

# THE LIONS ROAR AT DUSK

Driving south on the interstate, I took notice of a lot of semis loaded with sod heading north. I mention that because my wife Helen and I were going to visit her brother Brett in South Florida, and he happens to be in the sod business. We arrived at his home place on Saturday afternoon with a heavy rain beating on the windshield. We had to wait about fifteen minutes before we could get out of the car. When the rain finally stopped, I opened the car door, and my first step sank into the waterlogged mud about two inches.

Standing on the front porch, Brett called out, “Welcome to sunny South Florida.”

Helen gave her brother a big hug, and I purposely shook his hand with a firmer than normal grip.

“You really know how to put on a greeting, Brett,” I said.

“Just for you, my friend,” replied Brett. “Renee will be back in a few minutes. She had to run to the grocery store to pick up some additional supplies, given your healthy appetite, Jack.”

“I have to take advantage of you whenever I can,” I said.

Saturday night was filled with all the usual family stuff – gossip, photo albums and so on.

Sunday morning we went to First Baptist Church with Brett, Renee, and the kids. Brett frequently introduced us as the ‘black sheep’ of the family – we’re Lutheran.

“I wasn’t sure they would let us in the door, Brett. You know, with our denominational background.”

“Nonsense, my friend. Remember in Luke 5, Jesus was asked, ‘Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors, sinners, and Lutherans?’”

“I seem to remember that passage a little differently. You must be quoting from a Baptist Bible.”

“Is there any other?” asked Brett.

I pulled out my little notepad and made a few entries.

“What are you writing?” asked Brett.

“Just a few mementos to use against you later,” I answered.

“What if I die tomorrow before you have a chance to use them?”

“The good thing about these is that they work equally well at funerals.”

Monday morning the girls did their own thing, and Brett took me out for an adventure in his pickup truck. After leaving his home place, we turned onto a narrow, rough highway that was bordered by stout guardrails. Up ahead, we could see a mass of red lights.

“I wonder what’s going on up there, Brett?”

“Oh, they’re probably fishing out another one.”

“Fishing out another one?”

“Yeah, they are always pulling out a car that has gone into the canal. They’ve got about five more miles to go in putting up these guardrails. People drive too fast on this rough, narrow road. Once they’re done with the guardrails, they’re supposed to start resurfacing with new asphalt. But we’ll be turning off before we get to the accident.”

About a quarter mile later, Brett pulled onto a wide rock road on the left.

“I’m going to show you a big operation first. A friend of mine runs this sod farm for a big corporate outfit. They’ve got five thousand acres of pure muckland. This farm is all St. Augustine grass in different varieties. This first block is the Floratam variety. St. Augustine is a spreading type of grass with stolons. You’ll notice that they leave a narrow strip between each row of grass that they harvest. Down at the end of this field you can see a big tractor pulling a large roller that goes over the strips helping to compress them into the muck, so the field stays smooth. Over time, those strips grow back together forming a new plot ready to harvest. In this next block, you can see the harvester cutting the strips of sod and bringing them up so the workers on the back can stack them onto pallets. Here comes a tractor and wagon unit that will drive onto the field so the forklift can load up the pallets of sod on the wagon. He’ll then haul the pallets down to the loading ramp where the trucks are lined up.”

“Quite a large, well-run operation,” I remarked.

“Yes, a bit of a contrast to what we are doing, though the end result is the same,” said Brett.

Leaving the big farm, we got back onto the highway. Another quarter mile and Brett turned right onto an old, but sturdy, narrow wooden bridge that led onto the farm where he was working. I'm glad he was driving, because I probably wouldn't have crossed such a bridge with only a little room to spare on each side of the vehicle.

“There sure are a lot of logs floating in this canal, Brett.”

“If you look a little closer, you will see that those floating logs have eyes ... Yeah, alligators.”

The bridge suddenly felt narrower to me.

“What happens if your truck breaks down on this bridge?”

“Well, in these times, we would use the cell phone and call out to somebody in the field to come rescue us. Not that many years ago, though, before there were cell phones, you would have to crawl out the window, make your way to the bed of the truck, and then climb over the top and across the hood. From there, it would be a long walk back to the field to get help.”

“Simple as that, huh?”

“Yes, sir. All the while you would have an audience down there watching for any missteps.”

Back on solid ground, we went about a hundred yards, and Brett pulled off onto a little side path. He sat and waited.

“What are we doing, Brett?”

“Loaded trucks always have the right-of-way.”

“What?”

Thirty seconds later, a fully loaded semi came around the bend and gave us a toot with his air horn.

“Look over there at the edge of the canal, Jack.”

“Are those otters?”

“Yeah, sometimes it’s fun to just sit and watch them for a few minutes. They can be very playful.”

The farm that we were on was owned by a cattle rancher who wanted to refurbish some of his pastures. He contracted with Brett’s company to remove the existing Argentine Bahia grass so he could replant. After so many years, the Bahia

grass can get a little woody and be less palatable for the cattle.

Brett prepares the old grass for sod harvesting in multiple stages. The first block we stopped at had tractors mowing the tall, neglected field. After windrowing and drying, the baler does its work.

The next block, which had already been mowed and baled, had a tractor pulling a trailer with a propane tank and a wide boom that sat very low to the ground. The propane burner actually set fire to the remaining residue and grass mix. Of course, that could only be done on a calm day with a water tanker running parallel. In a few weeks, the blackened field began sprouting lush new growth.

Then we came to the field where the harvesting crews worked at cutting and stacking the sod on pallets. The trucks pulled directly onto the fields to get loaded.

Bahia grass was in great demand for roadsides, erosion control, and areas with no irrigation because it was so drought tolerant once it became established.

No strips were left behind with Bahia grass, so the rancher could then replant with a pasture of his choice. Of course, he consulted with the cows for their opinion first.

Brett and I spent the entire day at the field operation while his two brothers managed the retail and installation end of things. While Brett had been doing this kind of work since he was a teenager, and he had the operation running smoothly, there were always problems. He had a sixteen-foot van trailer in the field that he stored spare parts in for the inevitable equipment breakdowns. Sometimes they would hit a patch of sandier soil where the sod pieces wouldn't hold together very well. When a heavy rain came, like we had on Saturday, they often had to use a bulldozer to help push the loaded trucks out of the field.

This day was relatively trouble free and as dusk came the equipment was turned off and the crews left. Brett and I walked along a fence line headed back to his pickup truck in eerie silence. It had been an interesting day, and I certainly had a better appreciation for that piece of turfgrass that I might buy to fill in a hole in my yard.



When I saw a huge diamondback rattlesnake cross our path some thirty feet ahead, I said, “Whoa!”

“Perhaps I failed to mention about the snakes,” said Brett. “But he’s not paying us any mind as he seems to be in a hurry to get home.”

Pausing until we were sure he was a safe distance away, we continued on towards his truck. All of a sudden, I heard a loud noise. It startled me so much that I almost tripped and fell.

“What was that, Brett?”

“Oh, that noise?”

“Yes.”

“Lions,” he said succinctly.

“Lions, out here?” I asked nervously. “In South Florida?”

“Yes, I forgot to tell you. This field backs up to a wildlife preserve. The lions are just beyond that brush line.”

“You forgot to tell me about the lions?”

“An insignificant oversight on my part.”

“There is a substantially higher fence than this barbed wire cow fence between us and them, isn’t there?”

“Oh, of course ... Of course ... Unless one happened to ... No, I don’t think that’s happened lately.”

“Is there anything else you forgot to tell me?”

“Quite possibly ... Quite possibly ... But it will probably come to me later.”

Then I heard the lions roar again. This time they sounded much closer. I increased the speed of my pace back to Brett’s truck, while my brother-in-law walked behind me, smiling.