

Beyond Average

There was a time when the safest place in Baton Rouge was a tiger cage, since the tiger it belonged to wasn't there. Before LSU's legendary mascot made his great escape, he was introduced to his predecessor, a large, aging Siberian-Bengal mix who spent his retirement in "The Nighthouse." Lenny, soon to be inaugurated Mike VII, was put there so that the fructiferous facsimile might aid his adjustment to the campus atmosphere.

At the time, he'd entertained no notions of escape. He'd considered his departure from the Molotov zoo in New Dehli an escape in itself. He'd thumbed his nose at his former cagemates as his plane took off. Now, he was living solo. Well, semi-solo. Big Number Six wasn't much of a conversationalist. Few felines are.

"Mike' is something of a stage name for all of us here, isn't it?" queried Lenny on night. "Now that you've retired, you'll go back to your birth name, won't you?"

Six yawned and stretched his legs. "Maybe."

That was about as much as Lenny ever got out of him. He hadn't pried any news of what to expect from his new life. A shaved Merlin. That's what this cagey, six hundred-pound codger was. A shaved, magicless Merlin to Lenny's blindfolded prince Arthur. Lenny admittedly liked darkness, but not alongside this speechless lump.

He knew from his caretaker's reminiscing chatter that his daily routine matched that of Six upon his arrival; morning spent in the cage, the rest of the day in the nighthouse, the nights spent badgering the last retiree. But what about the football games? What about everything that Six had done as an energetic cub?

Maybe he hadn't even been energetic or young. He certainly wasn't now.

"Oldie! Oldie!" taunted Lenny on the last day of Six's stay in the nighthouse. The Senior Mike was to be moved into the New Orleans Audobon zoo alongside other torpid tigers. Lenny found this to be a source of great humor. "Have fun at that funeral home, if your creaky old bones will let you!"

Six yawned and rolled over so that he could face his successor. "What is your name."

Lenny had the idea that this old cat was half-deaf and trying to hide it. It would have explained why he answered everything with the word, "maybe." It also would have been a safety net should any of his taunts strike a nerve. Maybe he should have tested Six's hearing before he insulted him.

"My name is Lenny," he said. "Soon to be Mike VII."

Six snorted. "I once had my own name. It was Roscoe."

"From Roscoe to Mike, huh? I'll bet that was an emasculating experience."

Six snorted again. Lenny couldn't tell if this was some snobbish display of contempt or if he just liked the smell of the nighthouse.

"Our academic ancestors suffered worse. Number one was sprayed green by a rival football team. Two either got sacked by an imposter or died of a broken leg. I forget which."

"So that's what goes on around here." Lenny indulged in a little wide-eyed innocence. "Broken legs, kidnappings, evil twins--"

"Now, now, relative runt," chided Six, "the people who passed him off as the genuine Mike II are evil, not the imposter himself."

"Still, I bet that was a heck of a season, masquerading as a college football mascot. What happened in Number Three's time?"

"Nothing until the very end. He became so comfortable with the college's winning streak that the one game he lost caused him a fatal dose of grief." He took a deep breath and sighed. "If you ever see a winning streak in your day, don't get used to it, kid."

Kid? So Lenny's age-related taunting DID matter. Six's did too. "Hey old man, I may be younger and more exuberant than you, but I'm still a full-grown tiger."

"So was Jerry when he was set free into the city."

"Wait, there's a chance I might be set free?"

"A much smaller one than before Four made his grand exit. That was during the fifth year of his reign."

"Reign, huh? Did he go on a reign of terror once he got lose?"

"Is that what you would do?"

At first, Lenny wanted to return Six's cageyness. Would he terrorize Baton Rouge? Maybe. But what would he really do if he went on his own solo safari of the city? He'd only seen it from that campus cage. Surely it had more to offer than the crowds of pointing people.

"Wow, I think my feral instincts are kicking in." Had the nighthouse had an overhead light, and had he looked in the mirror, he might have seen his eyes spinning like a pair of train wheels.

Six recoiled and sneered. "Don't get used to THAT, either. Remember where you are."

"But where am I, Six? Locked inside a tiger cage. Please tell me that Four--his name was Jerry, right? Tell me he stowed on a plane to India and spent the rest of his life there!"

"Now why would he want to do that? He was born in Florida. And before you ask, no, there hasn't been another tiger escape since then. You're not likely to see the rest of the city."

It was Lenny's turn to snort. "I could see the rest of the city if I wanted to."

"Then you'd better hope they put in a webcam, because the only view of Baton Rouge you'll ever get is if it's televised."

Lenny tutted. "Even that's more of a view that the zoo will give you."

"And Jerry's excursion was more of a view than you shall ever have in your life. He ended up tranquilized and brought back to his cage."

"Yeah? What about Five?"

"He never escaped, if that's what you want to know. A group of pet owners rallied to protest this position when Stevie -- or Five -- retired. And thanks to the LSU chancellor, this position still exists. Maybe you'd be free if you hadn't been donated. Think about that."

In a parallel universe, one in which Lenny was NOT handed over to LSU, maybe he would have escaped the New Dehli Molotov zoo. Where would he have gone then?

"I've got to get out of here."

"What?"

"I've got to got to got to --" but the other Lenny ceased to be his transdimensional counterpart. A continual life of captivity in this honorary claustrophobia was devoid of opportunities for adventure.

"I know what you're thinking," said Six. "You plan to mug the caretakers when they come in to load me aboard my cage. Well, fair warning; you might be halving your lifespan. Then again, Two only lived but two years."

"Well, then, I'm definitely leaving. When those guards come in here, you'll see. I'm gonna punch them out like a couple of Chiuauas."

An hour later, the door opened, and Lenny charged the intruders. Too bad for him. They weren't the college alumni he was expecting, but rather, the PETA activists who tried to end the mascot tradition in the first place. They were dressed in gold shirts with purple camouflaging stripes (rather than their official "You can't Beah-ah PETA, so please join-ah PETA) so that no one would recognize their intentions. They tranquilized both big cats, and toasted one another's daquiries. "And may all animals live in their natural habitats." They then loaded their pickup truck. Their celebratory drinking caused them to crash into a ditch. The prison cage door fell open, and both sets of partners, human and feline, lay snoozing in an intoxicated stupor.

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Meanwhile, back at the nighthouse, the authentic animal husbanders found a terrifyingly empty place.

"Both of them?" cried Danny. "This is the worst thing to happen since Mike II--"

"Shush!" said Andrew, recalling the taboo on Mike II conspiracies. "This is bad. I'll bet this is the work of Tulane again. You smell any paint around here?"

They didn't. The only green in the house was from the fake foliage, a costly stab at making the surroundings resemble a tiger's natural habitat.

The two caretakers combed the ecological sanctuary with caution, as though they were prowlers crashing a surprise party. When it was clear neither Six nor Seven were present, they huddled in a corner to come up with a plan.

"If word of this gets out," said Danny, "Baton Rouge will have the apocalypse on her hands."

"Oh, you're exaggerating. We can always find a new Mike. It's a shame old Six won't enjoy his retirement, though, wherever he is."

"What makes you so sure? I think he's going to enjoy the panic that goes along with two grown tigers wandering loose around the city."

"Well... what do you suppose we should do?"

Danny thumped his own head, as though dislodging an idea tucked snugly into his neurons. "We'll have to call in the Average Joes. They're the only ones who can fix this situation discreetly."

The Average Joes were a fraternity of men, all of whose first names were Joe and whose last names had something to do with culinary preparation. There was Joe Fry, Joe Grill, Joe Bake, Joe Barbecue, and on down the line. Would you trust these guys with tracking down a beloved football mascot?

Andrew didn't. "Look, if there's an apocalypse, it will happend because THESE guys are after our Mikes."

Danny groaned. "What are you, a soothsayer?"

"All I'm saying is that your idea is a terrible one."

"All right then, I'll make a bet with you. You can go after Six and Seven your own way, and I'll call the Average Joes. Whoever finds them first gets fifty bucks."

He pulled out his cell phone and went to his contacts, but Andrew seized his wrists. "Wait, it doesn't have to be this way!"

"Knock it off, will you? Extreme cases like this--" Andrew punched him out like a Chihuahua before he could finish that sentence. Unfortunately, he'd already dialed the Joes, and on the line now was their spokesman, Joe Roast.

"It's a sunny day at the A.J. Headquarters, what can we hunt for you?"

Andrew panicked. He had a premonition there and then that this Mike disappearance business would all be on the news, that the Joes would see it, and that they would scramble to collect the reward. He was wrong, but remember his fears. They are very important to a later occurrence.

"Um," Andrew answered the Joe, "Question: Do you guys ever NOT cook the animals you track down? 'Cause I'd really like for you to not do that to these two animals I need you to find."

"Wait, you want us to find a /specific/ animal? Hmm... sounds like a lot of work."

Andrew laughed, relieved of the Joes tenacity with their averageness. He'd like to celebrate by going to their headquarters and counting how many sofas and televisions they had. But he didn't know where they lived, and the Mikes were more important.

"Um, yeah, it's a lot of work, but it pays fifty bucks."

"Phooey. I could make more than that babysitting my nephew. Make it five hundred bucks."

Andrew almost objected, but then he remembered that it was Danny's phone he was using. The money would be coming out of HIS pocket. "Seven hundred fifty. Now look, there's this pair of Tigers on the loose, and I, Danny Flanders, need you guys to get them safely in a cage or a giant coffin, something we can put into the back of a pick-up truck. We also need you to keep this search and rescue mission under your hats."

"Hmm, seven hundred fifty. I could buy a new oven with that. And a new washing machine, too. All right, I'll go find these tigers for you. You can pay me in person with cash."

Andrew hung up around the same time Danny came to. "The Joes have taken the job, so maybe we won't lose ours."

"What? Ow," Danny rubbed his jaw. "What are you going to do about it? I thought you didn't trust the Joes."

"I don't. That's why *you're* paying for their services."

"Fine, let's just get out of this crazy place."

They locked and chained up the night house so that it would look like they'd done their job. No tigers? No problem. Danny and Andrew had already taken Six to the zoo. Seven, they'd say, was still in there, he just didn't want to be disturbed.

The Average Joes had lately taken a dog into their care, an eighty-pound galoot who was some mix of pit bull and boxer. Joe Sautee suggested he roll around in catnip and that they use him to bait the tigers. Joe Carve objected. "You know how much money we paid for his vaccines? And what if PETA catches us?"

"Relax. We won't really feed him to the lions--"

"--we're looking for tigers."

During this debate, the dog galloped across the breakfast table, spilling coffee and toast left and right. For guys whose last names were all cooking-related, they didn't do much cooking.

"Besides, if any animal rights activists come along, we'll give them all a wedgie. Maybe even use them as tiger bait."

They filed out of the House of Joes armed with the very cooking utensils they didn't use, as well as the living room curtains. They planned to throw them over Mike as a net the moment he charged the dog, whose name was Gustav.

In the mean time, Danny and Andrew drove their truck to places where they thought their boss wouldn't be, waiting for a call from the Joes. They did get a call, but not from any Joe they'd hired. It was from their boss, Ed chambers.

"Drat," said Andrew. "He's gonna ask for the key to the night house, what will I tell him?"

"You're the brains of this operation," snapped Danny, "Tell him number seven's having an adolescent tantrum, it's not a pretty sight in there." That was at least half-true. The disappearance of a beloved football mascot was never a pretty sight. "Oh, and you might want to throw in some convincing details--the trees were all shredded, the vines were all over the floor, there were holes in the walls, sort of like he was trying to escape."

"I don't think Ed'll take it well if we accuse Seven of deforestation."

"Then just accuse him of deforestation. That's what happened anyway, right?"

Andrew answered the call. "LSU caretakers, what's up?"

"Hello, Andrew. I'm just calling to see how old Mike is doing."

"Ah... um, listless and lethargic if you mean Number Six. Jubilant and youthful if you mean Number Seven."

"Good, good. Old Six didn't give you any trouble, did he? I mean, as you loaded him aboard your pickup truck?"

At this point they came to a stop light. Danny, who was behind the wheel, motioned for Andrew to hurry it up. Andrew lost his patience. "All right, buster, you want to do the talking? Here!"

He shoved the phone in Danny's face. "Hey, what's the big idea? I'm driving here!"

"No, you're not," said Ed. In pushing the phone to Danny's face, Andrew had inexplicably pushed the speaker phone button. "You are not driving, you are at a stop light. I can see that from where I am seated."

With sweat dripping down their foreheads, Danny and Andrew turned around, braced for the disapproving glare of their boss. Actually, the person behind them was a rich lady giving her Chihuahua a makeover. "Man," said Danny, "I'd bet PETA would be all over her."

"Look to your right, you idiots!"

Ed was on the right side. Andrew's side. Danny's sweat was a little less torrential now; if Ed had his attack Doberman, then Andrew could have been used as a shield.

Ed rolled down his window, and ordered the other two to do the same. Not wanting to lose their jobs just yet, Andrew rolled down his window. Danny did likewise, then jumped through it.

"Wuss!" yelled Andrew. "I hope that you're not only fired, but also you're eaten by Mike!"

Andrew scooted over to the driver's side. He made room for the attack Doberman by accident, as well as the head honcho, Ed.

"Oh, you don't mean that," purred Ed. "He may very well be hoping that you both lose your job and be eaten by Dobey Dooby Doo here." He stroked the dog's bull neck. "At least half of those things /will/ come true, and you are going to make sure that one of them isn't Mike's eating anyone. Oh look, the light is green."

And it had been for some time. Consequently, the rich lady lost her cool and started ramming them over and over. Andrew leaned out the window.

"Knock it off, Aristobrat! I'll duel your dog with mine!"

Chambers laughed. "I'd love to see that."

But it would never come to pass. The rich lady brought her decorated foo-foo to the window. It was a frothing, tazmanian mess. It frightened the three to the passenger's seat.

"You challenge me to a duel?" said the lady. "I dare you to take on this! The doctors can't cure it. I'd like to see you try. In fact, I'd like to see you."

She lowered the spasmodic miniweapon and peered at the two men's faces.

"Wait, I know you, /both/ of you. You, you're Andrew Finkle-something or other, half of the LSU caretakers. And you, you're Ed Chambers, heir to the honorary LSU mascot's namesake, Mike Chambers. And you--" she pointed to Dobey Doo. "Well, you're really not much different from other live dogs: not infected with rabies yet. Is this the truck you use to transport our mascots?" She eyeballed the back of it. "Why, there's nothing back here but an empty cage."

"I object!" said Ed. "Specifically, I object to any reason you should recognize any of us, especially an Average Joe like Andrew."

Andrew groaned. "Speaking of Joes--"

"Oh, but is the matter of how I recognize you even relevant? The fact is, I do, and there's an alarmingly empty cage that should have a ferocious animal in it."

"You want a wild animal in there?" Ed fumed with rage. You could cook a pot of gumbo on his forehead if he stood still long enough, but being the man of action that he was, he yanked the chiuaua from the rich lady, threw it into the cage, and hollared, "There! A wild animal's in there! Sic her, Dobey!"

But Dobey turned his sleek, pointy nose up at Ed. /I guess I'm just not ferocious enough to be locked in a cage,/ he telepathically told his master.

"Oh come on, Dobey," pleaded Ed. "Don't be that way--"

He hopped out of the car to dissuade his dog from resigning, but the rich lady arrested him by the ear.

"Is this the sort of mathematics being taught at our beloved academy?" She pointed at the cage. "For shame!"

"Madame, relinquish my ear at once!"

"Nor until you fix the incongruity of what you've just done. Look at that total waste of cage! What truly belongs in there is something at least half its size. Tell me, can a bachelor own a mansion?"

Yet the brilliant logician who owned a rabid Chiuaua continued her assessments of the cage.

"Wait," she suddenly realized, "If this is the Mike the Tiger transport truck, and there's an empty king-sized cage in it..."

"Then you already know too much!"

Ed Judo-chopped her. It wasn't very effective. Owning an attack dog makes you less likely to train in the martial arts, and that's why the rich lady's retaliatory Judo chop wasn't very effective either. In fact, she had to

release Ed's ear to deliver it, and that's how he made his escape. He lurched into the truck and ordered Andrew to drive.

"Don't worry, ma'am. The Average Joes are on the case!" shouted Andrew as the drove off.

"Doomed! You're doomed! And by the way, kidnap!" The lady hopped and pointed at the retreating truck. They'd run a red light. A nearby law-abiding teenager rolled down his window. "Don't you mean 'dognap'? Get out of the road, you old bag!" He wasn't really so law-abiding. He didn't even have a license.

Andrew and Ed, meanwhile, had an interesting conversation. This is what they said: "I'll bet that lady's going to sic the cops on us," said Ed.

"Yeah, I'd sic the cops on us too after stealing a pet and running a red light willy-nilly."

Andrew was the one driving now. He wasn't used to it, and he flattened many squirrels and rabbits due to his inexperience.

"Did you say you had 'Average Joes' looking for the tigers?" said Ed.

"Um... well, Danny hired them moreso than I did, so I suggest firing him before you fire me."

"Not so fast, pal. You're both losing your jobs simultaneously. You call yourself an animal care-taker? With this trail of roadkill you're leaving, it's a wonder you've kept your job this long."

"Wow, that sort of sounds like a compliment."

They come to an overpass, and Ed ordered him to pull over.

"I'm gonna do the doctor's job here and now. Make sure none of those PETA jerks are watching."

Andrew gulped. He didn't want to watch either. He muttered a mantra -- "It has rabies anyway. It has rabies anyway."

Ed left his seat and came back from the cage with his own case of rabies. "That frackin' dog has escaped! Great, now we've got two full-grown tigers and a rabid Chiuaua on the loos in the same blam city."

"Hey, didn't you leave your own car just sitting there in the middle of the highway?"

Andrew felt at ease saying this. He was losing his job anyway, why not needle his boss's nerves a little?

Because it would make him cry. "I'm losing my dog and my job and my pride all in one day."

"Aw, there, there. Is this about your lame self-defense mechanisms? Lots of people can't Judo-chop. That lady who had your ear couldn't do it either."

An alarm went off in the distance. It was the kind usually reserved for hurricanes and other big scary storms, so the two silly men thought it was just another layer of bad luck. But it stopped after a few seconds, and a loud speaker announced:

"Attention, Baton Rouge: Mike VI and his successor, Mike VII, are loose from their cages. Please stay indoors at all costs until we return the animals safely to their cages. Thank you."

It was a good time to bet lots of money that nobody stayed indoors.

Before all the consequences of that announcement can be shared, it must be said that the announcement was really the Average Joes' fault. While Danny and Andrew were driving around trying to look like they'd done their job, the Joes went to all the swampy, jungly places where MIke might be.

On the way to the Bluebonnet swamp nature center, they stopped at a Dunkin' Donuts and fought over the creams. Joe Freeze seized the box and sat on them.

"There. Now nobody's getting them. Happy?"

"No," cried Joe Refrigerate. "Unhappy."

"I wasn't gonna eat 'em, not like the other Joes," declared Joe Steam. "We need them as extra bait for the tiger."

The donuts were high in calories, and because calories were the dietary evil of the day, the Joes figured that the donuts would be extra potent in releasing Mike the Tiger pheromones.

They couldn't use the day; two PETA officers got a whiff of the catnip and gave them a ticket for supposedly trying to enter the thing in a Dog vs. Cat tournament. Catnip was considered a cheat.

At any rate, they drove to the Bluebonnet nature reserve. It wasn't at all like a jungle; it was more like a swamp. Joe Toss had the feeling that it had once been a dump for toxic waste.

They set the trap anyway. They learned from a banned edition of the boy scout handbook how to set a trap, the kind you step in, dangle from a rope, and look foolish as you try to untie yourself. It may look like they forgot both the species and the number of animals they wanted to trap. After all, for the first hour of waiting they truly expected their game to show up. It should be noted here that they sat in a semi-circle around the trap in lawn chairs, eating popcorn. They didn't feel threatened because they figured the Tigers would want to skip dinner and go straight to dessert. But once Joe Poach's popcorn box was empty, he'd had his fill of waiting.

"This won't work." He stood up and kicked the donuts away. "We need meat."

"Don't be crazy," said Joe Toast. "You heard the PETA patrol, no catnipped dogs. And you wasted the donuts."

Joe Poach would not be told. "Forget the donuts. Forget the dog, too. I'm talking about us. Which of us is the least average?"

Joe Peel raised his hand. "I've got a question. If the tigers were around this swamp, wouldn't it maul us instead anyway?"

"That is a very good question." The Joes turned around, and a rich lady marched toward them with a rabid weasel on a leash. "And the answer is, why would you need to ask it in the first place?"

Joe Whisk snorted. "That's just another question. The real answer is 'Duh, of course he'd maul us anyway.'"

"That raises another question," said the rich lady, "Why would you point that out? Answer that one."

"Because I'm talking to a dumb person."

"And that raises the most interesting question of all: Are you really all as average as you think?"

With the toothpaste foam-lipped weasel snarling and snorting at them, the Joes were running out of ways to get this dame to go away. Joe Puree said, "Well, at least we're not dumb."

"No, Joe, you're below average."

The rich lady felt around her back. The Joes thought she was going to pull out a weapon like a lightning rod, but that was absurd. The attack weasel was already her means of self-defense, which she let go of when she couldn't find her zipper. The Joes sprang from their chairs and bounced off each other like a billion Yogi Bears. \$72 worth of lawn chair fatalities happened while they lumbered towards places they thought would be safe from a weasel.

Amidst all the chaos, Joe Tenderize threw popcorn at the rich lady, insulted at being called below average. It was an accurate label when applied to his aim. Every last projectile landed somewhere in Baton Rouge, but not on the rich lady. One landed in the campus lake leviathan's eye. Another got stuck up the Bluebonnet Lou

Garou's nostril. One had even landed in Mike VII's ear, wherever he was. Average Joe Tenderize had an excellent arm, but alas, he was still only an average Joe, or, according to this wealthy wench, a below-average Joe.

In spite of all the hub bub and popcorn pelting, the woman finally caught her elusive zipper, and gave it a yank.

Beneath all the fur, makeup, and jewelry, a member of the Average Joe's arch rival fraternity emerged. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, having gotten word from a confederate that the caretakers had lost Mike the Tiger, another animal rescue agency was on the case. The Above Average Joes.

"Joe Eat was the one who called me," declared the nemesis. "He noticed the LSU Mike transport truck carried a vacant cage, and he relayed the news to us. Kiss your frat house goodbye, Below Average Joes. When we return the tiger, it will be ours."

"Go jump off a plane, Joe Schmoe!" ordered Joe Sprinkle. "The tiger belongs to ALL of Baton Rouge."

"I was talking about your frathouse, nitwit!" He yanked out a cape and disappeared behind it in a puff of smoke. Whatever he threw could have set the swamp on fire, and /did/ set his cape on fire. He reappeared a few meters away, hooting and waving his smoldering birthday magician clothing over a pond. It just goes to show you: That Joe was one above average man. At the end of it a heron walked by and pecked his booty, so he lost his grip on the cape and tried to punch the meanie on the beak, but he'd grown weak from owning an attack weasel. More importantly, he'd let go of the cape, which spread its own personal inferno to a tree, who then shared its flames with its neighbors like the latest celebrity gossip.

Meanwhile, the Average Joes (the ones who weren't above) had calmed down. Joe Scoop then noticed they'd flattened the weasel, and convinced the others that they were safe from weasel attacks.

"Yeah, but what about this fire overhead?" Joe Filet pointed to the flames overhead. It was making them all sweaty so they couldn't work.

"Animals are smart," said Joe Mix. "They'll know to leave the forrest when they see its on fire."

"Darn it, so we set this trap for nothing?"

Mike definitely would not be in the Bluebonnet nature reserve by the time it burned to the ground.

"Okay, this is way too much work," said Joe Shake. "I don't care if we never rescue Mike, I just don't want the double A Joes to rescue him."

At that point, the Bluebonnet alarm went off. Its purpose was to notify the ranger when something went wrong. Two things had already gone wrong. First, the Joes showed up. Then, the alarm didn't go off because of that. Now, with the reserve on fire, it finally decided to do its job, but it gave Joe Chop a headache, so he took out a big fat butcher knife and gave that thing what for. But the other Joes, instead of stomping on it in a warm-up rampage like they normally did, they saw an opportunity to indirectly interfere with those so-called Above Average Avengers' plans.

They unhooked the megaphones climbed to the top of the ranger's outpost, then announced to the entire city Mike's misplacement.

The outpost was high enough to watch the show that the Baton Rouge football fans put on. At first, it simply looked like they were all playing individual football games, but when the tackling didn't stop, it unfolded into a fist fight. Men and women left their houses, screaming and running with torches and pitchforks.

Windows were broken, cars were wrecked, footballs were burst and deflated. The Joes couldn't see a single person who stayed indoors, so they resigned themselves to eating popcorn until the rest of the city settled down.

Let's hope they could learn to live without snacks because the commotion on the ground would way outlive their popcorn supply. For starters, a band of vegetable rights activists saw the forrest fire before they heard the alert. "Mother nature shall have her vengeance!" They cried, then took their rage out on what they believed was the source of the fire, university education. They rammed their truck into the Tiger Stadium. This disturbed LSU officials who were trying to put up reward posters. An additional disturbance included die-hard Mike fans, who scorned the idea of putting a price on their precious tiger. "You can't appraise our beloved mascot, he's priceless!" They set the reward flyers on fire, thereby earning a punch in the face instead of the twelve grand the poster promised.

Along the highway, some baldknobbers heard news of Mike's disappearance, then fostered the insane idea that they could make him their attack tiger. When they saw a frothing, snarling chiuaua on the side of the road, they saw in it an omen that they could abandon their self-defense lessons anymore, so they left their caravan armed with nets, tranquilizers, and tracking devices. They skulked single-file into the woods. Unfortunately, a voodoo queen disapproved of their radically illegal parking and pulled up behind them. "GOING SOMEWHEA?"

The still raging fire in the Bluebonnet nature reserve seemed to inspire a little arson in the city. In fact, it inspired lots of arson. All the alcoholic beverages that would have been guzzled after the big game that weekend helped to encourage it. It was late evening at this point. Families who just wanted to spend a friendly night out found themselves dodging debris and sprinting across streets barren of civility or safety, and all the while two tigers roamed at large.

So did two animal caretakers, one of whom was consoling his boss as he drove through the Baton Rouge wreckage.

"Aw, don't feel so bad." Andrew patted Ed's back when he should have been watching the road. He inevitably ran over a weiner dog. "Look at this metropolitan catastrophe. We wouldn't all be rioting if Mike was insignificant."

Pathetic Ed whimpered. "Not everyone's rioting." He flicked away a tear. "We're not rioting."

Andrew retracted his hand. He'd given so many pity pats that he'd practically burned a hole through Ed's shoulder. Yet /he/ was the one suffering.

"Okay, boss, I've given you all the empathy I have. I seem to have poured it all down a bottomless pit. You've got a bottomless pit inside you, Ed."

"That's all I need to hear, definitely."

He hung out the window like a smelly old sock. It was a good way to tempt an arsonist, but Andrew had no more motherly instincts left for this self-pitying poo-cow. Ed was a wimp.

"All I can say," said Andrew, "Is that I'm glad our mascot isn't named Ed. You have no tiger spirits in you."

"What are you," said Ed, "some kind of fortune teller?"

"No, that would be the old hag behind us."

A witch in a stolen caravan violated traffic law and pulled up beside them. "GOING SOMEWHEA?"

"Look, lady," said Ed, "I don't know who you are, but if you ever had a familiar, I'll bet this guy ran over it."

Incidentally, Andrew had mowed down a menagerie of animals for lack of focus. He'd paid so little attention to the road that even animals who'd perfectly obeyed the safety code had unlucky tire tracks on their backs: Alligators, black bears, cockatoos, flies, parrots, macaws, toucans, even frickin' dragons and even griffins fell victim to Andrew's imbecillic vehicular operations. For all we know, this voodoo lady's familiar (assuming she had one) could have landed a spot in the animal obituaries thanks to Andrew's distracted vision.

"I have a familiah," crowed the witch. "His name is Mike VII." Let's hope that's not true. "and I'll give you three days to find him."

"And then what?" wondered Andrew. "Bring my career back from the dead? Poo."

"If you do not, he'll get rabies, and the ghosts of past animal rights activists will haunt you forever." Assuming ghosts were real, Andrew would already be haunted by flat pancake animals, including her familiar, who was definitely not Mike VII.

"Yeah," he mused. "Okay, but can they haunt Ed moreso than me? I mean, look at how lame he is, flopping out the window like he does. Maybe an old fashioned spectral stalking will liven him up."

"I never needed to be lively," said Ed. "I always had Dobey to be my surrogate personality."

"Oh, well, in that case, I guess we won't be needing this witch."

Andrew swerved and knocked over the caravan, adding to the vehicular wreckage along the road. The newly enraged witch whispered a curse, and the truck ran out of gas. "You frickin' gypsy!" screamed Andrew. At least a troupe of baldknobbers dog piled on her. That way, she didn't have room to cast any more ridiculous spells. Still, a running man's escape repulsed Andrew. "It looks like we've lost our mobile armor."

"Hey, those nimrods over there have been driving over animals for miles!" An angry mob of football fans crowded around.

"No, no," explained Ed. "He's been running over animals. See him? The guy steering and pedal-pushing?"

"What if one of those animals were Mike? Both Mikes!"

"No, no, no!" Andrew waved his hands. "I've only squashed insignificant animals. These tires don't stand a chance against tiger claws. Tell 'em, Ed."

Ed was no longer in the car. He had been extracted, and was now crowd surfing all the way to who knows where. Andrew's door opened, and he followed after along with the Mike cage. Through a blur of barely perceptible occurrences, Andrew ended up rooming with his boss in a locked cage. This, in turn, was thrown into the night house, where neither Mike nor mobster lay in wait. Granted, it was probably the safest place in the city, but it made Ed and Andrew claustrophobic.

They felt trapped, how Mike must have felt during his first week over.

"Mike?" said Andrew. "Is that why you ran away?"

"Oh boy! Now it's my turn to call you an idiot!" Ed perked up right away. "Mike, both of them, did not run away, they were stolen. Oops, forgot to call you an idiot. You're an idiot. Unless Mike VII has developed the telekinetic power to unlock this nighthouse from the inside - which is a power we could use right now - then my guess is that someone stole him. Oh, did I tell you you're fired? Along with the guy who chickened out?"

"Hey, I did not chicken out," retorted a figure from the shadows. "I made my escape. I can't lose my job if I don't get the message. That's state law."

Ed cleared his throat. "Here's the message: You're fired."

"Thank you, Donald Trump, but by now, losing my job is the least of my worries."

"How'd you even end up here?" asked Andrew.

"By taking so many detours that I found this to be the only place where there isn't a mob. And is it any wonder? This place is so serene."

All three men were lost for a moment in their utopian surroundings: speck lights above, meant to resemble stars, outlined fictional constellations of tiger prides, even those obstructed by polar trees. A river trickled nearby, where forsaken goldfish frolicked in freedom from five-year-olds' bedrooms. If Andrew were not locked in a cage with a guy he hated so much, he might have tumbled backward, detached from Mikian the Sixthian and Seventhian concerns, and sung Bobby McFerrin songs.

But too many things were rotten in the capital of Baton Rouge.

"We're safe in here," Ed regressed back to his weenie-baby state and rocked on his affluent hind-end. "We don't have to worry about anything out there."

"Except Mike getting rabies."

"What?" Danny put his hands and face on the cage. "Mike's got rabies? Which one, old Mike or Little Lenny?"

"Get a grip, will you? Nobody's got rabies yet..." and that's when Andrew noticed something familiar burbling and fruming around Danny's lips. Or should I say foamiliar?

"This can't happen!" Danny slapped the cage "We never even kidnapped Riptide the Pelican and painted him purple! Everyone's on this tiger hunt, yet no one's thinking of revenge!"

Actually, Andrew was thinking quite a lot about revenge, specifically, about how to get back at Danny.

The Joes were also trying to think of ways to get back. Back to H.Q., that is. They'd depleted their edible resources, and were loathe to starve through the calamitous entertainment.

"Boys, it looks like we're sufficiently disrupted the double-A Joe's rescue mission," observed Joe Glaze. He should have been observing the angry firemen and cooked foliage. "Now I think we should consider relocating our headquarters."

"I hope you're not suggesting we move it up here," scoffed Joe Spit. "There are too few sofas, too few TVs, and too much nature for me to get used to it." Naturally, the fire had

been raging for so long that they forgot what nature looked like. It was a nice touch to the riots, but it had delayed their venture to the store.

"Heck, who needs TV when you can watch the city fall apart?" said Joe Burn, and that verbal affront on television was all the rest of the Joes needed to vote him to the Baton Rouge supermarket. He grudgingly left the perch, but the supermarket was way too crowded and showy, so he came back to Bluebonnet empty handed. He didn't get to go back up the perch though, because the firemen detained him. Nor did his frat bros get to stay up there, because he ratted them out.

It's too bad Joe didn't stick around at the supermarket. He might have heard the following conversation.

"Attention, comrades," Joe Eat spoke into a cell phone. "This city is on the brink of disaster. Contemplate aborting mission immediately."

"I'm aborting nothing!" Joe Swallow through his own phone on the ground, stomped over to his comrade and poked him in the chest several times as though trying to activate a self-destruct button. "You think I'm going to step aside and let those below average yahoos collect the reward money?"

He wouldn't have to. A nearby shop-lifter acquainted his skull with a beer bottle. "You can't appraise our mascot, bubba!"

Joe Munch happened to be nearby. He sent the shop-lifter to the slumber land by the same vehicle as his snoozing colleague.

"Oh yes you can, and his monetary value will be in our bank vault tonight!"

"If that were true, then your vault would explode!"

The beat goes on. So did the beatings. And speaking of beatings, that was what Danny laid upon the cage in which his former boss and coworker were locked. Ed was thankful for the safety that the locks offered, while Andrew wished for the freedom that would permit him to lay some of his own beatings upon Danny.

"How could you let this happen!?" cried Danny.

"Hey, genius, I didn't let it happen anymore than you did."

"Will you numbskulls shush? I'm trying to channel Dobie. Maybe he can get us out of here."

Danny and Andrew didn't have a lot of experience outside of animal care. They didn't have a lot inside of it either, but they had enough to know that Ed was dangerously out of his mind. Telepathic communication? That was one of the dark arts, wasn't it? Andrew had seen a witch use it to remove all the gas from his car. What might a rookie do with it?

"Danny, get me out of here, Ed's crazy!"

"Shut up!" ordered Ed. "You think a guy who can talk to dogs is crazy?"

"Okay, Andrew, okay, I'll get you out..."

It just so happened that Danny still had the key to the cage. He opened it. "There, now you're safe. You're safe from Ed and you're safe with the Baton Rouge mob."

"Great, fine, but I still won't forget that you ditched me earlier."

Speaking of ditches, Six and Lenny had been lying car-wrecked and comatose in one all day along the highway. Nobody went far enough to notice them except for Dobey Doo. He was making a break for New Orleans where his ferocity might shine a lot more, when he noticed the two cats looking like they'd over-celebrated at a football party. He ignored the PETA people; he'd feed them to an alligator if one was available. But he nudged the two Mikes until they both came to.

"Wha... good gravy," said Lenny. "Is there a sobriety tonic in the house?"

Six wobbled around and sniffed at the out-cold humans. "They are the ones who've enjoyed drink."

"What?" exclaimed Lenny. "I saw we drag them into the road and leave them there."

"Isn't anyone going to notice me?" said Dobey. "I'm the town hero now, I found the two Mikes!"

Big husky Six gave the dog twenty love taps on the flank. "'Mike' does not stand for 'microphone,' humble canine."

"Well, if it did--ow!" Dobey scooted around in circles; Six's ferocity had nearly set flames to his hiney. "If it did, then I could announce you've been rescued, and all the rioting would stop."

"What rioting?" A dire look flashed across Six's eyes. "Recalcitrant pup, if you are fibbing to the great Mike VI--"

"Just come to the city if you don't believe me."

"Okay, fine," said Lenny. "But let me finish up here first."

He hoisted both PETA rights activists over his back and deposited them into into the middle of the road. "Whatever happens, happens," he said. "So. People are rioting over us, eh?"

"Not just people," said Doby. "You see that smoke?"

Yes indeed, a meaty layer of smoke overshadowed the city.

"Yeah, where's it coming from?"

"I have no idea," said Doby, "But my guess is, your disappearance caused it."

"That's awesome," said Lenny. "And at the same time, really scary."

Six lurched toward it. "We have the power to stop it," he said. "I will walk the streets of that troubled metropolis and roar my return. I advise you to do likewise."

"Yeah, yeah I will do that!" Lenny followed his senior. "But don't forget, you're old stuff."

Doby thought better of himself than tiger food, which was what he'd inevitably become if he went back to Baton Rouge, so he continued on towards New Orleans.

The tigers, meanwhile, marched proudly into the city and roared at every tangle of fist-fights they saw, healing the city of its panic. They roared a team of crowd control officers into setting the vehicles upright. They roared a pair of electronics burglars into returning the stolen goods. And they roared a little league baseball team into bidding their bats farewell, and leavin the knees of their chaperones alone. They even roared the rabies out of the pets although the rich ladies who owned them disappeared as mysteriously as had Mike the Tigers earlier that morning.

As our formidable felines roared the city back to normal, the Dean of LSU cleared a path through the crowd to the night house, where he discovered Ed and the caretakers. He called them into his office and exercised a little judiciary power.

"Andrew Minnigan, you have leveled over two hundred animals, many of which weren't even on the road, with your subordinate driving."

"I already fired both of them, chief," explained Ed. "Naturally, animal care went out the window."

The dean rolled his eyes. "I can't fire you because you're a member of the royal family."

"And the only member without an attack dog, I might add."

"Really?" said Danny. "That's terrible! I'll go find you one now." He hopped out the window with no intention of buying a dog and full of intention to avoid his impending termination. He didn't, and neither did Andrew.

Back in the night house, Six and Lenny settled in for their true last night together. "Now do you covet your freedom so ravenously?" said Six.

"Not really. Not when I can put a whole city back together just by roaring."

Lenny recalled his vocal might affecting man and beast alike; even inanimate nature (smoldering trees) seemed apt to repent from their bachanalian ways. However, the one class of society that didn't budge, riot or

no, were the Baton Rouge cats, who'd done nothing more than watch disdainfully from tree branches and roof-tops.

"Only one thing bothers me," said Lenny. "When we came home--or when I came home, since you're moving--we saw everything go back to normal, didn't we? But cats stayed the same."

"Ah, our underwhelming brethren. I suppose it could be mutual jealousy; we want their freedom, while they desire our earth-shattering social position."

"Yeah," Lenny's eyes twinkled. "We are earth-shatteringly important."

"Or," suggested Six, "It could be that indifference is the nominal achievement of the cat."

Lenny kept his snort private. Maybe Six had reached a remarkable level of indifference, but when Lenny looked up at the fake constellations, he found himself endowed with the pride and honor of every Mike who'd come before him. He longed to march the perimeter of the tiger stadium and roar his team to victory.

"Although," Six pondered aloud, "it may be that they are simply below average, those metropolitan cats."

Lenny smirked. "Rock on, old man."