

Carolyn F. Logan

LOVEY LION

"Jeremy, don't get so close to that cage. Jeremy."

"Puss-puss. See the puss-puss, Mum?"

"Jeremy." She struggled for a threatening note; her voice cracked and she gave up.

"Lovey puss-puss. I lovey puss-puss. Kiss-kiss puss-puss," the child crooned. "Kiss-kiss puss-puss."

"Jeremy, come away." In the pusher, Baby began to fuss. Panic fluttered in her throat. "Do as I say, Jeremy." Kneeling awkwardly, her skirt catching on the wheel, she scabbled in the bag that sagged from the handle, watching her son from the corner of her eye.

"Lovey puss-puss," Jeremy sang, trailing his hand in the air above the low wall as he moved around the cage. He came to a railing and walked under it, his fluffy white hair brushing it softly.

"Here, puss-puss," he called, putting out his hand and opening and closing the fingers over the palm. "Lovey puss-puss." He moved further around the cage, pushing behind some low bushes. There he climbed carefully up onto a drainpipe. He was near the bars of the cage, and leaning forward he thrust his arms even closer. "Here, puss-puss," he crooned. "Lovey puss-puss, give me kiss."

Across the cage, two yellow eyes blinked and then narrowed, focusing on the soft arms. A pink-tipped tongue flickered beneath the yellow eyes.

"Look, Mummy," called Jeremy. "Look at the puss-puss. Look!"

She turned her head away and looked down at Baby.

"Come puss-puss," he called. "Come kiss. See Mummy! The lovey puss-puss going to kiss me."

The lion rose and moved toward the boy, claws clicking on the floor of the cage.

"Lovey puss-puss. Come, puss-puss."

"Jeremy," she whimpered. She remained kneeling, one hand on the pusher while the other held the bottle for Baby. She gazed at the infant leaning eagerly into the nipple, eyes rolled up beneath half-closed lids,

showing only their whites. She shivered at the sight of those blank baby eyes.

Suddenly Baby turned her head, thrusting the nipple aside with her cheek and cried out. She leaped to her feet, screaming. "Jeremy! Stop!"

She did not want to look at the child's horribly lacerated arms, streaked with blood and gobbets of hanging flesh. She could not bear to see the mutilation of the soft downy head. Her knees trembled and her shaking hand dribbled milk down Baby's neck.

Jeremy's hand joggled her arm. "Mummy. The train! I want to go on the train."

"Jeremy." She allowed herself to turn her head. Her son stood beside her, untouched, a petulant thrust to his lower lip. He was going to frown, in a minute.

She lifted her head and threw a quick glance at the cage. The lion lolled on one haunch, eyes slitted against the sun. Languidly it began to lick at the pad of one forepaw, tongue pink and knowing.

She capped the bottle and threw it into the bag, took her son's hand and wheeling the baby before her, marched over to the small platform where the children's train was taking on passengers.

Faced with the noisy crowd around the train, Jeremy begged her to go with him, his pleading eyes wide with fear. She could not go with him, she said, giving his shoulder a shake. She had to stay with Baby, a fat sleeping lump in the sagging seat of the pusher.

She was lying and they both knew it. She could leave Baby there in the shade of that tree. Baby would remain oblivious, lips soft between fat, red cheeks, a dribble of milk glistening on her chin. Baby would never know.

The woman settled her son on one of the small open seats next to another wide-eyed child. "You're a big boy," she said, refusing to look into his eyes. "Ta-ta," she carolled and waved as the train whistled and moved off.

She watched as Jeremy clutched the side of the seat, his narrow shoulders hunched against the fearsome movement. Soft wisps of hair on the crown of his head drifted up in the breeze created by the motion of the little cars as they rattled and clattered along the narrow track.

"He's not old enough for all this," she thought and waited for the stab of remorse, under her breastbone. She turned away, dread sealing her eyes against those pathetic shoulders. With those same dread-filled eyes she saw the car on which Jeremy was riding tilt against a torn track and throw

the small downy boy out and under the wheels of the swiftly following cars. Blood spurted and gore splashed as the wheels cut into the flesh of his soft arms. The eyes, those eyes that had pleaded with her to understand his fear, rolled up and withdrew from his face, leaving a blank white stare.

The woman moaned as she sat in the shade of the tree, eyes closed, rocking the pusher with her toe.

Jeremy's face displayed a tight smile of triumph as the train rounded the last curve and slowly drew up to the platform. He climbed down and ran to her.

"Did you see me? Mum? On the train?"

With one hand she tucked in his shirt, while with the other she gripped his arm. He was shivering with excitement and exhilaration.

"Did you see? It went fast!" He pushed at her knees with his fists.

She gripped his arm tighter, feeling the soft flesh through his shirt and beneath the flesh, bone.

"Yes, Jeremy. Yes, I saw you."

Her tone and the grip of her hand on his arm silenced him. He stared up at her, a faint quiver of fear tugging at his left eyelid.

Carefully she released her hold on his arm and Jeremy stepped quickly out of reach. She thrust that hand into the other, gripping tightly, and looked away.

"Do you want an ice cream?" She bumped her knee on the bench as she lurched to her feet and the pusher bounced Baby cruelly as she shoved it toward the kiosk.

"Ice cream for Baby, too?" Jeremy trailed a couple of steps behind. She had not noticed that Baby was awake, kicking her fat heels against the faded canvas of the old pusher.

"Yes, one for Baby, too."

These days she had to think hard to remember the name of the child in the pusher. It was so much easier to call her Baby. At first, she had a name, did fat Baby. But it had vanished, sucked down into the dark reaches of her mind. Jeremy called her Baby, as well; poor Jeremy, not much more than a baby himself, standing beside her with ice cream dribbling down over his hands and wrists.

She turned her head and stared at him, tracing the dribbles of ice cream, the thick liquid flushed pink with the blood which spurted from the hole in the middle of his forehead. Jeremy's eyes rolled blankly and he turned his head to the left and then to the right, all the while staring at her through that ghastly bleeding eye in the middle of his forehead.

The gun smoked in her hand.

“Mummy! Baby wants ice cream.” Jeremy pushed her hand gently, the hand that held the second ice cream cone. She blinked and his pale forehead gleamed smooth and whole beneath his wispy hair. She pushed out with her hand and Baby opened her mouth wide, eagerly kissing the cold ice cream.

Jeremy held back, making a small show of independence when she said it was time to go home. But as she moved off, he ran to catch up and put out his hand to help push Baby.

Their way led past the lion cage. There Jeremy stopped and put out his hand, opening and closing his fingers over the small, sticky palm.

“Come puss-puss,” he called in his soft voice. “Lovey puss-puss.”

She watched her son call to the lion.

“Jeremy.” Her voice carried a note that stilled the child’s gesture, freezing his hand in its folded position.

“That is not a puss-puss. That is a lion.”

Jeremy turned his head and looked up at her, eyes white at the bottom.

“That is a lion,” she repeated slowly.

Jeremy lowered his eyes and turned his head back to look at the cage. “Lion,” he said.

“A lion can hurt you, Jeremy.” She had to whisper the words, her throat was so tight. “Hurt you badly. It is dangerous, a lion.” She was barely speaking, but she knew that her son heard. He hunched his shoulders beneath the thin shirt and the folded hand fell to his side.

The golden eyes of the lion glowed from the back of the cage.

“Hurt me?” Jeremy asked. “The lion hurt me?” He twisted his head again to look up at his mother.

“Yes, Jeremy. But not today.” She was forcing the words from her throat. “Not today. Today the lion is in its cage.”

She laid a hand on his shoulder and stroked the quiver of fear there. Together, they gazed through the bars of the cage into the wild yellow eyes of the lion.