



Do What You Say

By Dean Harrison

The lion just wouldn't get off me. His right elbow was pressed into my shoulder, pinning it firm to the ground. I had maneuvered my chest just enough to his right so that I could still breathe. If he was a little further forward on me, breathing would have been a thing of the past — and maybe me too. I couldn't believe I allowed myself to be in this position; I played right into his paws.

As I think back as to how this came about, my error was obvious. My wife, Prayeri, and I had just finished the Lion Safari Show at Out of Africa Wildlife Park when two young couples approached me to go back in with Java, the big black mane Cape lion. I told them once we leave the lions after a show, we don't go in with them again as we have found that additional contact with them right after the show is riskier and it serves no purpose. However, one of them said they were at the park a couple weeks ago and were so excited at what they had seen that they had brought some friends to see it too. He explained they had driven an hour and a half and really wanted to see us in with Java — and they had promised their friends.

Again I explained to him the risk and said "no." A little later on they found me again and persisted with their request. By now I was feeling guilty about not satisfying their pleadings — so I relented and said, "Okay, just briefly."

But at that time there was an additional reason for not pushing my luck with Java. Two weeks before, I had moved him out of his favorite habitat because we needed to do some upgrading where Java was living. I told Java he could come back by the end of the day. But the work was not finished as expected. In fact, we found more time would be needed. So I went to Java to tell him. He indicated to me that it was all right; he would return later.

The next day, the work continued, but it was still unfinished by day's end. I explained to Java and he seemed to accept the delay. By the third day the work was still not complete and I was embarrassed to tell Java. So I said nothing. A week later we still weren't finished and I apologized and told him we were almost done. But more complications arose. By now it was quite apparent that Java was annoyed with the project and my excuses and wanted to go back. Another week went by and still we were not finished. Now it was Sunday and I knew Java was harboring ill feelings toward me. He had not expressed them during the show because he was distracted, but it was plain to me that Java was unhappy with the insensitive way he was being treated. I too felt our relationship strained, but didn't know what to do about it.

When I said okay to the persistent visitor, I knew the situation I was walking into involved an irritated lion. As I entered Java's temporary habitat, I felt a particular uneasiness. It felt like a trap. Java was resting upright in typical cat-like fashion. His neck was erect, but his head was slightly downward.

This posture is typical of what Java does when he wants to pretend he is not going to jump me. While his head was downward, his eyes were looking up at me. I felt the possibility of a jump coming and took appropriate action to test my suspicions.

Walking back and forth in a zigzag pattern while approaching the big lion, I was looking to see if he would turn his head as I approached. But he did not. This confirmed my suspicions, but by now I was committed, and the four visitors were so happy I just couldn't disappoint them. By now many other visitors had gathered. As I stepped into Java's space, he remained perfectly still, never moving an eyelid. I placed my left foot to his right, just next to his head so I would avoid the full force of a frontal assault. I carefully picked up my right foot, planning to place it in a stable, defensive position to secure my stance if Java did attack.

I was surprised that as yet he had done nothing. He certainly had the chance. Then all of a sudden he was in the air. My right foot had not yet touched the ground. He was two feet above my head and coming down. I can't remember hitting the ground but I was on it — flat on my back with my head and chest under Java's chest and my legs pointing away from him. As he hit me, I heard his words in my head "Do what you say."

His mouth never opened and I was completely unharmed. He was standing directly overhead, his head over mine about three and a half feet up. He made no attempt to do me harm, but I felt I should leave now. I wiggled my body backward on the ground like a snake in reverse. Java stepped forward, still standing and still looking up. It seemed as if he was waiting for instructions as to what to do with me. I knew his intent was not to hurt me, for if he had intended it he already would have done it. His head would have been down and he would have been biting me. He was exercising complete control over me, his captive. His behavior was not rash or harsh, it was not without meaning or purpose, and he was completely composed, without irritation or feelings.

I wiggled forward again. He stepped forward and laid down on me. As he settled, I shifted to be able to breathe. I asked him to get off me, but he remained unaffected. All those at the park who work with animals wear microphones for constant communication for show purposes and for reasons such as the situation in which I was now involved. I reached into my pocket and turned on my microphone. "Prayeri, could you come to habitat six, quickly." But she didn't hear.

I didn't want to alarm park visitors, after all, I wasn't dying...I was just under a giant lion. Several staff animal people arrived and made distracting noises and behaviors at the fence. They could not come in since Java does not allow anyone in except Prayeri and me. We are part of his pride. Anyone else would be attacked. But Gerry Happ, who was in charge of what we call "core group" (those who work with the big cats) ran to the meat room and got a big piece of meat. As he approached the habitat fence, Java saw him. Gerry tossed the meat over and Java pushed off of me and headed for the food. I jumped to my feet and hurried out.

The two couples who insisted I go back in with Java were visibly shaken and greatly relieved that I was unhurt. I assured them I was fine but glad to be out. When the park opened again, I made sure the

work on Java's habitat was continued. In fact, it was completed by noon. I went back to Java and called him to tell him the good news. He and his wives, Shanta and Sahara, came running and investigated all that had been done. From that day on, I do what I say- especially with Java.

Interspecies communication has long been a subject of debate. Today many people have discovered its existence and have experienced it to various degrees. One only needs to visit Out of Africa Wildlife Park to see the results.