

The Lions

by Pam J. Hecht

It was raining and there wasn't much time left. The place closed at five and it was already almost three.

“Awww, do we hafta?” the boy groaned, as he trudged out the motel door after his father.

“Yeah, kid, we hafta.”

Their suitcases bounced on the gravel as they wheeled them to the car. The electric blue South Florida sky had faded to light gray, and a long thunder rumbled. The hot, sticky air was cooling down in the breeze.

Alan was in town for a couple of client meetings, dragging along Jeremy, his sixteen-year-old. Not wanting to leave the sullen teenager at home alone, he'd promised him the use of his iPad to watch movies and all the junk food he wanted.

It was their last day. His meeting over that morning, Alan swung by the motel to pick up the boy, whose eyes he imagined had flickered open when he mentioned visiting Lion Country Safari, a kind of drive-thru zoo. When Jeremy was in second grade, the three of them had gone there. Alan was still married then. They'd gaped at a gigantic ostrich towering over the car, laughing and screaming as it pecked at their windshield. He hoped that going there again would bring the kid to life, cheer him up a little.

Jeremy had barely grunted all weekend. Well, except for telling Alan that he wanted to kill his mother. Stab her with his pocketknife, to be exact. They'd sat on the beach under a rental umbrella. Alan was half-reading a book while Jeremy, his knobby white legs caked in sand, was poking at a hole into which a crab had poked its head out for a split second before retreating back inside. Alan tried to keep his face neutral while Jeremy talked, willing his eyebrows not to jump up in alarm. He could feel his heart palpitating in his chest a little, as Jeremy angrily stabbed into the sand with the branch he held in his fist.

At least Jeremy had opened up to him in some way. He had read somewhere that it was normal for teenage sons to be particularly distant, even hostile at times, to their mothers. In any case, Alan could understand why he would feel that way, with a mother like that. He pictured her face—a perfect, smooth oval with long, innocent eyelashes and a pink-lipsticked mouth—and grimaced inwardly in disgust, knowing how she simmered under the surface with anger and discontent.

He made a mental note to book another appointment for Jeremy with the psychologist when they returned home. The kid might protest, but he would make him go.

As they got into the car, he noticed a patch of red hibiscus flowers growing haphazardly along the fence behind the motel parking lot. It seemed as if they'd taken root there of their own accord, which made him feel hopeful somehow.

“Wonder if we'll get attacked by another ostrich, remember?” he said to Jeremy, who was fiddling with his ear buds. Alan feared that his words sounded forced, too high pitched, overly exuberant. Damn. A misstep. Jeremy might call him on it, say he's talking to him like he's a toddler, fume. He cleared his throat loudly and shifted the car to reverse.

Jeremy stared straight ahead. “Kinda, maybe. That was cool.”

Alan smiled to himself, relieved.

They drove down the highway for twenty silent minutes, past a sea of identical tract houses with orange tile roofs and long stretches of dingy warehouses and strip shopping centers. Then they turned off onto a peaceful road in West Palm Beach, with sugarcane fields on either side and a line of palm trees standing sentinel on the narrow, grassy median. The GPS said two more miles to go.

“I've got money to pay if you want,” Jeremy mumbled, looking down at his cell phone.

Alan made a decent living as an accountant, but his ex-wife practically put him on the streets with all of her demands. Ironic, and just plain mean, given that her father was a multi-millionaire and gave her whatever she wanted. She certainly didn't need any of Alan's money. But he was trapped, at the mercy of his ex-wife and a court system bowing to mothers.

“Don't worry, I've got it.”

“Whatever.” Jeremy leaned forward slightly to shove his cell phone into a back pocket then flicked at the curtain of brown hair that had fallen in front of his right eye.

The sign at the turn-in read *Welcome to Lion Country Safari: America's First Cageless Zoo!* Just past the entrance, Alan paid the ticket fee at the drive-through booth. It had stopped raining, and the sun was peeking out from under the clouds. Jeremy was thirsty.

“I'm sure there'll be somewhere to get a drink. Look, let's get off here. I see something.”

They pulled into a small parking area with a concession stand. Jeremy trudged over to get a soda, and Alan ducked into the bathroom. When he came out, he saw Jeremy leaning against the side of the car with his drink.

“Did you get me one?” Alan asked, guessing that he didn't.

“Naw.”

“Well, can I have a sip?”

“Maybe.” Jeremy turned up one corner of his mouth in a half-smile (a small victory, Alan thought) and passed him the cup.

Alan took a swig of the icy soda and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “It’s safari time.”

They slid into the car and drove onward.

He didn’t get to see the kid much these days. Jeremy preferred staying with his mother, where he had round-the-clock access to the electronic gadgets his grandfather regularly bought him, and free rein over the house while his mother was out. Also, he was large enough now to defend himself against his mother’s rage. She hadn’t touched him since that time he was a scrawny twelve-year-old, when she shoved him against the bathroom vanity, giving him a large, purplish welt across the top of his thigh.

When he did visit Alan in the small, two-bedroom cottage his father could just afford, he mostly kept to himself in his room, while Alan worked long hours on the computer or seeing clients.

“Man’s gotta work,” Alan grumbled from time to time. His marriage, and his life, hadn’t turned out the way he’d wanted. And it made him angry that Jeremy’s mother and grandparents still regularly tried to turn Jeremy against him. He was a loser, a cheapskate. He didn’t make enough money. He didn’t know how to take proper care of Jeremy.

He wished he could start over, do everything again differently.

Last year, the cutting had started. Alan had thought it odd that Jeremy wore his one raggedy pair of jeans every day he saw him that summer, in the heat. Particularly since he’d always been a kid who wore shorts even when it was snowing.

Alan’s ex-wife had texted him back, “It’s what kids are wearing. Old pairs of jeans with holes in the knees. Don’t you know anything? Keep up.”

Then one day, Jeremy had shown him the jagged scars on his legs. “Will they go away, do you think,” he’d asked Alan, looking down. He’d promised he was done doing it, but Alan had made him go back to the psychologist to talk about it. They didn’t tell his mother; Jeremy had insisted. The boy clammed up again after that, but at least he’d stopped that cutting business. Still, Alan reminded himself to ask Jeremy about it every so often just to be certain, even put it on his calendar.

Alan popped in the audio tour CD the man at the ticket booth had cheerlessly passed him through the window. The sounds of bongo drums and parrot caws filled the car and a booming voice announced, “Welcome to Florida’s only drive-through safari park adventure. Now you are part of the herd.”

They came to the tortoises first. “Pass,” Jeremy said.

“What do you have against colossally huge tortoises?” Alan said. “You could ride one of those.” Jeremy shrugged, slumped in his seat.

They were silent as the cheerful voice on the CD droned on about the pelicans, alpacas, and impalas. They drove past a hilly green field with a couple of small ponds. The ostriches were meandering a few yards away. Alan pulled over to one side and stopped the car. He noticed Jeremy sitting up straighter in his seat. He clicked off the CD, and they waited.

Finally, one of them bobbed toward the car, wings spread in an arc of black and white-tipped feathers. It locked eyes with Alan, impudently, Alan thought, and plunged its head down to peck at the ground.

Jeremy furiously rolled down the window and called out, “Hey, loser, come here...”

“Shut that, Jeremy. Now.”

When Jeremy didn’t move, he reached across the car and grabbed the window handle.

“I can close it,” Jeremy grumbled.

“You can’t do that, it’s dangerous.” Alan knew that an ostrich, with its super-strong legs and sharp claws, could kill a person. Maybe even take down a lion.

“All right, all right.”

He was about to tell Jeremy about another place like this in Los Angeles, where a kid stuck his head out a window, and a tiger dragged him out of the car. The child was paralyzed permanently, and the place had to shut down. He’d tell him later, he decided, after they left.

“Just go, Dad. They’re obviously not coming anywhere near us.”

“Wait, son, give it time.”

They waited, watching a group of ostriches gather in one spot, practically bumping heads, and then disperse in different directions. None of them approached the car.

“Guess they’re not feeling friendly today,” Alan said.

“Whatever.”

They were rolling through the zebra habitat when suddenly one of the zebras, apparently spooked, ran in front of their car. Alan slammed his foot on the brakes, just missing it.

They sat still for a few moments, dazed. The zebra stopped at a nearby pond and dipped its head down

into the water to drink.

“I bet if we ran him over, the owners or whatever wouldn’t even care,” Jeremy said. “Probably just be annoyed they’d have to close early and not make as much money that day.”

“Maybe. I hope not. But you might be right.” At least the boy said something, Alan thought. But his outlook was so gloomy, his voice so deadpan. For a second, Alan wanted to grab Jeremy’s shoulders and shake him. Shake something out of him, he didn’t care what. It was hard to believe that this was the sunny, wide-eyed little boy he once knew. He reached down for the pack of gum he’d thrown into the cup holder. “Wanna piece?” he asked. Jeremy shook his head.

Gliding past the giraffes and rhinoceroses, they came to the lions last. A large guard truck loomed to their right, a uniformed man sitting inside, hands gripping the steering wheel. Alan knew that he was there for their protection, for a worst-case scenario. But still, it was a bit jolting. It felt like they were entering a place where maybe they shouldn’t be. The irony of the whimsical black and white zebra-striped vehicle struck him, and Alan wondered whether lions in the wild ate zebras. They probably did. Didn’t lions eat any animals weaker or smaller than them?

They drove through an electronic steel gate into the lion area, which was enclosed by a tall barbed-wire fence. They gazed at the lions, who were lying in separate concrete pavilions with the open sides facing their car. Even though there was another fence separating the lions from the road, Alan marveled at how close they were. Two of the lions looked up lazily, heads barely raised, as they slowly drove by.

The CD’s narrator droned on, in an almost ominous tone, “...The roar of these noble creatures can be heard up to five miles away...it is the responsibility of the males to guard their territory and protect the pride...running as fast as a car on the highway, fifty miles per hour, but in time they get tired...”

“I wonder if they want to get out of here,” Jeremy said. “I bet they do.”

“Well, some of them might be content where they are. They’re probably used to it. But who knows?”

“They’re free, but they’re not free. If it were me, I’d want outta there.”

Alan looked at his son, noticing a fuzzy patch of hair just forming on his chin. He was suddenly aware of how fiercely independent the boy was and yet how vulnerable. And young. So young. He wanted to reach out and pat his shoulder.

“Yeah, me too.”

They rounded a corner and saw a large lion with its back to them loping across a grassy hill, tail swinging back and forth. When they got closer, the lion turned his head toward them for a second or two, then swung it back and kept going.

Alan had a crazy notion to throw caution to the wind, to break the rules, to open his window. To scream at the lion until it noticed. Until it turned around and came back toward them so that he and Jeremy could watch it coming closer and closer. And just as it reached the fence between them, pawing at the rusted metal with a growl, he would step hard on the gas and they would drive away.

Pam J. Hecht is a writer and instructor, mother of two young adult children, and a syndicated parenting humor columnist. Born and raised in Miami, Florida, she now lives in East Asheville. “The Lions” is her third published short story.

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The Great Smokies Review is an online publication of The Great Smokies Writing Program, a joint effort of the UNC Asheville departments of Literature and Language, Creative Writing, and the Asheville Graduate Center.

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