

## Middle of the Pack By E.T. Thorbens

There was a deep, sinister roar in the distance. I heard the group scream in terror as they ran for the nearest exit. The tiger was tracking closely behind us. He knew our every move and felt the vibration of our heartbeats. Babies were crying as mothers frantically hushed their outbursts. Chaos was swirling around me, but I knew I had to follow my grandfather and mom who were a few steps in front of me.

This story all started on July 20, 2013. I was six at the time. My mom booked tickets to go to an animal sanctuary near Palm Coast, Florida. It sounded fun. While my mom and I were getting into the car, my grandfather was getting the snacks.

“Are you ready, Dad?” asked my mom.

“Yeah, I’m ready. Let’s go!” huffed my grandfather.

As my grandfather lumbered into the car, my mother slightly shuddered. I saw her body tremor, but she didn’t say anything. It occurred to me that my mom might have been nervous.

It was a twenty-minute drive to the sanctuary. As we meandered through the backcountry of Northern Florida, my mom exclaimed, “I feel like we are missing something, BUT I DON’T KNOW WHAT IT IS! Ellie, are you feeling fine?”

“Yeah, I feel fine, why?” I responded, but I was half annoyed at the question.

“I don’t know,” my mom said exasperated. “Dad, are you sure this animal sanctuary is safe?” my mom questioned.

“You need to quit your worrying, Jenn. Everything is fine. This is known to be one of the best places to visit in Palm Coast!” said my grandfather.

My mind wandered off, and I started to think about the animals that I would see. Most importantly, though, I thought of the souvenir that I would buy at the end of the tour. I had my eyes set on one of those plastic elephants you get from the wax machine. The smell of the plastic made me sneeze, but the elephant always had amazing details.

When we arrived, my mom applied my sunscreen. It was about 100 degrees so she wanted to make sure she did a good job covering me. I wiggled around because the aerosol spray was really cold.

“Stay still!” my mom shouted.

“I am sorry. It feels like a polar ice bath!” I exclaimed.

We headed into the sanctuary where we met our tour guide and our group. Our group seemed particularly large. While I counted the people on the tour, our guide explained the rules, and I tried to feign interest.

“Okay, hello everyone! I am sure you are all very excited, but you need to know a couple of rules first. You *cannot* touch the cages. You *must* not stray away from the path we go on, and in case of an emergency, we will announce it, and you must remain quiet. Okay, LET’S HAVE FUN GUYS!” bellowed the tour guide. No one cheered or really even listened. A few of the other kids on the tour squirmed as their parents read the map.

We started on the trail. The trail was muddy, and it made keeping up with the tour guide challenging. As we passed the animal enclosures, I was distracted by leopards, gorillas, lions, and tigers. They paced the perimeter of their cages and stared at their visitors. I was fascinated because these animals seemed so powerful. There was only a simple, and at times, rickety fence between us and the animals, but I felt safe because I was surrounded by my family and the group.

“Hey Jenn look at this!” beckoned my grandfather as he was pointing to a broken lock. My mom glanced over and immediately gasped. The lock was broken, and there was no animal in the cage.

The comment, as well as her less-than-calm reply, sparked a stir. People around us started panicking which, consequently, caused the tour guide to turn around. The tour guide inspected the lock and used her walkie-talkie to contact her superior. Over the muffling of the tour guide’s radio, everyone descended into mayhem. There was a broken lock and an empty cage. What animal was roaming about?

After conferring with her colleague, the tour guide, armed only with a walkie-talkie, frantically announced that a tiger had been let loose in the sanctuary. While we had not seen this rogue tiger yet, the tour guide reminded our group that we needed to stay quiet to avoid drawing the tiger’s attention. Muffled shrieks were coming from our group as people pushed and hurried ahead.

At that moment, my grandfather turned to me and whispered, “Ellie, you do not need to panic. You do not need to run to the head of the group. You just have to outrun the last person. Sometimes, there’s safety in being middle of the pack.” It seemed as if time stopped. I couldn’t even respond. Was this really happening? I was in terrible danger.

In that instant, my life flashed before my eyes. The statement registered so clearly in my mind. I was being hunted by a tiger. I knew what I had to do. I had to make sure that I was in the middle of the pack.

The group was sloshing in the mud, and the sucking sounds that our shoes made seemed to echo through the sanctuary. Then, a deadly silence seized us. There were no crying babies and no tour guide radio chatter. I could cut the tension with a knife. Almost, as in a sudden blast, there was a distinct roar of a tiger nearby. The group uttered a collective ear-piercing scream that beat in my eardrums and sent the hair on my neck standing. People scattered like ants. The tiger was tracking us. Chaos circled me, but I knew that I had to follow my grandfather's advice. His words still echo in my mind.

I repeated it over and over. "Ellie, you do not need to panic. You do not need to run to the head of the group. You just have to outrun the last person. Sometimes, there's safety in being middle of the pack."

Hand in hand with my family, we made sure to put people between us and the tiger. In what seemed like miles but was probably more like yards, we made it to the front gates of the facility. We had finally reached an exit. I turned back and saw about ten other people behind us. My eyes filled up with tears, and I whirled toward my mom.

"Mommy, do you think they'll be okay?" I timidly asked.

"I don't know Ellie, but we need to leave now" my mom stressed.

We dashed to the car with one of the tour guides following behind us. My grandfather and I heaved ourselves into the car.

"Miss, miss, excuse me, miss!" said the tour guide from behind. "I know you weren't happy with your visit. Here are refund tickets, we hope you come again!"

My mom jumped into the car, slammed the door, and shrieked "HELL NO!" My grandfather hit the gas and drove until we arrived at his condo. We didn't stop once, and I am quite sure we broke the speed limit the whole way back.

When I got out of the car I was still shaking. An adrenaline rush just passed over me.

"What a story we have! I think I am going to get a shower now. I am all sweaty!" exclaimed my grandfather.

The rest of the night I spent alone. I did not eat dinner because I felt like I was going to throw up. I wondered what happened to the other people...

As that thought sank into me, I realized that sometimes it's ok to be middle of the pack,  
just as long as you are not l a s t.

**THE END**