

Machine of Death: Torn Apart and Devoured by Lions

by Jeffrey Wells

“Missus Murphy, I will have you know that I am to be torn apart and devoured by lions.”

Simon Pfennig was fully aware of how strange he must sound.

He had no choice. It was too exciting not to share.

There came a startled pause on the other end of the line. As might well be expected, thought Simon. He imagined her there, sitting in her parlor (did people even have “parlors” anymore?) listening to the salesman on the other end of the line droning on and on about Company X’s jolly new life insurance policy for citizens over 50, about the security it would bring to your family were you to suddenly keel over stone dead and how content you’d be, as the final darkness was falling, that you’d at least managed to avoid becoming a big fat financial burden and suddenly, *bam*, out of the blue, he drops a line like that. Damn straight she should be startled.

Eventually, the silence on the other end of the line was broken. “...Excuse me?” Mrs. Murphy eventually managed.

“I,” said Simon, “am to be torn apart and devoured by lions.”

“I’m sorry,” said Mrs. Murphy. “Weren’t you just talking to me about insurance a moment ago?”

“I was,” said Simon. “Now I’m talking about lions.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Murphy, apparently unsure of what to make of all this.

“Did you know that an adult male lion can consume up to seventy-five pounds of meat in a single meal? And that said meal will often have to last him an entire week?”

“I, er, did not.”

“That’d be two whole meals, out of me alone!” said Simon. “I’m guesstimating a bit, because I am not made *entirely* of meat.”

“Well. Who is?” replied Mrs. Murphy, gamely.

“Exactly. For one thing, there’s the matter of bones. I’m not quite certain how much my bones weigh. Lions don’t eat bones; they leave them behind for the hyenas to consume. But, you see, that doesn’t matter as much to me, Missus Murphy. Because I am to be torn apart and devoured by lions, not by hyenas.”

“So you said.”

“I will be long dead,” said Simon, “before the hyenas ever get ahold of me.”

“Ah...hah.”

“Naturally, though, I don’t expect myself to last the whole two weeks. Far from it! After all, as you know, I am to be torn apart and devoured by *lions*, plural, not ‘a lion.’ And it is uncommon for male lions to travel together, unless they’re roaming the savannah in unwed bachelor groups.” Simon leaned back in his chair and studied the single fluorescent fixture mounted above his tiny cubicle, imagining it for a moment to be the red-hot sun of the Serengeti. “No,” he continued, “far more likely, I am to be torn apart and devoured by lionesses, a group of huntresses intent on bringing food back for their leonine patriarch.”

“I...see.”

“As you might expect,” Simon went on, “I’ve given this some thought, and I have eventually come to the conclusion that the word ‘lions’ doesn’t necessarily refer to the male of the species exclusively. Good news for me, you understand, because I must confess to harboring this romantic notion of how it will all play out.”

Mrs. Murphy smiled into the phone; you could hear it in her voice. “Just got your prediction today, did you?”

“Actually,” said Simon, “it’s been seven weeks now.”

“Oh,” said Mrs. Murphy.

“But, I’m sorry, you’re quite right. We should probably go back to talking about life insurance now.” Simon cleared his throat, straightened his tie and put his salesman voice back on. It was a good salesman voice, keen and enthusiastic, and it bore shockingly little resemblance to the one he’d been using his entire workaday life up until that day about two months ago, the day Simon now liked to call “Torn Apart And Devoured By Lions Day.” “Missus Murphy,” the new, exciting Simon began, “did you know that in the event of your sudden, accidental death, your family might incur miscellaneous costs of upwards of—”

“Ah, see, there,” said Mrs. Murphy. “I’m sorry, I was waiting for something just like that. I’m to kick off from colon cancer, lad, not a stroke or a heart attack or anything quick like that. Plenty of time to get my affairs in order.”

A common response, these days. Simon knew the company line. “Many of our potential customers come to us with this same story, Missus Murphy,” said Simon. “Truth to tell, though you may believe that you know the circumstances surrounding your eventual demise based on your prediction alone, the fact of the matter is that the specifics can often be surprising. To both you and your loved ones.”

Mrs. Murphy chuckled. “Come now,” she said. “Have you ever heard of anyone crossing the street one day and getting hit by a runaway colon cancer?”

Simon had to admit that he had not.

“I’m fairly certain that I’m destined to pass away peacefully in a hospital bed, lad,” said Mrs. Murphy. “All shrouded in white and surrounded by my family. Probably in some pain, too, mind, but there’s little helping that.”

“Missus Murphy, if I might—”

“Lad,” said Mrs. Murphy, “I have my fantasy, just as you have yours. And I am unwilling to cheapen it by banking on the possibility that the chips might not fall that way.” Her voice smiled again. “You clearly have one of your own. And I think that if you think about it,” she said, “you’ll understand.”

Simon thought about it. And he did.

“Well,” he said, after a moment. “Good day to you, then.”

“To you as well,” said Mrs. Murphy. “May God bless. And say hello to the lions for me.”

“Will do, Missus Murphy,” said Simon.

There was a click as Mrs. Murphy disconnected the line, and then a low, steady drone. Dutifully, Simon's auto-dialer started in on another number.

"Dude," said Scott, the guy in the cubicle next door. "You gotta cut that out. Armbruster is going to be mighty horked if he ever catches you in the middle of that."

Simon pulled his chair closer to his desk, fully intending to ignore his wall-mate, as per usual. After all, he had insurance to sell.

"You can't let this Death Machine crap run your life, man," continued Scott, heedless, as Simon waited for his line to pick up. "I mean, geez, look at you. Ever since you did that stupid prediction thing, you've gone, like, totally mental on us. With the suit, and the tie, and—"

Simon's line picked up; it was an answering machine. Simon dropped his headset to his neck for a moment and rolled his chair back. "Customers can hear the tie, Scott," said Simon. "Just like they can hear a smile."

"Uh huh," said Scott. "So d'ya suppose they can hear this little stain here on my shirt, too?"

"I believe they can," said Simon.

"Wow," said Scott, with feigned amazement. "Those are some really keen ears right there, Simon." He snickered and spun his chair around a couple of times. "Dude, you have lost it, man," he said.

Simon pulled himself back to his desk, replacing his headphones just in time to hear the answering machine disconnect. "To each," he said, with measured patience, "his own."

"I'm sorry, what?" said Scott. "I couldn't hear you there, dude. Between my stain and your tie there's just too damn much noise goin' on around here."

Simon just shook his head as the auto-dialer worked its magic again, preparing to serve him up another golden opportunity. It was hard to get too angry with Scott about his little jibes. After all, thought Simon, Scott was likely bored and a bit depressed and was probably compensating for it by taking his frustrations out on the people around him. But he was fundamentally a good guy. He just needed a life goal or two; it would fix him right up.

It had certainly fixed Simon right up. He himself had two life goals: (1) being torn apart by, and (2) being devoured by, lions.

And that had made all the difference, really.

The morning rolled on in a series of polite refusals, and soon it came time for lunch. Standing by the break room microwave, Simon marveled at how quickly the day was going. It was to be a short lunch; Simon had been thinking of ways to improve the company's sales script, and since the auto-dialer gave him only limited opportunities to hash them out on work-time, he was thinking of devoting some of his break to the task.

"Hey, Simon," said one of his co-workers, coming up from behind. Brad. Blue-eyed, fair-haired and a bit on the pudgy side. Simon and he had joined up with the company about the same time, and Brad had quickly latched on to him as a conversational partner. Simon didn't mind; Brad was, also, a fundamentally good guy. "I'm a head to Mickey's in a minute. You want I should pick you up some fries or something?"

“Not today, Brad!” said Simon, twirling an empty little coated cardboard box in his hands, the erstwhile contents of which were now warming pleasantly in the microwave nearby. “Today I’m having Rosemary Chicken with Vegetables.”

“Rosemary,” said Brad, frowning. “Is that an herb or something?”

“Indeed it is,” replied Simon.

Brad thought about this for a moment. “So you’re eating herbs now?” he said, eventually.

“Yep,” said Simon. “It’s only polite, I figure. After all, you are what you eat. Right, Brad?”

“Well, I guess I pretty much gotta be a triple-stacker roast beef melt by now,” said Brad.

“Quite possibly,” said Simon, diplomatically. “But for me? No.” Simon smiled to himself, his eyes going distant. “No, Brad, from here on in, I intend to make myself exceptionally, even exquisitely, healthy. And, if possible,” he added, “herb-flavored.”

Brad narrowed his eyes. “Wait a sec,” he said. “This isn’t the thing about being eaten by the lions again, is it?”

“It will always be the thing about being eaten by the lions, Brad. From here on in, until it occurs.”

“You’re obsessed, guy.”

Simon grinned. “Perhaps,” he said.

“Totally!” called out Scott from his corner table. He sneered at them around and through a mouthful of sandwich.

“Hey, shut up,” said Brad.

“Make me, fatboy,” Scott replied. Then he chucked a piece of onion at him.

“Little snot,” muttered Brad, picking the onion out of his hair. “Look, Simon,” he said, putting his hand on Simon’s shoulder. “Little friendly advice. You don’t have to be a Machine of Death slave like this. Don’t be trapped by it. Use it to free yourself.” Brad spread his arms wide, exposing his substantial midsection. “I mean, look at me.”

“Can’t not,” said Scott, swallowing his latest bite. “You take up our entire visual field.”

“Hmph,” said Brad, raising both his chins in a dignified fashion and turning his back to Scott’s table. “Look at me, Simon. Here I am, going to die in a car crash or something. So, I don’t worry about the roast beef melts anymore. I don’t worry about the soda refills. And I don’t worry about getting the chili and the cheese on the fries instead of going healthy and eating them without.” He smiled amiably. “You see?” he said. “Little changes. I know it won’t matter what I eat, so I eat what I want. And I’m happier for it.”

Brad shook his head, then. “But you, Simon. You’re thinking about this thing all the time now. It can’t be good for you.”

“I *want* to think about this thing all the time, Brad,” said Simon, earnestly. “I am looking forward to it. Like you wouldn’t believe.”

“For Pete’s sake, Simon,” said Brad. “Why?”

“Because,” Simon replied, his pale brown eyes as wide as the veldt itself, “it will be the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Brad shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said. "But I read in this self-help book my mom gave me that you shouldn't sacrifice your now just because you're looking forward to being eaten by a bunch of lions at some point in the future."

"Don't worry," said Simon. "I'm not sacrificing my now. I'm happier, healthier, and more vital than I've ever been." He smiled. "The thing is, Brad," he said, "everything I do for my lions? It makes my life better too."

There came the sound of a throat clearing from the door of the break room. Simon looked up.

"Pfennig," said Paul Armbruster (Vice President In Charge Of Targeted Media Solicitation), leaning into the room. "When you have a moment. My office, please."

Silence. Simon gathered his smile. "Certainly, sir," he said, tossing the box from his frozen dinner into a nearby waste container and stepping toward the door.

"After lunch is fine," said Mr. Armbruster. The tips of his moustache lifted in a tiny grimace, as though someone had invisibly popped by with an eyedropper full of lemon juice and given him a bit. "But soon. We need to talk about your...performance."

Simon's smile did not falter. "'Performance' in the sense of 'how I'm doing relative to the quota'?"

"No," said Mr. Armbruster, sucking on his tongue thoughtfully. "'Performance' in the sense of 'Ooh, ooh, look at the dancing bear; now look, he's riding a little unicycle.' That type of performance. Specifically," he added, "your performance earlier this morning, Pfennig."

"Right," said Simon, his smile still adamant. "After lunch, then?"

"Yes," said Mr. Armbruster. "If you please." He then vanished from sight.

The subsequent quiet was broken only by the noise of Scott sniggering quietly to himself in the corner.

Brad smiled at Simon, sheepishly.

The microwave went 'ding.'

"Pfennig," said Mr. Armbruster, motioning to the chair opposite his desk with one hand and taking a moment to fine-tune his rather heroic comb-over with the other. "Sit down, please."

"You wanted to speak with me, sir?" said Simon, taking a seat.

"That is, in fact, why you are sitting in my office right now," said Mr. Armbruster.

A moment passed as Armbruster sucked on his tongue again for a bit. Then he leaned forward and nudged a small brass dish out from behind a fancy little wooden desk clock and over toward Simon. "Malted milk ball?" he asked.

"Don't mind if I do," said Simon, cheerfully helping himself to one.

Armbruster regarded Simon as he sat, there, crunching. "You understand," he began, "why I brought you in here today."

"I think so," said Simon, swallowing his candy. "You're about to tell me a piece of bad news."

Armbruster sighed. “Simon,” he said. “I want to start by telling you that I’ve been really quite pleased with your new-found gumption and enthusiasm for selling insurance policies over the telephone. You show a level of dedication that is...well, let’s say, uncommon in these halls. You remind me a bit of myself when I was your age.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Simon.

“That having been said,” said Armbruster, leaning forward even further, “I need you to stop describing to our potential customers, in gruesome detail, how you’re planning on going to Africa and getting eaten by a lion.”

“Lions,” corrected Simon, politely.

“My point,” said Armbruster, “remains a salient one.”

“I see,” said Simon, biting his lip. “‘Gruesome’ detail, though, sir?” he asked, then. “I mean, I realize that I’ve been a bit chatty on the fact to some of them, but—”

Armbruster reached beneath his desk and produced a portable cassette player. He clicked at a button.

“—Organ meats!” came Simon’s voice. “Not as desirable as the muscle meats, mind you, which are frequently claimed by the dominant male of the pride, but certainly full of good, nutritious—”

Armbruster clicked the ‘stop’ button.

The clock on the desk ticked a handful of times.

“Well...yes,” said Simon. “I can see where you might—”

“I don’t know if I’m imparting the proper gravity to this situation, Simon,” Mr. Armbruster interrupted. “So I will make it perfectly clear to you that I have no desire to see Consolidated Amalgamated Mutual become known as ‘That Place With The Guy Who’s Always Going On About Lions.’ To this end, I am warning you that I absolutely, positively will not tolerate any further behavior of this sort. Do we understand one another, Mister Pfennig?”

“Mm hm!” said Simon, cheerily.

Armbruster narrowed his eyes at Simon. “Let me try this again,” he said, picking up a pencil in an attempt to add emphasis to his words. “We are talking about you *losing your job with us*, Simon. You don’t want to be unemployed in this city. Not in this economic climate. Trust me.”

Simon nodded brightly. “I understand, sir,” he said.

“You don’t seem like you understand,” said Mr. Armbruster. “I’m looking for a little solemnity or something.”

Simon pondered for a moment. “Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“This isn’t the military, Simon,” said Mr. Armbruster.

“Well,” said Simon. He gathered himself. “The thing is, sir, it’s really hard for me to get worked up at the prospect of losing my job, sir.” He raised a hand against Armbruster’s objection. “Now, I don’t mean that,” he continued. “I will try to restrain myself from talking about my lions to the customers from here on in. But if I can’t...?” Simon shrugged. “Well, another job will be on the way. After all, I have to

fund my African safari *somehow*.” He smiled. “These are more than just idle hopes and dreams now, Mister Armbruster,” he said. “They’re part of my destiny.”

Armbruster regarded Simon for a moment, then shook his head.

“You are a strange little guy,” said Armbruster. “If you were any less of a salesman, I’d be handing you your pink slip now and personally ushering your behind out of this building while I instructed Stacy to prepare an invoice charging you for the milk ball. But for every lion mutilation story I’ve got on tape, there’re two or more instances of you winning over a stubborn customer on attitude alone. And that’s the kind of attitude we need around here. Desperately.”

“‘Desperately,’ sir?” inquired Simon.

Armbruster tapped his pencil on the desk a couple of times. “I don’t know if I should even be talking with you about this,” he said. “According to the last Board of Directors meeting, Consolidated Amalgamated Mutual isn’t doing so well. It’s not bad,” he added, quickly. “But comparing our first-quarter sales to how we were doing two years ago, well, it’s sobering. To say the least. And that’s companywide, Simon. It’s not just Targeted Media Solicitation. It’s across the board.”

He sighed, deeply, and tossed his pencil back into the little cup on his desk. “It’s this damn Machine of Death thing, Simon,” he said. “We’re in the uncertainty business, here. All we’ve got to offer the world is protection against the frightening, unpredictable future. You give the people something, anything, to latch on to, something that gives them a sense of control—even a false one—and suddenly, well, they don’t need us anymore.”

“I’m sure we’ll come through this all right,” Simon volunteered.

“Oh, I know,” said Armbruster, pushing his chair back and rising to a stand. “I know. We weathered that damn ‘no-call list’ thing all right, and I suppose we’ll pull through this, too.” Armbruster rounded the desk and patted Simon on the back; Simon stood, sensing his cue. “But to do it,” said Armbruster, “we’re going to need all our salesmen giving us one hundred and ten, or perhaps fifteen, percent. Can you do that for me, Simon?”

“Yes, sir!” said Simon.

“Good,” said Armbruster, ushering him to the door. “Now get back out there and sell us some policies, all right?”

“Will do, sir!” said Simon, disappearing out the door.

“And NO LIONS!” added Mr. Armbruster, calling after him. But if Simon Pfennig had a response to this, Mr. Armbruster did not hear it.

He sat back against the corner of his desk for a while after Simon had gone, listening to the whirr of the air-handler and the steady ticking of the clock.

“Wish I were looking forward to my heart attack like that,” said Mr. Armbruster.