



LIONS

Jason Jackson

A story with no sex and no violence needs something else and, luckily, this one has a lion. It's only one of those stone lions that some people put outside of their houses but don't let that put you off. There are, in fact, two lions in this story but the one we're interested in, at least at first, is the one sitting in the hallway of Choppy's house.

Choppy's just got up to check the post. More often than not there's nothing of interest lying on the dirty, red carpet, so sometimes he pretends that one of the other people in the house steals his post and reads it, secretly, in their room. Choppy's been moving around a lot recently and he's got very few friends, so who's going to write him a letter? Giros come once every two weeks but that's it. Still, habits help to keep you sane, so Choppy checks the post every morning when he gets up. He likes moving the envelopes around with his cold toes, reading other people's names, then filling the kettle in the kitchen before retreating back to the warmth of his bedroom. It's routine. But today the routine has been broken.

The incongruous lion sits with its back to Choppy, on guard. It's quite small, only reaching his bare knee, and he can't see its open mouth, but something in its bearing suggests a thrown-back head and a roar, even from behind. Choppy's arms are wrapped close around his body as protection against the cold, and the teapot dangles from his hand as he stands and looks at the lion. There doesn't seem to be a lot to do. Then he remembers the post. Sticking to his routine, he flicks the three envelopes around with his foot: nothing. He decides to boil the kettle, make some tea, and go back to bed. Leave the lion alone for the moment.

Later, Choppy is thinking of going out. His bedroom is at the front of the house and the sun is streaming through his window. You'd think that a man like Choppy, a man with little to drag him from his bed every morning, would dislike the sun's intrusion, but you'd be wrong: Choppy enjoys lying in bed, bathed in sunlight, thinking. It's a great way to start the day. Of course, the weather being what it is, most mornings there isn't enough sun to stream anywhere but today is sunny, today is bright, today is a nice day.

So Choppy is out of bed, drinking his fourth mug of tea, and getting dressed. Now, for some people, this would involve thought, choice, decisions. But Choppy owns only two pairs of black jeans. He has three t-shirts, a few pairs of identical socks and boxer shorts, one pair of Doctor Martin boots and an old leather jacket. Not much choice there, then. Obviously, the three t-shirts can lead to some amount of thought, as they're not all the same: one is a Clash t-shirt, the front cover of London Calling; one is plain white, but with a cigarette burn near the bottom; and one is a Bob Marley t-shirt, with Bob playing football on it. Choppy doesn't even need to think this

morning: he's in a Clash mood.

Downstairs, the lion is still there. Choppy heard the door go earlier, so either Janine or Gregg must've seen the lion but no one's done anything about it. He crouches down at its side, reaches out and pats it on the head. It's surprisingly cold to the touch and it feels solid.

'All right, Choppy. Is that a lion?' Janine is hurrying down the stairs, wearing her work clothes. Choppy preferred her when she used to wear long t-shirts and black woolly tights all day, lounging around the house, chain smoking and singing in her room, but since she got a job things have changed. Even on Saturdays she dresses in a suit.

'Hi, Janine. Is this your lion?'

She reaches the bottom of the stairs and bends down next to Choppy. As she strokes the lion, he smells her perfume. The patchouli oil was better, but this is still quite nice.

'I've never seen it before.' She stops stroking the lion and looks at its face, stares into its eyes. 'Fucking ugly, innit?' She looks back at Choppy and grins her grin. 'See ya later.' And she's up and out the door, into the sunshine. Janine has recently got herself a life, joined the real world and woken up to herself.

And now Choppy, too, is up and out. As he closes the door, he looks at the lion; it seems lonely. It also looks familiar. It stares at him and roars silently, but Choppy isn't frightened, just a little confused. He shuts the door quickly.

It's beautiful outside; all one side of the street is glowing in the sunlight. You might think that this isn't really the kind of street where you'd expect to find Choppy. The houses are painted in unobtrusive but classy reds and blues, the gardens trimmed with scissors every Sunday, and there are large cars parked everywhere.

Even Choppy had been surprised when he turned up to see the room; he thought he'd got the wrong address. Janine had answered the door and told him it was her parents' house, well, one of her parents' houses. The other people in the street had been angry when her parents had bought it and then rented it out but Janine's mum and dad had told the Neighbourhood Watch woman to fuck off: it was their house and they'd do what they liked. So Janine was in charge, Janine put the ad in the paper, Janine chose who lived there, and Janine said Choppy could move in. He'd only been in the city two days, and had slept rough the first night, so it had been luck on an unexpected scale to find such a lovely place to stay. He'd gone to sort out the housing benefit straight away.

Look at Choppy, walking down the street where he lives! He's smiling. On Saturdays, Choppy enjoys walking into the city to look at the people. He often buys a can of lager and some cigarettes, then sits in the park. Sometimes he likes to do this on his own, but today he feels like company. He'd like to talk about the lion. It's quite a strange little story and Michelle would like it. Michelle would think it was funny. And anyway, Michele might have some grass. It'd be nice to tell Michele about the lion, drink some tea and have a smoke.

You might think that Choppy is going to have sex with Michelle now, but there's no sex in this story, just Janine, Choppy and the lion (and a couple of people we haven't met yet). No, Michelle's a friend, a drug-buddy but not a fuck-buddy, so they're just going to have pleasant afternoon together. But not yet, because before Choppy gets to Michelle's house, in fact before he gets to the end of his street, he's going to realise why the lion looked familiar.

The house on the opposite corner of the street has a lion outside

the door. It's roaring silently and looks lonely. Choppy isn't really sure what impression having lions outside your door is supposed to give, but he can see that having just the one lion doesn't really do it.

Now, you might think that Choppy isn't really someone you'd like if you met him: He doesn't have a job, he dresses badly and he likes the Clash (who were quite angry) and Bob Marley (who was high a lot). Choppy smokes grass (mostly Michelle's) and he's certainly quite lazy. He finds things difficult sometimes, he has what some people he used to work with called an attitude, and he thinks too much. But why not judge Choppy on his actions? Why not judge him on what you see? Why not judge him on the fact that he turns around and walks back to his house to get the lion?

It's still there, roaring silently in greeting, when he opens the door. Choppy smiles and tries to lift it but it's very heavy. He's never been to a gym, and he gets very little exercise, so this is going to be difficult.

Look at Choppy, struggling to lift the lion! He cradles it in his arms, almost falling as he slams the door shut behind him with his foot. Crouching under the lion's weight as he shuffles down the street, he's fully aware that this isn't how he expected his Saturday to pan out, but he's going along with it.

The other side of the street is in shadow, so Choppy walks for as long as he can in the sun until, eventually, he's opposite the house with the lion outside. He crosses the road, sweating and breathing hard, his face screwed up and his eyes squinting. He is, if you listen carefully, swearing quietly. Luckily, the gate at the bottom of the garden swings open when he kicks it, and he staggers up the path.

Look at the upstairs window! Can you see the hand moving the

closed curtains a little? Can you see, through the small gap, part of a face, part of a mouth, an eye? Choppy can't. He's putting all of his energy into these last few steps, directing all of his attention towards reuniting the lions outside the front door. He doesn't exactly drop the lion but he doesn't exactly place it either; there's a dull thud and quite a large wobble as it meets the ground but, when Choppy steps back, both lions look happier to be together.

Let's leave things there for the moment. Choppy's going to head off to Michele's, smoke some grass and tell her about the lion. Michele's going to laugh and make tea. Then, after a smoke, they'll walk into town to watch the people and drink lager. Later, Choppy will go home and read a fantasy novel which Michelle's going to lend him. It's Saturday and Choppy is quite at peace, so let's leave him alone to enjoy his day in the city, because it's the last full day he'll spend here.

Sunday, as is often the case, brings confusion. There's no post on Sunday, of course, but Choppy is still downstairs in the hall, teapot dangling from his hand, looking, once again, at the lion. As opposed to Saturday's surprise, today he just feels a little sad. Firstly, because the lion looks so pathetic, lying on its side with an ear missing, but also because all his efforts of yesterday have been wasted. But the what's really making him sad is that Sunday is going to be difficult. He's going to have to make difficult decisions. But the first decision is easy: boil the kettle and have a cup of tea.

Look at Choppy filling the kettle, thinking about yesterday! If you could listen to his thoughts (and you can) you'd realise he's trying to work out what to do. He knows how the lion ended up in the hall. Janine said it was nothing to do with her and, anyway, she's small, and not strong. No, Gregg must've brought it home. This is Choppy's

conclusion, and this is why Sunday is going to be difficult. By the time the kettle boils he knows that before he drinks his tea there's going to be a confrontation. He's going to knock on Gregg's bedroom door. You see? Choppy might be lazy and unemployed, he might smoke soft drugs and drink during the day, but he knows what's right.

Gregg lives in the converted living room downstairs and Choppy's bumped into him in the kitchen a few times. He knows that they'll never be friends. Gregg has a job, a car, a girlfriend and a large collection of rugby shirts, and Choppy isn't jealous of any of this, he just knows that he and Gregg are different. Also, Gregg laughs loudly and plays U2 CDs when he's drunk. Choppy doesn't mind not being friends with people but, just like the rest of us, Choppy knows that if you aren't friends with people, you don't knock on their bedroom doors on Sunday mornings and ask them to take back the stone lion they stole the night before.

So, no pause, no second thoughts, just knock, knock, knock, quite hard. Choppy is standing next to the lion, which is still roaring silently, despite its prone position and broken ear. Soon, Choppy hears shuffling and grunting.

'Alrighchops?' says Gregg. He's naked and Choppy can't help but look at his penis. It is, of course, huge. Choppy looks back at Gregg's hairy face.

'Gregg. I took the lion back yesterday, but it's here again.'

Gregg makes a noise like a snuffling pig. 'Ssmffhmyeah.' It takes Choppy a little time to realise Gregg is laughing.

'It's got a broken ear now.' Choppy's trying hard to smile. He doesn't want to argue. He just wants Gregg to take the lion back.

'Fuckinstupitlione?' says Gregg, and he makes the pig-noise

again.

‘Do you want to help me take it back?’ Look at Choppy! He’s not arguing, he’s not shouting, he’s not staring at Gregg’s huge penis. He’s just trying to be nice.

‘Bollockschopsfuckinsundyinnit?’ says Gregg, and closes the door.

Choppy stands outside Gregg’s bedroom door for a few seconds. He’s glad Gregg closed it, really: he doesn’t like seeing other men’s penises, especially huge ones. He turns round and crouches next to the lion. He’s about to say something to it, something like Well, boy, guess I’ll just have to carry you myself, but he doesn’t. He realises, just in time, that this isn’t a film.

So, door open, lion in arms, into the sunshine. Look at Choppy! He’s still wearing his Clash t-shirt, and he’s still in a Clash kind of mood. You might think that someone in a Clash mood wouldn’t carry a heavy, broken, stone lion down the street in the sun just to be helpful, but perhaps you don’t really like The Clash. They were, of course, a loud and angry punk band, but at least three of them were also intelligent, creative and thoughtful people, especially Joe Strummer who always sounded really nice, if a little drunk, when he was interviewed on the TV.

The heat makes carrying the lion just as difficult as before, but Choppy’s done this once already and he knows he can do it again. When he gets to the house where the lion should be he’s sweating and swearing so much that, until he kicks the gate open, he doesn’t notice the woman.

‘Brought it back again, have you?’ The woman’s voice is quiet, calm. ‘Saw you yesterday, doing the same thing. Wish you’d make

your mind up whether you want it or not.’ Despite the fact that this side of the street is in shade, she’s sitting on the front step, wearing a dressing gown, a cigarette dying between her chipped pink fingernails.

‘Shall I put it next to the other one?’ asks Choppy. The woman looks at him and he realises this is a polite but stupid question. He shuffles the six steps towards the woman and places the lion on the path, to the left of the door. The woman drags the life from the cigarette and, without taking her eyes off Choppy, grinds out the butt on the broken ear of the slightly wobbly lion. She stands up and smooths her dressing gown against her legs.

‘I don’t want the fucking lion, son,’ she says. ‘Next time you get pissed and steal it, get a friend to take the other one. And don’t bring them back.’ For the first time since Choppy kicked the gate open, the woman drops her gaze. She turns quickly to go inside.

‘Wait,’ says Choppy, ‘I didn’t take it.’ The woman stops. ‘I found it in our hallway yesterday, then again today. I thought you’d want it back.’ Choppy has always thought that the truth is important, and the woman needs to know he didn’t take the lion, even if this whole thing is becoming a little more complicated than he’d imagined it would be.

‘Listen, son,’ says the woman, as she turns and fixes her grey eyes on his. ‘My husband bought those lions about three weeks ago. Thrilled, he was. Thought they were wonderful. Me, I thought they were pathetic, but you don’t argue, do you?’ Her voice is louder now. ‘He was going to dig two holes in the path just here,’ she says, pointing down but still with her eyes on Choppy. ‘So he could cement them in. Stop some wanker nicking them, he said.’ She pats the pocket of her dressing gown.

‘Do you want a cigarette?’ Choppy asks, but she doesn’t hear.

‘The day after he bought them, he died. Heart attack.’ She looks down at the lion, where the cigarette butt sticks up, twisted and creased, from its broken ear. ‘We buried him. He’s gone.’ She looks back at Choppy. ‘So do me a favour and get rid of the fucking things, will you? I can’t bear them.’ She turns again, steps into the house, and the door slams behind her.

It takes a while for Choppy to do anything. He stands next to the lions, thinking. Then he picks up the lion with the broken ear. The cigarette butt falls off and he crushes it underfoot. He walks slowly back up the path, carrying the lion out of the garden, into the street. Before he reaches his front door, he’s made decisions.

Now, perhaps some of us would make different decisions in Choppy’s position, but this isn’t happening to us, it’s happening to Choppy. It’s not something he does very often, making decisions, and he’s a little out of practice, but as he opens his front door he’s sure he’s on the right tracks. First, he’s going to put both lions outside Gregg’s bedroom door. Then he’s going to say goodbye and thank you to Janine. He briefly considers a trip to Michelle’s for one last smoke and a goodbye, but decides against it. You see, Michelle is a drug-buddy and drug-buddies come and go, just like lions, just like husbands, and just like Choppy.

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