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I’d just been busted for giving the chimpanzees water balloons when I first heard something was wrong at Hippo River.

Large Marge was the one who caught me. No surprise there. Marge O’Malley was a security guard, but all she did most days was follow me around, waiting for me to cause trouble. I saw her slinking after me all the time. She’d always try to hide behind rocks and trees and stuff, but it was never hard to spot her, because Marge was built like a rhinoceros.

“You’re in big trouble this time, Teddy,” she snarled. She was making a big show of apprehending me in front of a crowd of tourists, shoving me up against the rail of the chimp exhibit and frisking me for weapons—like I was a mugger in some urban back alley instead of a twelve-year-old
boy at FunJungle, the newest, most family-friendly theme park in the world.

“Why don’t you arrest some real criminals for once?” I asked.

“Right now, you’re the only person I see making trouble.”

“That’s just ’cause you’re not paying attention.” It was true. Half the park guests broke the rules. There were signs posted everywhere telling them not to feed the animals, or bang on the glass of their exhibits, or harass them in any way, but they all did it anyhow. Only ten feet from where Marge was patting me down, an entire family was pelting a baby chimp with peanuts. They weren’t trying to feed it—which would have been bad enough. (The animals had very restricted diets to keep them from getting sick.) They were laughing every time they hit it.

“Watch this,” said the dad. “I’ll bet I can hit him right in the head.”

Right as he was about to let fly, though, a huge red water balloon sailed out of the chimp exhibit and nailed him in the face. It exploded on contact, drenching him.

Before he could recover, another balloon hit him. And another. And another. The chimps were fighting back, just as I’d hoped. That’s why I’d armed them. If the security guards weren’t going to protect the animals, then I figured I ought to help the animals protect themselves. After all, how would
you like it if someone banged on your windows and chucked peanuts at you all day?

Within seconds, the whole chimpanzee troop was lobbing balloons, howling with delight as they pelted the family from all sides. The family stumbled about, slipping in the water and spluttering for air—and now everyone was laughing at them.

Well, everyone but Large Marge, who was born without a sense of humor. She whipped out her radio and alerted headquarters. “HQ, this is O’Malley. We have a water-balloon situation at Monkey Mountain. I’ve apprehended the perpetrator, Mr. Theodore Fitzroy, but I need backup.” Marge always spoke like she’d seen way too many cop movies.

“Never mind that,” the dispatcher responded. “Get over to Hippo River. We’re getting reports that something’s wrong there.”

Marge frowned, though not out of concern for the hippos; she was annoyed her request for backup had been ignored. “I don’t think you appreciate the magnitude of the situation here. . . .”

“This is coming straight from Buck,” the dispatcher said, meaning Buck Grassley, the chief of FunJungle’s security. “Hippo River is a Code Red. If you’re at Monkey Mountain, you’re the closest to the scene. So get over there now.”

Marge snapped upright and jammed her radio back
in its holster. The idea that there was an actual emergency had stirred something inside her. She grabbed my ear and dragged me toward the exit. “Don’t think this saves your bacon, mister. You’re still in trouble for what you did to that poor family.”

“That family ought to thank me,” I told her. “If I hadn’t given the chimps water balloons, they’d have thrown poop.”

I wasn’t making that up. I’d seen chimps defend themselves in the wild by throwing their own feces. But as usual, trying to explain anything to Marge was useless.

“Watch your language or I’ll wash your mouth with soap,” she snapped.

The family that had been bombarded with balloons stormed out of Monkey Mountain right behind us, so soaked that their shoes sloshed. “See if we ever come to this park again!” the mother announced indignantly.

Good riddance, I thought, stifling a smile.

The truth was, except for Marge’s vice-grip on my ear, I was happy to be heading to Hippo River. I wasn’t sure what a Code Red meant, but it promised to be interesting. Maybe some clumsy tourist had fallen into the exhibit and needed to be rescued. Technically, that was probably a bad thing to hope for: Most people don’t realize that hippos are actually the second most dangerous African animals. (Water buffalo are the first.) They’re mean, they’re unpre-
dictable, and they have razor-sharp teeth a foot long. In the wild, they’ve been known to stomp lions to death and bite crocodiles in half. If someone fell into the hippos’ territory, they’d be screwed. But after a few weeks at FunJungle, I was bored out of my skull and willing to take excitement anywhere I could find it.

That might seem pretty surprising, given that I spent every day at a place that claimed to be “America’s Most Exciting Family Vacation Destination.” FunJungle was the biggest, most elaborate zoo ever built and it had been jam-packed since it had opened two weeks before. But unlike the thousands of other kids who visited every day, I didn’t go home when they closed the park at night. I was home.

Both my parents worked there. My mom was a famous gorilla researcher. My dad was a renowned wildlife photographer. (They’d met when National Geographic had sent him to photograph Mom’s gorillas.) Now Mom oversaw the care and research of all FunJungle’s primates while Dad worked for the publicity department, taking glamour shots of the animals for websites and magazines.

FunJungle had been built way out in Texas Hill Country, where land was cheap; the closest city, San Antonio, was more than half an hour away. So the park had provided housing for my family and a few other animal specialists who’d come to work there: Our mobile homes sat just beyond the back
fence. None of the other specialists had children, though, which meant I was the only kid for thirty miles in any direction.

Now, don’t go thinking I was bored because I don’t like animals. I do. In fact, I bet I know more about animals than any twelve-year-old you’ve met. I spent the first decade of my life living in a tent in the African Congo. I didn’t see a TV until I was six; instead, I watched animals—and Mom and Dad taught me everything they knew. I learned how to track elephants, communicate with chimps, and defend myself against a hungry leopard. Heck, I learned about animals you’ve probably never even heard of: bongos, hammerkops, Gaboon vipers, guenons. My first friend was a gorilla my age named Mfuzi. I loved being around animals every day.

I was bored because, until not long before, I’d had an amazingly exciting life. Living in the Congo was one incredible experience after another—and when I did leave the jungle, it was always to visit fascinating places with my father on his assignments. Dad was a real adrenaline junkie and he encouraged me to embrace adventure: We’d rappelled into caves to find giant bats in Mexico, stalked tigers in Uttar Pradesh, and even snorkeled with blue whales off Fiji.

But then, right after I turned ten, a civil war broke out in the Congo and my parents decided it was no longer safe
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(If not for me, they probably would have risked their lives to stay with the gorillas.) Mom grabbed the first job she could find back in the States, a research position at Emory Primate Labs in Atlanta, but that was a bust. None of us was happy in Georgia; we all missed Africa terribly. So when my folks were offered work at FunJungle, which billed itself as “the closest you can get in America to being on safari,” we figured living there might be more fun for all of us.

And for a while, it was. FunJungle was by far the best zoo in the world. All the reviews said so. It was three times larger than the next biggest zoo, its exhibits were innovative and there was plenty to do. But it still wasn’t the Congo. After a few weeks, to keep myself amused, I’d had to resort to playing practical jokes, like giving the chimps water balloons—or switching the signs on the men’s and women’s restrooms—or replacing all the black jellybeans in Large Marge’s lunch with rabbit poop.

That’s why I was fine with letting myself be dragged along to Hippo River. I was only hoping for a little excitement.

It never occurred to me that Henry would be dead.

It didn’t occur to Marge either. She shoved through the crowd at Mbuko Hippo Overlook, still dragging me by my ear, flashing her little tin badge—and suddenly, there Henry
was, lying in the shallow water of his enclosure, all four legs pointing straight at the sky.

Most of Henry—and there was about 4,000 pounds of him—was underwater, resting on the bottom of his pool. I couldn’t see his body, since the water was clouded with hippo poop, as usual. Only his feet were visible, jutting above the surface, pale white now that the blood had drained from them. They were thick and stubby, looking like giant, moldy marshmallows floating in day-old hot chocolate.

“Isn’t that cute?” a mother asked her children. “Henry’s sleeping upside down!”

Marge’s grip finally relaxed on my ear. She was so stunned, she’d forgotten about me. Instead, she stared at Henry vacantly, not knowing what to do.

She wasn’t the only one. There was always a crowd at Mbuko Hippo Overlook, but today it was more packed than usual. Maybe word had got out that Henry had kicked the bucket and some folks had come running to see, but most of the visitors appeared to have been caught by surprise. They just stood there, gaping at those feet, unable to believe Henry the Hippo was dead.

I admit I was pretty shocked myself. Since FunJungle had more than five thousand animals on display, you expected things would go wrong now and then. Every day, dozens of animals got sick; maybe even one or two would die. But for
Henry to go belly-up . . . that was pretty much the worst-case scenario, given that he was the park’s mascot.

FunJungle had been advertising all over the world for a year before it opened, and every one of those ads—every TV commercial, radio spot, and billboard—featured Henry. Well, not the actual Henry, but a cartoon version of him who said corny things like “Come visit FunJungle! It’s more fun than a barrel of monkeys . . . and I ought to know!” Cartoon Henry didn’t look much like the real Henry—he was skinny, purple, and friendly, while the real Henry was fat, gray, and mean—but that didn’t seem to bother the tourists. Henry was famous, so they flocked to see him. It was bizarre. There was a far more interesting hippo, Hildegard, in the exhibit right next to Henry’s, but most guests didn’t give her a second glance. Hildegard could’ve done backflips and everyone would still be packed ten deep to watch Henry nap.

“Wake up, Henry! It’s time to get up!” a little boy near me yelled. Several other boys decided this was a good idea and joined in.

Their parents looked at one another blankly. Cartoon Henry had told them all that a day at FunJungle was supposed to be “nonstop family fun”; explaining the circle of life and death threatened to be quite the opposite.

“Johnny, please,” said one mother. Her son was happily proving he could chant the loudest. “I don’t think Henry is
going to wake up. Hippos are very sound sleepers.”

“That’s right,” a queasy-looking father added. “Plus, his ears are underwater.”

Hippo River was the most popular exhibit at FunJungle, though this wasn’t only because of Henry. It was right by the main entrance—the first thing visitors saw as they came through the front gates—and it was pretty spectacular. (As it should have been. I heard FunJungle had spent more than thirty million dollars on it.) The exhibit took up ten acres—and once you entered it, it was really like being in Africa. You started at a thundering 150-foot waterfall, then hiked through a jungle filled with birds and monkeys, visiting scenic viewpoints from which you could see flocks of flamingos, huge Nile crocodiles—and, of course, the hippos. Each viewpoint had a quaint name that had been designed by a computer to sound African, even though they meant absolutely nothing: Ngodongo Gorge, Lallabasi Basin, Wullumon Camp.

The real draw at Hippo River, however, was the underwater viewing areas: places where you could watch the hippos through huge glass walls. This wasn’t a revolutionary idea: Lots of zoos had similar exhibits for viewing polar bears—and a few even had ones for hippos. But no one had anything on the scale that FunJungle did.

The folks who’d designed FunJungle were actually pretty
smart about animals; they knew hippopotamuses were far more interesting below water than they were above it. Heck, a lot of the time (and I know this from experience) you can watch the surface for hours and never even see a hippo; they need to breathe only once every ten minutes, and even then, they usually just poke their nostrils out. But underwater, it’s a whole different story. Hippos swim, play, eat, give birth, and nurse their young on river bottoms. (Mom told me they also make baby hippos down there, but FunJungle kept Henry and Hildegard separated during visiting hours to make sure this didn’t happen in front of the guests.) Plus, while hippos look like big, lazy sacks of fat on land, they’re surprisingly graceful in the water. So FunJungle had eight gigantic windows to view them through—and even a pricey restaurant where the prime tables were right against the glass; guests could have a fourteen-dollar hamburger and watch hippos swim past a foot away. You can’t do that in Africa.

Unfortunately, there had been a few glitches with the exhibit. Most obviously, the water filtration system wasn’t strong enough. Henry ate nearly a hundred pounds of food a day and sent most of it straight through his digestive tract, clouding the water faster than the filters could clean it. If Henry stayed near the windows, where the water flow was better, you could get a decent, if somewhat hazy, view of him. But Henry preferred to spend his time in a small
backwater of his enclosure, wallowing in his own filth. This rendered the underwater viewing areas all but useless. Restaurant patrons ended up eating their fourteen-dollar burgers with nothing to see except sewage.

Of course, this was now a relatively minor problem.

It was June in Texas, which meant it was ninety-eight degrees in the shade. Under the harsh glare of the sun, Henry was starting to smell worse than usual—which was really saying something. Hippos are naturally quite flatulent, but Henry was the worst I’d ever encountered; he could emit odors powerful enough to make you nauseated fifty feet away.

“He’s not sleeping,” a little girl said, wrinkling her nose in disgust. “He’s dead!”

Other parents’ eyes widened. The girl’s parents immediately shriveled under everyone’s gaze. “No, he isn’t,” her mother said hopefully. “Hippos don’t die like that. When hippos die, they float to the top, like goldfish.”

“He’s dead,” the little girl announced again.

“Let’s go see the elephants,” said her father.

All the parents thought this was a wonderful idea. (“Maybe they’re still alive,” another father said under his breath.) None of the kids wanted to leave, though. Those who thought Henry was sleeping were intent on waking him. Those who suspected he was dead were fascinated.
Know how kids sometimes can’t help staring at something they’re disgusted by, like roadkill? Well, imagine how captivating roadkill the size of a minivan would be.

The parents who didn’t look squeamish were growing annoyed. Many turned to Marge, expecting that, as the only person in the vicinity wearing a FunJungle uniform, she should be doing something to address the Henry situation. But Marge just kept staring, slack-jawed, at Henry’s corpse. Marge wasn’t the best decision-maker on normal days; I’d seen her take ten minutes to decide whether to have the fried chicken bucket or the triple nachos grande for lunch. (For the record, she’d ultimately opted for both.) Faced with an actual crisis, her brain had apparently overloaded and shut down.

Nearby, a teenager dressed in a Henry Hippo costume paced nervously, unsure what to do. His job usually didn’t require much thinking; he was essentially supposed to stand still, wave hello, and let tourists take his picture. Mbuko Overlook had been selected as the best place for this because it offered the most shade. The Henry costume was thick and heavy and had poor ventilation; in the direct Texas sun, it could quickly get to over a hundred and twenty degrees inside. On the first few days the park was open, the Henry portrayers had mistakenly been stationed at unshaded Mulumbo Point. Two had passed out from dehydration, collapsing on small children.
The actors only had hour-long shifts, because they had to drink a ton of water to survive in the suit and would inevitably have to pee. However, their job orders stated that during that hour, they were never to leave their posts, no matter what. The Henry on duty now obviously felt he shouldn’t be there, lurking around the dead hippo like his ghost, but he didn’t want to get in trouble, either.

An excited family came along, unaware that the real Henry lay dead just around the corner, and positioned their children at the fake Henry’s feet for a photo. The worried actor fidgeted so nervously that the mother had to steady his hands twice.

It seemed someone should take care of this, but since Marge was a basket case, that left me. Once the family had taken their pictures, I approached the actor and told him, “You should probably get out of here.”

“Are you from Administration?” Henry asked, contorting to get a look at me. The costume had been designed so the actor inside could only see through some gauze in Henry’s open mouth, which was angled downward. It was well suited to prevent the actors from stepping on children, but not for looking people in the face or, as had been proved on several occasions, avoiding low-hanging tree branches. Since I was standing outside his range of sight, the actor had no way to tell I was only twelve.
“Yes,” I said. “Now move it before you freak anyone else out.”

“Yes, sir!” The actor hurried away so quickly he forgot to watch his feet, stumbled over a bench, and face-planted in the landscaping.

I shook my head in disgust. Some people have way too much respect for authority.

Henry staggered to his feet and reeled away drunkenly, scaring a few guests.

A hand clamped on my shoulder. I spun around to find Martin del Gato glaring at me.

Martin was the director of operations at FunJungle, which was an odd choice, because he hated children and animals. Dad said he was supposed to be some hotshot business genius, though. I could usually spot him coming from a mile away, because in a park crowded with T-shirt-clad tourists, he was always the only person wearing a three-piece suit. Martin was perpetually overworked and constantly appeared to be five seconds from a heart attack, but he somehow still found time every day to chastise me for doing something wrong.

“Who gave you permission to dismiss my employees?” he demanded.

“I figured someone needed to do something,” I replied. “Seeing as Marge has gone brain-dead.”

Martin gave me a glare so hot I could imagine eggs frying
on his bald head. “Why would anyone need to dismiss the actors?” He scowled.

“Because of what happened to Henry,” I said.

Martin looked at me blankly—and I realized, to my surprise, that he didn’t know about Henry yet. He turned toward Mbuko Overlook and took in the stunned crowd. I guess, in his haste to reprimand me, he hadn’t noticed them. His anger was quickly replaced by concern. “What’s wrong with Henry?” he asked.

I’d been reading about Ancient Rome the night before; apparently, they used to kill messengers who brought bad news. “You should probably see for yourself,” I told him.

Keeping his hand locked on my shoulder, Martin shoved through the crowd. When Marge saw him, she finally snapped out of her comatose state and pretended she was doing something important. Martin blew right past her—and caught his first glimpse of Henry.

He said something in Spanish. I didn’t know what it meant, but I’ll bet a hundred dollars it was something for which I’d have been sent to my room for saying in English.

For maybe half a second, Martin seemed truly saddened by Henry’s death—and then his inner administrator kicked in. He immediately went into Damage Control Mode. “Go find Doc,” he told me. “Wherever he is. Tell him to get over here ASAP.”
I considered pointing out it was a bit too late for the head vet to help Henry, but decided against it. Martin probably wanted to get rid of me as much as he wanted to locate Doc. Meanwhile, his attention was already on other things. He instructed Marge to get all the tourists out of there, then started barking orders into his radio.

I knew better than to stick around after Martin had essentially told me to scram, but I felt compelled to take one last look at Henry. I’d seen plenty of deaths in Africa, so I wasn’t that freaked out by animal corpses, but something really bothered me about this one. I’d been at Hippo River the day before and Henry had been in a rare good mood, prancing about on the river bottom, putting on a great show for the tourists. He was only twenty, which was young for a hippo, and he’d certainly looked healthy. It didn’t make sense for him to be dead.

Suddenly, Marge grabbed me by the collar, yanking me away from the overlook. “What are you still doing here?” she growled.

“Trying to guess who’s bigger: Henry or you.”

Marge’s eyes narrowed in anger, but I wrenched free of her grasp before she could do anything. Then I raced off into FunJungle, leaving the corpse of the world’s most famous hippopotamus behind.
STUART GIBBS has written several screenplays including See Spot Run, Repli-Kate, and the upcoming Parental Guidance, and has developed TV shows for Nickelodeon, Disney Channel, ABC, and Fox. Before all that, he studied capybaras (the world’s largest rodents) and worked at the Philadelphia Zoo (which is run much better than FunJungle). He now lives in Los Angeles with his wife and two children, Dashiell and Violet. This is his first novel. Visit the author at stuart-gibbs.com.