

## Rattle Some Cages

In the ensuing days, once the powers-that-be would have been afforded sufficient opportunity to examine CCTV and witness testimony, and once blame would have been divvied up and assigned in an actuarial sense, the departed zookeeper would be determined most at fault. The facility itself would shoulder some blame, of course, but its good name would remain intact once things had blown over. Retrieval of the zookeeper's phone from the feeding enclosure, and the most recent text conversation on it, would paint a damning portrait – that he'd been more concerned with his plans for his girlfriend that evening than he had been with proper safety protocols.

Likely, that is why he had left the outermost antechamber door open – to ensure the signal fueling his explicit conversation would not be interrupted. Almost certainly, that is why he had the phone in his hand while placing the tiger's food into the primary feeding chamber, and why he made the flabbergasting decision to try and retrieve the phone from that primary chamber once it fell in.

We can't *prove* the absence of a larger conspiracy – not categorically – but barring the fantastical, this is not a conclusion which strains credulity: that one man could be so distracted by his pursuit of sexual conquest, he disregarded the immediate danger presented by his surroundings, and unintentionally wrought havoc upon himself and others. It's been a common enough story in our species' history.

Still, one can only imagine the gentleman's horror as the situation for which he would later be found responsible revealed itself to him in full.

The majority of the class was assembled before the baboon exhibit. A few stragglers lingered at the prior display, but most of the children were quickly enamored of the primates. Several boys raised their arms above their heads and began to hoot and shriek in the direction of the monkeys.

*Buffoons*, another, smaller boy thought to himself.

“Children!” the teacher called to the gesturing boys. “Those are chimpanzee sounds. Chimpanzees are apes, and baboons are monkeys. They’re not the same.”

*More importantly*, the little boy understood, *chimpanzees often hunt baboons*.

Sure enough, the monkeys did not react favorably to the children’s taunting. Several lesser males exposed their genitals to the class, which only encouraged the rowdiest boys to redouble their own exaggerated displays. *Buffoons mocking baboons who are mocking them*. This in turn triggered the alpha male. Having seen enough, he ran toward the mesh enclosure and hurled a fistful of feces at the offending kids.

The volunteer chaperone shrieked like a banshee, but to her credit, she was Johnny-on-the-spot with wet wipes, sanitizer, and spare t-shirts. Almost before the teacher fully grasped what had happened, the boys had all been cleaned and refitted. Still the chaperone insisted on taking them to the first aid tent for further evaluation. The teacher politely voiced her concern with regard to separating the students, and the chaperone quickly escalated the conversation to shouting tones.

With both the teacher and chaperone distracted, the smaller boy quietly walked backward until he was at the very periphery of the group, and when it was clear no eyes had followed him, he turned on his heel and ran around the corner. *Who wants to get splashed by dolphins*, he thought to himself, *when it’s feeding time at the big cat exhibits?*

“I’m tellin’ you, I’ve never seen anything like it! Tens of thousands of people all camping in close quarters, non-stop partying, and nobody accepts legal tender! You have to bring stuff you can trade if you want to get your hands on any of the food or crafts they have ‘for sale’.” The security guard made quotation marks with his fingers as he said the last two words.

“Yeah? Imagine that...” The second security guard was making little effort to appear interested.

“Yessiree – they might not have it *all* figured out, but those hippies have definitely got a pretty good grasp on the whole ‘off the grid’ thing.” Again, he punctuated his speech with finger quotes.

“Fuckin’ hippies ain’t got shit figured out. For that matter, young man, neither do you.” The second, senior-most security guard flipped his newspaper to the next page.

The first security guard began to respond, when they were both startled by the sudden alarm. He looked at the second guard for a moment, and then they both turned to the CCTV display. At first blush, nothing was obviously awry. But then they noticed a scene neither of them had ever observed before: the door to the tiger feeding enclosure wide open, and a series of dark streaks along the ground in front of it. Down the line, another monitor showed the enormous feline dragging the remnants of the zookeeper away. And two monitors further down, they saw the most alarming thing of all: a lone child, unwittingly headed directly toward the uncaged beast.

The smaller boy stopped briefly before the Galapagos tortoise exhibit. He hadn’t planned on visiting this particular enclosure, but as he was passing by, he saw one tortoise mounted behind the other. As the bottom tortoise walked slowly toward a shaded corner, the top tortoise walked

behind, his rear feet in lockstep with the female's. His fore feet rested at the crest of her shell. Every few steps, the male tortoise would thrust, and as he did so his neck stretched out almost a foot, while at the same time he uttered a gravelly, baritone groan not unlike what the smaller boy had once heard coming from his grandparents' bedroom.

*Amazing!* He thought to himself. *One of the rarest animals on Earth, and I'm watching the species stake its claim to another generation!*

He was glad none of his classmates were present. None of those morons would have appreciated the sanctity of what he was now witnessing. They'd only make poorly articulated jokes with ill-timed punchlines, and then their antics would inevitably devolve into something similar as to what had been on display at the baboon exhibit.

He did, however, wish his grandparents could see this. Likely they'd blush a little, especially given how much the male tortoise sounded like his grandfather in the same act, but after all it was they who had instilled in him his appreciation for the natural world. They surely would have shown an appropriate degree of reverence.

But even his sense of reverence buckled when he remembered the big cats. At the direction of a large, ornately decorated overhead sign, he turned a corner toward the big cat compound - only to stumble upon the rogue tiger finishing its zookeeper hors d'oeuvre.

"Just stay perfectly still, kid," the second security guard said to him. "If you move quickly, you're going to become the focus of his attention." The tiger slouched protectively over the remainder of its meal, eyes darting between the boy and the security guard. A coarse rumble emanated from the animal's throat. It wasn't overly loud, but the boy and the security guard could both feel the ground vibrating ever so slightly beneath their soles.

“No sudden moves,” the senior security guard reiterated, “but VERY SLOWLY, I want you to get behind me, and we’re going to shuffle toward that concession stand right there. Whatever you do, do not turn away from him – his instincts are too strong to resist pouncing if he can see the back of your neck.”

“I know,” the boy said matter-of-factly.

“Okay, then. Let’s do it.”

The child slid behind the adult fairly smoothly, and they paused. The tiger sat upright, but its haunches were still on the ground. The adult took one small side step to his right, and very slowly slid his left foot commensurately. The child followed suit, and the tiger stood up. The security guard took a smaller side step, this time in sync with the child, and then they slid their left feet in unison.

The tiger took a single step forward, dipped its head slightly, and pulled back its lips. It growled perceptibly, and the humans froze. Emboldened, the tiger took a full stride in their direction, and then crouched for real – fully ready to spring into attack.

Gradually, gingerly, the security guard cocked the hammer on his revolver. *Just a couple more steps!*

“I’ve got a shot,” the first security guard said over the second’s walkie-talkie. The second guard nodded slightly in acknowledgement, then shook his head somewhat more discernably. *Not yet, young man.*

“Okay,” the first guard acquiesced. “The SWAT team is less than a minute out.”

The tiger’s pupils expanded, and then rapidly contracted. Its nostrils were momentarily motionless.

The second security guard said to the smaller boy, "In just a moment, I'm going to give my partner the signal. Then I'm going to tell you to go. When I tell you to, I want you to turn and run into that concession stand. I unlocked the door before I found you. When you get in there, lock the door behind you. Don't open it for anybody except me or the SWAT team."

"I understand," the child said. His voice waivered, but less than that of the adult to whom he was responding.

"Okay," the adult said to the child. Then he nodded at his partner. "Ready. Set. NOW!-"