

B'wana Mike (1967)

I was very fortunate in my senior year in high school to be friends with a classmate named Dan Sechkar, who had an in with a local celebrity, Lawrence Tetzlaff, better known across northern Ohio as Jungle Larry.

Jungle Larry was the local Frank Buck, a genuine white hunter who periodically went to Africa (or India, or Borneo, or wherever) and brought back alive terrific animals, which he put in his zoo, showed off on local television shows, and rented out to various Hollywood projects like the TV show *Daktari*. His schtick was that he never caused harm to any living thing: "I only shoot with a camera!" He was a Christian Scientist, and he was said to apply the precepts of his religion when his animals got sick, ministering to them personally instead of filling them up with pills and shots.

Everyone knew Jungle Larry. But only Dan Sechkar had the job of hiring a handful of fellows to clean up his roadside attraction at Cedar Point Amusement Park, Jungle Larry's Safari Island. And Dan chose, along with a couple of cousins and a neighbor, me.

Throughout the month of May, we all left school early and tooled out to Cedar Point in my Buick. There we raked trails, painted fences, and rearranged the furniture of the zoo in time for the Memorial Day opening. After that, we graduated from being yard workers to zoo guides. We got to wear jungle khakis and Australian cowboy hats, and we assumed jungle identities. Dan was B'wana Dan, and I was B'wana Mike. There were numerous other B'wanas, a Prester John, a divinity student from Oberlin who knew Larry since he was a kid, plus Walt, the head curator. Larry's wife was a husky blonde named Safari Jane, the fourth Safari Jane, according to Prester John, whom I quickly became friends with.

The week before Memorial Day, the animals arrived on trucks from their winter compound in Medina, Ohio. Instantly, Safari Island became a very interesting place. We had lions, tigers,

bears, crocodiles, zebras, monkeys, a baby elephant, a tapir, anacondas, pythons -- you name it. The night Ohio air was filled with the cackle and scurry of un-Ohioan things.

Finally I met Jungle Larry himself. He was a huge man, over six foot seven, and handsome in a Fred MacMurrayish way, and he obviously loved the spotlight. He extended his hand to you so you were looking up at him like a loop of a suspension bridge. His style was essentially Texan -- slow-talking, tall in the saddle, and a little far between the eyes. He thought he was sly and subtle, but if you even half-listened you could hear the tumblers clicking.

I was not supposed to take care of the animals -- I was just a high school kid. But Larry seemed to be perpetually shorthanded, so I lent a hand from the first weekend we opened to the public -- changing cages, feeding the chimps, giving short talks to passersby on the habits and peculiarities of different species.

The first crisis we experienced involved the two hamadryad baboons, Loma the female and her mate Mombasa. The two animals had been cozily together all winter, and separated from one another, they both became sexually distraught.

On Memorial Day Larry allowed the two creatures to be together, but it was a major mistake, as Loma was in estrus and Mombasa was on top of her with a busload of animated Seventh Day Adventists taking pictures of the procedure.

Larry then decided the two animals could be together, but staked ten feet apart. The decision was, as many of Jungle Larry's turned out to be, catastrophic. On the third day of frantic chain stretching, straining against the steel to touch Loma's fingertips, Mombasa freaked out, leaped as high as he could on his chain, and hung himself from the branch of the laurel tree above him. Prester John and I cut him down and bore his limp body away to the commissary.

The rest of the week, the proud and dangerous Loma was kept in a shaded traveling cage. Personnel were advised to keep away from her, that no animal in the wild had the potential for viciousness and cruelty as the hamadryad baboon. So it made the

airs on the back of my neck stand up when I was raking the grounds adjacent to her cage, to suddenly feel a tiny fist close quickly on the sleeve of my shirt.

I turned away to free my shirt from her grasp, but she had me fast. I glanced down at the cage, expecting to see a face of feral horror. But instead I saw a sad expression under two tufted eyebrows. Her look told me I had nothing to fear from her. I slowly knelt until we were on the same level. She took my hand and flipped it over, and pulled it to the bars to examine more closely, moving quickly from finger to finger, and tracing the lines on my palm like a fortune teller.

What was passing between us was curious intimacy. She carefully groomed my arm for salt and bugs, all the way past the elbow. And when she was done with that arm, I held out my other.

Loma and I had a strange summer. I spent at least fifteen minutes with her every day, and we talked, like a mother and son. The hamadryad, I discovered was the ancient wisdom icon of pharaonic Egypt. Baboons were linked to the worship of Thoth, their version of Apollo. I came to have the utmost respect for this creature, and to understand how the ancients viewed her kind as priestly in demeanor and intent.

My other zoo experience related to Jungle Larry's most famous lion, a big brute of an African lion named Prince. If you ever saw the TV program *Daktari*, you may remember Clarence the Cross-Eyed Lion. Prince wasn't Clarence, who was old but personable; Prince was Clarence's stunt lion. If you saw a lion sitting on a pickup tailgate, that was Clarence. If you saw a lion leaping up onto the tailgate, that was Prince. Prester John told me Prince was fantastic, that all Sandusky County trembled when Prince would roar from his island promontory -- it would be the high point of my zoo experience.

The problem was, Prince wasn't with the zoo when it opened. Not a day passed that Jungle Larry wasn't asked where Prince was. And he answered with an odd story: "Wal, you see, the thing is, ol' Prince is traveling. He's on tour. That's right, with the

Richthofen Circus in Germany."

It was a fair cover story, except that I knew from all the war books my stepbrother Dickie had around the house that the phrase Richthofen Circus used to refer to a German World War I aerial combat crew. Indeed, it was headed by Baron Von Richthofen, the "Red Baron" of the Snoopy cartoon. Did it make sense that an 800 pound lion was traveling with a World War I aerial combat squadron?

Prester John and I stayed up late speculating on this matter. Perhaps there was a Richthofen Circus in Germany. Maybe Jungle Larry screwed up the pronunciation of the name with the more familiar Red Baron's name.

But John didn't think so. And one night he came to my dorm room and unwrapped a napkin, and showed me a body part. It was a lion's toe -- Prince's, which John had cut off after digging him up behind the zoo commissary an hour earlier. The smell was unbelievably putrid.

I found this appalling and terrifying, but John believed we needed to go to Larry for clarification. The next night, just as Larry was finishing his stint with the lions and tigers, John and I confronted him.

"Larry, we're concerned about Prince," John began.

"Why, haven't I told you?" Larry said. "Prince is in Germany."

I was so nervous I was about to burst. "We dig him up behind the commissary!" I said.

Larry eyed us both seriously. "What did you dig up exactly?"

"An animal," John said.

"We buried some animals there, antelope and smaller things."

"No, this was big. Real big."

Larry sighed as if he knew the jog was up, and wiped the back of his neck with his hand. "OK, listen. Listen to me, boys. Just listen

a second. John, come on, John -- don't you have a lot of school bills out there where you go? And you, too, B'wana, you're going off to school too, aren't you?"

He muttered some story about how prince was accidentally killed, and they put him back there because they had too much riding on him alive.

Before we knew what we had done, we negotiated an extortion payment to keep our mouths shut about Prince. I don't remember what John got. I got an extra \$800 on my paycheck at the end of that week. The only requirement was that I would never tell anyone. But you can't make that deal with a writer.

It's funny, but I never have considered, until I remembered this story just now, what my other options might have been. Was there justice to be obtained? Should we have exposed Jungle Larry as a hypocrite?

John and I stopped being friends after a day or so -- taking the money didn't feel so good. But before we split up, we hypothesized how Prince met his end. What follows is pure speculation, but it fit with several other hints of evidence we had.

During the winter, the animals were housed in an old school building in Medina, Ohio. Prince was among them. Walt, the caretaker, came down sick in late December and had to be hospitalized. Jungle Larry, who hadn't actually taken care of anything in years, stepped in and took over for Walt.

We imagined Larry doing a bad job of animal caretaking. Prince, instead of welcoming Larry into his realm, may have attacked him. And Larry, despite all his talk about shooting only with cameras, shot Prince dead with a pistol that made a hole in Prince's face bigger than a breadbox.

It was winter, and impossible to dispose of an 800-pound corpse anywhere near the compound. So someone -- maybe a combination of Larry, Walt, and Safari Jane -- hauled the dead lion's body up to the lake, drove down the chausee road, burned charcoal behind the commissary to allow digging in the frozen

soil, and dug a shallow grave for that incredible creature.

Sounds like a Hardy Boys mystery, doesn't it? I agree, and I think that's one reason why the book I wrote about the killing never interested editors. *Animal Fame* was a compilation of dozens of stories, true and made up, mostly involving blood, animal sexual practices, and a very horrible, very diverse pile of feces we created at one end of the island. But my second and last novel effectively protected the guilty, by fictionalizing the whole story, and placing it in the 1930s instead of the 1960s. Or maybe publishers didn't like it because I wrote it bad. Who knows?

But I'll tell you something. When I went off to college the following fall, I had a little extra spending money in my checking account. And a souvenir -- a Gerber's baby food jar with a lion's toe in it, floating in alcohol. I showed it to dozens of kids, and that may explain why it turned up missing before Christmas break.

Jungle Larry went on to bigger things. He opened up an African wild animal park in Florida, so he had tourist business year-round. On a visit to my mom's house I read in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* that he died of cancer in the early 1990s and was mourned by every creature that made it to the ark for being the one white jungle guy who really cared.

Prester John and I stopped being friends shortly after our confrontation with Larry. The last time we talked, he was drunk. He told me he had no right to cut a deal with Jungle Larry. By selling Prince out he did a disservice to a wonderful animal, and to all animals who wander into our traps, and our trust. It's rare you have the proof to expose a crime, and we let Jungle Larry slip away.

But for a while I had living evidence in a baby food jar, so help me God.