away was a school soccer game—kids yelling and
screaming in the open air. What if some of the cats were drawn toward them? By the time he got there, the culling had begun. Nobody yet knew where Thompson was, and so there was concern for his safety. Maybe the animals had somehow busted out, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured, in need of help. After Deputy Merry headed down the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured in the road in pursuit of a wolf, and he was injured in the road in th
Sergeant Steve Blake, who'd been first on the scene, decided he should drive up to Thompson's house. As he neared the farm buildings he saw more animals. Their cages had either been cut through or left open. Blake sounded his horn outside Thompson's house, but there was no response, so he drove back, and at the foot of the drive he met John
Moore, the caretaker who regularly fed the animals and had been alerted by a phone call from someone in the neighborhood. Together, they returned to the house, finding nothing but two monkeys and a dog in cages. But on their way back to the road, Moore spotted a body near the barn. A white tiger appeared to be eating it, and they couldn't get
closer. Forty miles away, at the Columbus Zoo, an event was being held for the International Rhino Foundation. Rhino experts from around the world had gathered, and the zoo was throwing a cocktail party on the grounds of the polar-bear exhibit. "One of our vets came into the cocktail area," says Tom Stalf, the zoo's chief operating officer, "and you
could see the panic on her face. She said, 'We have to go—Terry Thompson's animals are out.' "Stalf, who had moved to Columbus only eighteen months earlier, didn't know who Thompson's property to inspect his large private collection of animals
in 2008, accompanying an ATF raid that eventually led to Thompson's imprisonment for a year on gun charges. Though ultimately no action was taken concerning the animals after Thompson moved to improve his facilities, Barrie had been horrified at what he saw up there in terms of security, cleanliness, and animal cruelty. The Aftermath From top:
a nearby highway sign warns drivers; the gathered bodies of the slaughtered animals. That evening, the zoo assembled its capture-and-recovery team, armed with both tranquilizer-dart guns and regular weapons, and set out for Zanesville. Meanwhile, at the gateway of Thompson's property, the police were wondering how many animals might be
loose. John Moore mentally ran through the rows of cages he would feed. At first the number of animals he came up with was forty-eight, but then his fiancée arrived. She also helped with the feeding, and reminded him of some recent arrivals. The final total was fifty-six. That's when Moore told Deputy Jeff LeCocq something that would later appear in
the official police report and came to be taken as a kind of explanation for what had happened, albeit one that prompted many further questions. Moore said that he had last spoken with Thompson at nine o'clock the previous evening, and that Thompson, who was 62, had told him about a letter he'd received from an unnamed author saying that his
wife, Marian, had been unfaithful. Thompson had only returned from his prison sentence three weeks before. "That's when Terry actually goes to [Moore] and asks him about Marian having cheated on him while he was in prison," says Deputy LeCocq. "And his answer, to the way I recall, was he didn't know whether she did or she didn't. And then
Terry makes this statement back to him: 'Well, I have a plan to find out, and you will know it when it happens.' "When Deputy Todd Kanavel, who normally heads up the drug squad, arrived at the scene, Sergeant Blake told him about the body that they had spotted. "I think it's Terry," he said. "I don't know." They needed to find out for sure, and to see
whether the person might still be alive. By now they had also decided that they would need to neutralize all of the animals that were loose, even those still on Thompson's property, so they formed a shooting party. Blake drove Kanavel's Silverado crew cab, and four others sat on the bed of the truck behind him so that they wouldn't have to fire out of
windows. Deputy Tony Angelo, a sniper on their SWAT team, had a bolt-action rifle, Deputy Ryan Paisley had a nine-millimeter HK MP5 submachine gun, Deputy Iay Lawhorne and Kanavel had assault rifles. As they pulled up between the barn and a row of cages, two tigers started out of the barn toward them. The animals were only about ten or
twelve feet away. "It kind of took us by surprise," says Kanavel. "So those animals were put down." From where they were, they could see the man's body, flat on its back. The white tiger was atop him. "It stood up," says Kanavel, "and was standing there." He reported back to the sheriff that, whether the body was Thompson's or someone else's, it was
deceased. (At 6:04 p.m., Lutz shared this information on the police radio: "Okay, we have located the owner. Code 16 [dead on arrival], possible 58 [suicide]. Unknown for sure on that. Here in the field.")That was all the five of them could learn for now because they were urgently redeployed to the southern end of the property where some cats had
been spotted readying to cross the boundary fence. First they had to deal with a male African lion that managed to run between some junk cars after the first shot—there were dozens and dozens of old cars and RVs and tractors parked in clumps of rusted metal around the hillside, weeds growing around them. As they moved toward other escapees
spread over the hillside, they used the truck to give themselves elevation, trying to engage the animals from seventy to a hundred yards away, firing on them two at a time until they went down. Kanavel's tactic was to shoot for the head a couple of times, and then move on to the body and keep putting rounds into it. "I was sick, shooting these animals,
because they didn't ask to be there," he says. "And, you know, I'm a cat person. "After a while the four shooters ran low on ammo and called for more, and eventually they headed back toward where the body was. The white tiger had gone. Nearby, they found bolt cutters and a stainless-steel Ruger .357 magnum revolver. The cause of death seemed to
be a gunshot to the head. One detail Sheriff Lutz chose to release to the press at the time was a sizable laceration on Thompson's head that was consistent with a big cat's bite. Deliberately or not, he seemed to imply that Thompson's body was, aside from the gunshot wound suggesting a barrel placed in the mouth, otherwise fairly
untouched. It wasn't quite that straightforward. "He had been dragged, it looked like by an arm, and his pants and stuff had been pulled down, and he had been chewed on. "There were also pieces of raw chicken scattered around near the body.
"Apparently," Tom Stalf theorizes, "he wanted the animals to eat him.""No other law-enforcement agency in the world has faced this—it's not like there was a manual," says Deputy LeCocq. "Other things will happen, but this is never going to happen again."All evening it went on, the slaughter. Encounters with animals that would normally have been
remembered for a lifetime were forgotten moments later as the next came along. Somehow, no one was hurt. (Even Mr. Kopchak, forgotten in his barn, safely managed to make his way unescorted back to his house at nightfall.) Given the situation—fifty animals, mostly large and potentially aggressive carnivores set loose toward the day's end—things
could have gone so much worse. Up near the house, where no media could see them, the officers laid the dead animals out in rows, by species, to ease the counting. That's where the famous, heartbreaking photo was taken—it remains unclear who took it—of all the bodies together in the early-morning light, the one that went round the world.
Whatever people knew of the real situation, and of the hard decisions that had to be made, when you saw that image all you could think was: This is a photo of a place where dozens of big beautiful animals were massacred. By the time the Columbus Zoo team had arrived at the holding area, it was dark. They were told that it wasn't safe for them to try
to tranquilize anything because so many animals were circulating and others were scattering outward. Even when a tranquilizer dose is successfully administered it needs about ten minutes to take effect, and great care is required to establish that it has done so—impossible with so many animals running around. When the zoo people returned to the
site at five-thirty the next morning, they had been joined by Jack Hanna. Hanna—famous for his TV shows and his appearances on shows like Letterman—established his career at the Columbus Zoo, his face is everywhere—even on the Pepsi machines.) The previous day he was doing an
event at Penn State, and although he'd just had knee surgery, he drove straight here "a hundred miles an hour." Zanesville held a special significance for him—he went to school near here, enlisted in the army here, spent his honeymoon night here. After the sheriff spoke with Hanna and talked him through what happened, he gave interview after
interview. It probably made all the difference. Hanna was a trusted animal advocate, and as he emotively articulated his pain at the deaths that had taken place, his unequivocal insistence that the sheriff's department had no other option than to act as they did served as a powerful antidote to the other obvious narrative—that a thoughtless small-town
law-enforcement brigade had murdered dozens of noble beasts because they were too dumb and trigger-happy to think of a better alternative. "It's like Noah's Ark wrecking," he proclaimed, "right here in Zanesville, Ohio." Forty-nine animals would be
found of it, dead or alive, it was eventually decided that it had most likely been eaten by one of the cats. Six of Terry Thompson's animals survived. Three were leopards, still in their cages. And finally, out back near the empty swimming pool, was a small grizzly
bear, also in a birdcage. The house itself was disgusting. "It was the most horrific smells," says Stalf. "Garbage had lost their mind. There are no sane people that
would live in those conditions."Thompson's wife, Marian, arrived around lunchtime. She had to be convinced that the survivors should be taken to the zoo for safekeeping. "She was saying, 'Please, Mr. Hanna, don't take my children,' " says Hanna. Marian insisted on removing the macaques from their cages herself, waving off the zoo personnel's
advice about the risk she was taking. She would explain that she had spent $30,000 buying them, and that she used to sleep with the young female. Her bond with them one by one to their carriers. It was decided that the dead animals
be buried, there and then, on the property. Mrs. Thompson chose the spot. A big digger was brought in and a hole was dug maybe thirty feet deep. The animals were scooped by the bucketload, placed in the hole, and earth backhoed over them. "Our role in life is to care for animals and to educate and inspire people about these great creatures," says
Stalf, "and to see them piled in the mud...it was just a bad day, you know."Thompson's body was taken from the scene for an autopsy at the Licking County Coroner's, where it revealed a few of its secrets. At death Terry William Thompson was five feet five inches tall and weighed 174 pounds. He had been wearing a black T-shirt, blue jeans, and white
briefs. His gallbladder had been removed earlier in life, and he was suffering from severe atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. The only notable substance in his blood was Benadryl. There was gray powder residue on his left hand that appeared to be from a gun being fired. The wounds mentioned in the autopsy report, aside from the gunshot
wound, begin with "a 2 1/4 inch vertical laceration on the right lower forehead and along the spine of the most widespread damage. Others were noted on his torso and his legs. And then there was what the coroner described like this: "a 5
3/4 x 4 inch gaping laceration involving the pubic region and bilateral medial thighs with the absence of genitalia, exposure of the pubic bones and adjacent soft tissue." Or, to spell it out: By the time the body was recovered, no part of his external genitalia remained. Where they should have been, there was nothing but a raw gap. That was Terry
Thompson's final grotesque parting gift—a last meal for one of his animals, sometime before it, too, met its death by bullet on the sad night of October 18, 2011, near Zanesville, Ohio.Part 2: The Animals Among Us.For the majority of Americans who know little about the world of exotic animals, the astonishing events in Zanesville begged some
obvious questions. How could a private citizen have amassed a collection of so many unusual and potentially dangerous animals in the first place? Surely he must have broken every law that prevents your next-door neighbor from secretly housing an ambush of tigers? The answer to that first question: It's surprisingly easy. The answer to the second
question is: What laws?Though Ohio legislators are now scrambling to rectify this, the state where Terry Thompson lived is one of a handful where the regulations on exotic-animal ownership have historically been very light. Your neighbor could buy as many tigers, lions, cougars, and other exotic animals as he so desired and would be under no
obligation to tell anyone. To breed or exhibit or commercially transport animals across state lines he would need a USDA license, requiring that his facilities be inspected periodically to check that they met some basic standards—but other than that there are no special checks or controls. I will hear confident estimates of the number of big cats—tigers,
lions, and so on—in Ohio that vary from the low hundreds to the low hundreds to the low hundreds to the low hundreds to the war. I set out to find some of them. These days many exotic-animal owners have learned to keep what they do to themselves, to avoid the unwanted attention of unhappy neighbors,
animal-rights activists, and journalists who treat them as scary eccentrics or worse. But I find a few. Partly, I think, they talk because their way of life is under attack. They need people to know that not everybody who has a tiger or three tucked away behind their house is a
Terry Thompson. Over the days I spend visiting them I become strangely accustomed to the fact that, just around the back of an otherwise perfectly normal home in Ohio suburbia, there can be a tiger?" one owner nonchalantly inquires, as it nestles up against the fencing
inches away from me in his garage.) I hear many tales of devotion and care that I have alternative animals"); I hear from a man who had a bear escape and only averted disaster by luring it back into its cage with a trail of
vanilla-cream cookies; I hear from a man who shared his house and bed with a leopard for nineteen years ("I know certainly killed me"); I hear from a couple who have not been on holiday for seven years because they won't abandon their six
them, which is also why across America there are a surprising number of sizable big-cat sanctuaries, several with over a hundred animals. At the second-largest of these, the Exotic Feline Rescue Center in rural Indiana east of Terre Haute, where most of the 230 cats seem to come with their own tale of horror, the center's founder, Joe Taft, tells me an
just had major heart surgery. The solution was elegant, if unusual. In Taft's living room, a fence was built around his couch, and that is where he spent most of his time as he recuperated: safely inside a cage inside his own house, man looking out, tiger looking in. The common assumption after the catastrophe at Zanesville was that when it came to
not, sanctuaries may suggest that they should be cherished while most kinds of non-zoo ownership should be frowned upon. I can see a logic in some kind of extreme libertarian position (people should be able to do what they want with
animals unless they are clearly shown to be doing harm) and, conversely, in a hard-core animal-rights position (no animals should be used for any human purpose whatsoever), but the arguments for everything in between seem murky. Frequently these are based on a confident assessment of the animals' happiness (a thorny notion), and on the
pragmatic need to save animals from a place worse than where they are. (Everyone knows somewhere else worse.) Likewise, there is wide disagreement about what kind of human intervention or interaction can be beneficial or justified. Perhaps it is obvious to you that removing a monkey's teeth and dressing it up in pseudo-human-children's clothing.
(Hanna "Monk"tana two-piece panne velvet dress, $38) and diapers (infant starter pack, $35) is wrong? But what about declawing cats, something considered quite acceptable in parts of the exotic owners' world? (Thompson was not unusual in routinely taking his cats to the vet for declawing.) What about giving primates TV to watch? Or taking them
to the McDonald's drive-thru? What about neutering, which is now considered not merely acceptable but responsible behavior when it comes to many nonexotic pets? What, then, about the way that male lions are not, because when neutered they lose their manes? (Whose feelings, exactly, are being
taken into account there?) What, too, of this practice of removing cubs from their big-cat mothers soon after birth and hand-rearing them by humans?Only once you slide up and down these slippery moral slopes can you see how much easier it is for all of these owners to believe that they are acting with kindness to animals that they love, and that
their love is on some level reciprocated. Maybe something went very astray with Terry Thompson, and so of course it is now in the interests of the other owners to draw a firm line between what he did and what they do, but my hunch is that if one had visited him a few years ago, he would have expressed the same love and care and concern for his
to the animal—in backyards or zoos or even on the plains of Africa—is making a claim neither they nor anyone else can verify. When the owners I meet with talk about the proposed new laws (which, in their most inflexible draft versions, would effectively close down everyone in Ohio whom I speak with, and so would inevitably lead to massive animal
euthanization), there is one other common target of their ire, aside from Terry Thompson: Jack Hanna. They see hypocrisy in much of what he now says, particularly given his past use of animals from private owners as props on TV shows."He forgets where he came from," says one owner, Michael Stapleton (five tigers, four bears). "Jack needs to step
acknowledges that he is not universally popular for supporting what happened that night, and for supporting the laws being drafted. "I got death threats and everything else," he says. I wonder how I might bring up the dark moment that the exotic-animal owners think of as his great never mentioned dirty secret, but I don't need to. "I've had three bad
things happen in my life," he says, and proceeds to describe them. The first involves his daughter and cancer. The third is what happened that night in Zanesville. And the second occurred when he was a young private owner exhibiting his exotic animals." A little boy loses his arm to an African lion, 1972 or 1973, Tennessee, "he remembers. Jack
Hanna's lion, at Jack Hanna's animal farm. "My animals were raised in a magnificent setting, creeks going through the place and everything was gorgeous. But an accident happened. And I had to go and pick up the arm. It was beyond anything that you would ever want to experience." I reiterate how angry animal owners are with him. "Yes, they have
every right to be angry with me, but do they know that I lost everything I had?" he says. "Remember, 1973 was much different than 2011. And they have every right to think, 'Oh, here's Jack, he had his fun with animals—now we can't have our fun.' I can see that. And I have no problem with that. I just know that I learned the lesson the hard way,
that's all. "There is a belief that unites the exotic-animal owners of Ohio: If only the right people had listened, what happened with Terry Thompson—and all the trouble now following in its wake—could have been avoided. The exotic-animal world is a close-knit one, and in the year before Thompson's death, after he was sent to prison, word spread that
there were problems with his animals. I hear different versions of what was being said: dead cats—a white tiger and a cougar—observed lying on the property; animals in such bad health that they would have to be euthanized. Some owners took food down to
Thompson's property themselves, some say they contacted the sheriff's department. "They told me," says one owner, Cindy Huntsman, "there were no laws on the books that would allow him to confiscate." As for what actually happened on that day in October, I hear all kinds of theories, though most of them sound recklessly far-fetched. Thompson was
involved with bad people and had fallen out with them. He was caught up in dangerously illegal black-market animal sales, dead or alive. (Tigers are reputedly worth as much as $20,000 dead when their body parts are illegally sold off.) Drug smuggling. Secret plane trips. The Mexican cartel. His death was part of a twenty-five-year plot to rid American
enough to make one doubt any of them in particular. The craziest, most tangentially related rumor that I hear in Zanesville: Jack Hanna was supplying Charlie Sheen's tiger blood. There are two mysteries about what happened along the driveway of 270 Kopchak Road that nobody has been able to explain. The first is why Thompson seems to have cut
action—the cutting of the cages—does puzzle some for a different reason. People insist that the Terry Thompson they knew was too lazy to go to that kind of trouble. The second, bigger mystery is how Thompson managed to let loose fifty animals without being seriously injured by any of them. Even if many of the animals were confused or scared, and
not bloodthirsty for human flesh, some of the friendliest might have been expected to want to "play" with Thompson—and when a cat this big decides to play with you, you are in little less peril than when it decides to attack you. This riddle hardly bolsters any of the conspiracy theories—if someone did this to Thompson, they too would have had to find
a way of releasing the animals without coming to immediate harm (never mind to have escaped from the scene without being spotted). But people will believe what they need to believe. When a life explodes like this, in a shower of sparks and shrapnel, people pick through the remains and see what suits them best. That's what happens when your
death defines you. The bigger the bang that takes someone out, the more likely it is that the person at its center will be obscured. Terry Thompson's story went round the world, but it was also barely told at all. Whether he was a daredevil hero or an idiot or an animal lover or an animal hater or a victim or a recluse or a good man betrayed, he was
assumed to be a cartoon of a man whose whole life could be extrapolated from its final minutes. Almost from the moment Mrs. Kopchak picked up her telephone and reported that wild animals were on the loose, it was taken for granted that the manner of Terry Thompson's death explained all anyone needed to know about the life that came before
machine gun, that's all you got. You don't have anything else.... I'm not an expert in the military.... Yeah, I am. But so what does that mean anything?... See, the guys who shot expert got killed in Vietnam.-Terry Thompson, secretly recorded in his home by a government informant, April and May 2008. Terry William Thompson
parents, sporting triumphs, souped-up cars, girls. "Beautiful blues eyes—that's what you noticed first," says Christine Perone, who dated him for some time in high school. "His eyes were just beautiful." Not that she was the only one who noticed. "There was never just one girl in his life," she remembers. "He would sometimes step on other guys'
girlfriends. And he was like, 'You know, I'm a lover, not a fighter.' I always thought that was pretty funny." He had his pilot's license before he was 16. "He used to buzz my house," she says. "My dad really loved him, but I remember sitting at the dinner table and he buzzed our house, and my dad said, 'I'm going to shoot that [she mumbles wordlessly]
evacuations: "Dragged both bodies and wounded and maimed soldiers into the helicopter," Marshall says. "Many of them I'm sure died right there in his arms." On the worst days, there were more people to be rescued than they possibly could. "They could only get so many on the helicopter," says Cress, "and they actually had to pry their fingers off
biblical thing: 'I guess I'll never go to heaven because I killed people,' " says Chuck Spires, his friend and guitar teacher. Fred Polk, a farmer and scrap dealer who was one of Thompson's neighbors and sometimes tangled with him, also knew him before and after he went away to war. "He always laughed and would be real pleasant before," says Polk.
"He smiled a lot. When he came back... He had a funny look. You know what I mean? He was kind of a loner. He was just a bit different from the other ones. I think he had a little touch of Agent Orange. I said that he never left vietnam. I'm going to put it that way. He never left it. "Now, the thing is, you know when everyone says this guy went into a
Thompson, secretly recorded in his home by a government informant, April 2008.On his way home from Vietnam, Thompson found himself in Columbus, Ohio. From there, he walked the fifty or so miles east to his parents' house. He wanted to clear his head. Soon after, he bought himself a brand-new Corvette. His wife-to-be, Marian Sharp, came from
what was considered a good local family, and was an accomplished barrel racer and horsewoman. "Kind of classy—you know," says Jim Stilwell, a longtime friend of Thompson's who went to school with Sharp. "Kind of uppity. Carried herself gracefully. A nice girl." The general impression seems to have been that it was a case of the good girl drawn to
the wild boy. As one friend puts it: "Who is the guy who would piss my dad off the most?" Apparently it worked. Whatever the dynamic that drew them together, for the next four decades they presented themselves as a formidable partnership. Marian became a well-respected local schoolteacher and a prizewinning rider. Thompson opened a bike shop
in town. He became the local Harley dealer and also got a license to sell guns. Already, he did things differently from other people. "Back in the '70s," says Stilwell, "if you saw him with a toothbrush in his back pocket, you'd know he was going to go somewhere. Because he wouldn't take any clothes with him." For a while there was a plane on the
shop's roof. Inside the shop, along with the bikes and guns, were the kind of animals he favored in those early days. "He raised Dobermans back then," says Stilwell. "There would be dogshit all over the showroom. You had to watch where you stepped." One time Thompson offered Dr. Smith a boat for half price. Smith asked why it was only half price.
"It's only half a boat," Thompson explained. Thompson did things his own way even when it led him into trouble. He once told Spires about someone repeatedly breaking the windows of his shop and vandalizing the place, and how he'd waited for three nights to catch the culprit. "On the third night," says Spires, "this guy showed up, started beating
windows out. And [Terry] just really beat him up so bad. He kicked into the mode of what they taught him in Vietnam—beat people up, kill people. He said he didn't have any control over it. The guy was able to stumble to his feet and try to run, and Terry caught up to him, so at that moment he took off to run it was no longer self-defense." The charge
didn't stick. He eventually sold his bike shop and, for the rest of Thompson's life, his hobbies and whatever he did to make a living seemed to mingle in ways that were sometimes ill-defined. For a while he raced drag boats, and is said to have set a world record in his boat Master Blaster by going from zero to 158 miles per hour on a quarter-mile
course in an open cockpit. "Like riding on the end of a pencil, sitting on the hood ornament of your car as it accelerates from zero to 158 miles an hour," says Marshall. "Fast motorcycles. Fast boats. Fast airplanes. He liked speed." (Nearly everything. He and his wife liked to
drive a decommissioned fireman's truck around town until one night he wrecked it.) Thompson flew regularly for a local millionaire, including a vintage World War II-era Stearman biplane, and also kept some of his own planes on the Kopchak Road property—he had the electric company move the power lines so that he could take off and land there.
he once landed an ultralight on the county fairgrounds. Bo Keck, an officer who was there, told him he couldn't pull such a stunt. "Well," Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorted, "find someone to file a complaint on me." Thompson retorte
had these wild animals. He was the type of person, you weren't real sure what he would do. I think that was a lot of it. Some people just said, 'Oh, that's T.' "His friends, and there do seem to be many of them, talk of Thompson with a deep devotion, and testify at length to his goodness, generosity, and freeness of spirit, though they concede that he
you when I was in Vietnam in a foxhole, people shooting at me, if you're trying to protect me? Where were you then?Patrolman: I don't know—probably seventy-five._Thompson: _You might as well keep
writing, because when I leave here I'm not fastening my seat belt. Spires is one of the best-known guitar teachers in this part of the country and was Thompson's teacher in his other great passion of these years
the house another buddy would hold an M16 out, protecting him, and then when he came out he would hold the M16, protecting him buddy. His friend got killed and I guess they're thinking, 'That could be me tomorrow.' "Informant: You're crazy, Thompson: That's what they all say. You know, I'm crazy, but I live in the big house on the hill with the
white tiger—the same one, presumably, that was with him at the end. And of the time when he and Marian—she seems to have been a full and enthusiastic participant in many of these adventures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's fiftieth birthday party, held in their friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet, walls, furnitures—turned up with a baby bear at a friend's newly decorated basement where everything—carpet is newly decorated basement where everything—carpet is newly decorated basement where everything are not a friend's newly decorated basement where the first of the first 
—was white, and seemed guite unperturbed by the upset caused when the bear did what bears tend to do on the nearest white rug. He seems to have lived as though there weren't a rule invented that didn't deserve a little bending. Without a USDA license, he wasn't allowed to supply animals for photo shoots and commercial events, though he
for instance—and say that he took animals on two different occasions to a Bloomberg corporate summer picnic in New York. Thompson also used to insist that he never sold exotic animals, but many in the animal world are scornful at this suggestion. "I was at an auction and he had a tiger that had ringworm and he had a baby monkey," says Nancy
adapt as the looser times of his youth tightened up, or whether his luck just ran out. Friends say that Thompson loved having something that nobody else had, and he industriously accumulated objects that might fit the bill. "He always bragged," says Marshall, "that when he sold his business he had 138 motorcycles, 138 cars, and 138 guns." It was the
guns that eventually landed him in real trouble. When the ATF raided his home in 2008, they took away 133 firearms and 36 rounds of ammunition. In the end, as his friends point out, Thompson was only convicted for ownership of a gun without a serial number (he said it was too old to have one) and the possession of a single machine gun. "My
because he and his wife couldn't afford further legal fees. It was this ATF raid that also forced real scrutiny for the first time on his exotic animals. Thompson would speak of his grand plans for what he liked to call T's Wild Kingdom: a large octagonal building, a pond for the bears. But for now most of the animals were kept in connected rows of cages
along the driveway leading to his house, and to feed them he would often illegally collect roadkill deer. If there is a line that divides the avid collector from the hoarder, at some point Thompson seems to have crossed it. "He would never sell anything," says Marshall. "If he liked it, he kept it. And none of it was taken care of. It just broke my heart. He'd
had an ego that you wouldn't believe," says Stilwell. "You couldn't buy nothing off of him. He would rather say he owned it. Sitting up there, rusting away, is a brand-new '34 Ford steel body." Toward the end, according to Cindy Huntsman, he seemed to treat his collection of animals in the same way. "He was tops in everything he did. You know, Terry
always had to be number one—that was Terry," she says. "For Terry, it started out as a love. In the later years it became a hoarder of the animals. He would have no sense of 'Okay, this is too many.' It was all about Terry after that. I asked, 'Why, Terry? Why do you
need so many?' 'Because I can. Because I can. Because I can. Terry was Terry. He had a heart of gold. He just couldn't keep his brain on the right track."Thompson went to the Federal Correctional Institution in Morgantown, West Virginia, on November 17, 2010. "I asked him what he was going to do when they turned the key on him," says Spires. "He hesitated."
Usually he never hesitated. And he said, 'Well, I got through Vietnam...' "When John Moore told the police about a letter accusing Marian Thompson had received some fresh, devastating news about his marriage. Whatever the exact truth, it
wasn't that simple, though different people suggest different time frames. "They had split before he actually went to prison," says Huntsman. "He had accused her of turning him in for the guns. How could you blame a woman you have spent forty years of your life with for that, if you were sane? He was just going off the deep end. Terry became so
verbally abusive to Marian. He didn't trust anybody after that. He didn't trust anybody after that. He didn't trust anybody after that one morning he found a note from Marian in his mailbox, with a stamped addressed envelope, asking if he would write to Terry in prison. And sometime in this
period, Marian told Sam Kopchak that Terry was giving guitar lessons behind bars. But if afterward Thompson would try to present his year of incarceration with the same old bravado, telling people that he was voted "Most Interesting Person in prison," the events in his marriage clearly had taken a toll. "He said, you stand in line for two hours to get
to the phone," remembers Stilwell, "and then you call home and there's no answer. Day after day. Week after week. Month after month. You finally just stop. "In August, Thompson was moved to a halfway house in Columbus. He was released, forty pounds lighter than a year before, on the day of September 30. Perhaps it was the first of many telltale
signs that Thompson, man of so many friends, didn't call anyone. Instead, he walked over to Walmart, bought a Schwinn cruiser bicycle and rode nearly fifty miles through the rainy night along the old Route 40 until he reached his home. [Talking about the property on which he lived and died] It's the high ground. It's what the Indians wanted.—Terry
Thompson, secretly recorded in his home by a government informant, May 2008. Jim Stilwell only found out that Thompson was back by accident when he drove up to the house in early October, expecting Marian to be there. She wasn't, but Terry was. "He was pretty dejected. He was pretty distraught." A lot of things seemed to be missing from the
property and it was a mess: "The weeds were up over the cages—he couldn't even get in his house when he got home." Thompson seemed to need help, so Stilwell took up his Echo Weed Eater, and his lopper for the thicker growths, and his portable air compressor to pump up the flat tires of Thompson's Dually truck. Thompson did speak to other
friends in those days. "He was a broken individual," says Phil Cress. "Very depressed. It took his heart. The government stole his heart. How he was treated. What did he ever do to his country?" His probation officer also visited, and Thompson told him how distraught he was at the prospect of being hooked up for a year's electronic home
confinement. Three days before Thompson died, Chuck Spires, the guitar instructor, spoke with him for about twenty minutes. He told Spires that he was broke, that all he had was sixty horses, but Spires reassured him that he'd made money before and he could make money again. When Thompson said that as soon as he had some in his pocket he'd
be back for more guitar lessons, Spires told him not to worry about that. On one of his last visits, Stilwell walked around the animal cages with Thompson. The cats looked healthy enough, apart from one who had ribs showing, and they were rubbing their heads against the fences. "That means they're happy," Stilwell says. But Thompson explained how
upset he was that he used to be able to go around his own private zoo and call his animals by name but could no longer do so. "When he came back, they had been changed around in the cages. He didn't know who was who." As they passed by the lion cages Thompson talked about the split. "He threw up his arms," says Stilwell, "and said, 'She can just
have it all.' And that's when he then said, 'I'm gonna die.' ""Terry, are you sick?" asked Stilwell. "You got cancer or something?""No," he replied. "But you'll know when I go."[From a court deposition Thompson gave while incarcerated on March 28, 2011] Okay. Where do you plan to live when you are released...?At my house. Okay. And you've not
spoken to your wife since her deposition [five weeks earlier]?No. Now, I may have talked to her a couple times on the phone. We didn't talk about the deposition, she told me that you weren't going to be living together when you got out?No. I don't
know that.Okay. You've had no conversation with her about that at all?No.Naturally, they try to make sense of it."He felt betrayed by his family. And the straw that broke the camel's back was, when he went to jail, he came back and his wife had abandoned him. This
was his high school sweetheart. And it just broke his heart—this is what I think. I think it was the only way he felt that he could really punish Marian was to take something that she loved, too. Because she loved the animals as much as he did. They'd never had kids. So these animals were like her children. In the bottom of my heart, I think Terry was
thumbing his nose at everybody, and he wanted to destroy that which Marian loved the most. I don't know how else to explain it." "I actually think that he expected this when he got home and kind of planned it," says Stilwell. "That's what happens when they send a guy to prison that don't deserve to go there. "Since Thompson died, Chuck Spires has
been told by two people that Thompson had told them the same thing, and that he was going to put himself and Zanesville, Ohio, on the map," Stilwell says. "And he did it. I think he would say,
'That's just what I expect.' "After it happened, one thing everyone wanted to understand was how a man who had loved animals enough to have gathered so many grand creatures could then have condemned them to what he had to know was certain death. Their assumption was that he had been thinking about the animals, and they couldn't work out
his train of thought. Maybe there's a letter or a note that explains it all. Maybe Marian understands. But I lean toward another theory—that in the end the animals were just what they've usually been in human history: incidental collateral damage. The sentences that go round my brain are ones that were said to me by one of the animal owners I spoke
to, Nancy Wider. "My father didn't like animals," she told me. "And he always used to say, 'I don't like animals but I would never hurt one. The animal lovers are the ones that hurt them.' "But for those who'd prefer a Rosebud moment, here's one more story from forty years earlier, from the time when an Ohio youth with beautiful blue eyes found
himself forsaken and lost, deep in the kind of darkness and damage that some never completely escape. There are all kinds of ways that tragedy and fate can reach across decades to taunt us and trap us. "When he was in Vietnam," says Mike Marshall, "he told me that he was befriended by a little monkey. He lived in a hardback tent—you know, a
wood frame and a wood floor—and apparently a monkey kinda befriended him. And it planted the seed of caring for wild animals for the rest of his life. He took care of that monkey most of the time he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over there. It kept him sane while he was over the was over
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