

Books by Adam Baron

BOY UNDERWATER

YOU WON'T BELIEVE THIS

THIS WONDERFUL THING

SOME SUNNY DAY

Adam Baron

Oscar's Lion



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Davies



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Chapter One

When Oscar woke up that Friday morning, he had no idea that a massive and very wild animal had entered his house. He'd been dreaming, images rushing through his mind like a raging river. The dream had seemed important, as dreams can, and he tried to hold on to the churning pictures. They vanished though, so he sat up, reached over to his bedside table and grabbed it – not just a book.

The book. His complete and absolute favourite.

Mack and the Lost Truck.



Oscar stared at the shiny cover. The book was too young for him now, but he didn't care because it was special. He got out of bed, about to run along the landing to his parents' room. Then he stopped.

Odd.

On a school day, Oscar's parents normally woke him up at 7.15, but the clock on his wall said 7.25! They must have overslept, so Oscar hurried towards their bedroom door, clutched the handle and turned it. He pushed the door open, expecting, of course, to see the familiar sleeping forms of his mum and dad, two long mountain ranges that he still loved climbing on. But Oscar did not see his parents lying there.

Their duvet was quite flat.

And sitting on it was something that stopped Oscar in his tracks so that all he could do was stare.

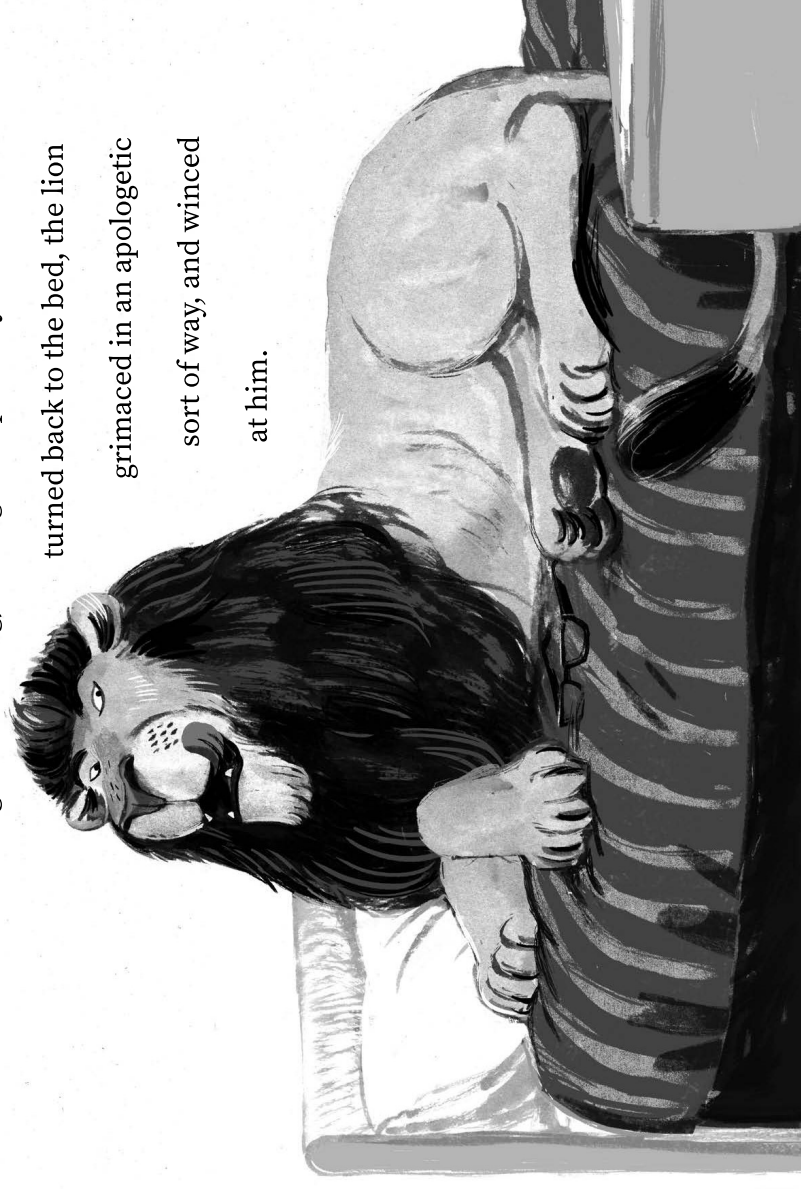
A lion.

A very big and very real male lion.

'Ah,' said the lion, turning to look at Oscar.

Oscar didn't reply. He simply couldn't – of course. He just blinked at the lion's massive head and shaggy black mane, at the huge paw the lion had been licking and was now setting back down on the bed in slight embarrassment. Oscar scanned the bedroom, taking in some bits of paper held down by a paperweight on his mum's dressing table, and a chair on which a pile of clean washing was tottering, waiting to be put away. When he

turned back to the bed, the lion grimaced in an apologetic sort of way, and winced at him.



Oscar swallowed. 'Have you seen . . . ?' he began.

'Yes?' enquired the lion, its voice like a rumble of thunder.

'My . . . ' Oscar couldn't say it. 'My . . . ?'

'Parents?' suggested the lion.

'Yes,' Oscar said, glad, for some reason, that he hadn't had to say it himself.

'Ah,' said the lion again. 'Were there . . . two of them?'

Oscar nodded. 'The father tall? Blue pyjamas? A little

patch at the back of his head where the hair has stopped growing?'

'Yes,' Oscar agreed, without much enthusiasm. 'That sounds like . . . '

'And the mother? Blue eyes? Golden hair? Pretty ankles?'

'I'm not sure about the ankles. I mean, that ankles can be pretty.'

'But the rest?'

'Yes,' Oscar said, really wishing he was saying no instead. 'And, if she was next to my dad, then it definitely would have been her.'

'Ah,' said the lion, for the third time. And then it grimaced again, in a way that told Oscar that it had *done* something. And Oscar had a horrible feeling that he knew what that something was, though he really hoped he was wrong.

The lion let out a long, and slightly smelly, sigh. 'It's just . . . ' it began.

'Yes?' said Oscar.

'Well, it's just this whole, well, being a lion. Thing.'

'Is it?'

'It most certainly is. One would like sometimes not to be one. To be, perhaps, a hamster. Something small and furry. Or a budgerigar.'

'A . . . ?'

'You know, a budgie. Bright feathers. All flitty here and

there and here again. Lovely song. But . . .’

‘You’re not one of those?’

‘No,’ the lion said. ‘As you can see, I am not. And that’s hardly my fault, is it? I mean, you couldn’t suddenly stop being you, could you? And be, say, a peacock?’

Oscar couldn’t really argue with that. It would be very difficult indeed. He doubted whether he could even be a different person, let alone a different animal altogether.

He had another look round the room and noted, again, the pieces of paper on the dressing table and the washing.

Everything seemed completely normal. If there was no other explanation for the absence of his parents, then it was just one of those things, however difficult that was to accept. Something did bother him though – and quite a lot.

‘Was it . . .?’

The lion seemed to guess what he was thinking.

‘Ghastly? Oh no,’ it said, shaking its head in a way that was clearly intended to reassure. ‘Trust me.’

Oscar blinked. He’d begun to see rather awful pictures in his mind of what he now presumed must have occurred mere seconds before he had pushed his parents’ door open. There was no actual sign of anything, however, and Oscar was about to ask about this. The lion, though, was looking at Oscar’s hand.

‘What’s that?’ it asked.

‘Oh,’ Oscar said. ‘A book.’ He stared at it.

‘Is it now? And were you . . .?’

‘Yes?’ said Oscar.

‘Going to ask your parents to read it to you?’

‘My mum,’ said Oscar. ‘Though I can read it myself.’

‘I don’t doubt that for a second. But it’s nice to be read to.’

‘It is, though Mum would probably have groaned. She would have said, “Not that again,” or, “Haven’t you grown out of that yet?” She would have poked my dad awake instead.

He would have yawned and said, “Heavens, must we?

Surely you know what happens to blessed Mack by now!”

‘But he would have read it to you?’ Oscar nodded. ‘Well, how perfectly awful.’

Mournfully, Oscar nodded again.

‘In that case, nothing for it then, is there? Jump on up.’

And the lion moved over to the far side of the bed, to make room.

Oscar stayed right where he was. He could feel *Mack and the Lost Truck* in his left hand and he so did want to have it read to him. But he frowned.

‘How can I be sure that . . . ?’

‘That?’

‘You won’t . . .’

‘Ah,’ said the lion, for the fourth time that morning.

And then it offered Oscar all the assurances it could think of, the most convincing being that, while it had been ferociously hungry at certain points in its life, it certainly wasn’t now.

‘Currently, I am quite full.’

‘But how long will you stay full?’

The lion tilted its head to the side and pressed its lips together. ‘Two days,’ it said. ‘I promise you. I will not need to eat for two whole days. Hop up!’

And so Oscar did. He hopped up beside the enormous lion, still a little uneasy as the lion took *Mack and the Lost Truck* from him and put one of its great, muscular forelegs round his shoulders.

Oscar waited, but the lion blinked, unable to start until it had taken Oscar’s dad’s reading glasses from the bedside table and put them on. Then it opened up *Mack and the Lost Truck* and began.

And what a performance!

The lion read slowly, not trying to whizz through to the end. It did amazing voices, including one for the *Lost Truck* itself, which it produced from right down inside its throat and that seemed to shake the very bed. And, on completion, the lion didn’t just toss the book aside. Its

yellow eyes opened very wide, the black lump at the end of its tail thumping the mattress in delight.

‘Fantastic!’ it boomed. ‘Again?’

And, after Oscar had nodded, the lion did read the story again. And even better this time, pausing dramatically just before page four when Mack first sees the Lost Truck! The third reading was better still, and by the fifth time it was as if he, Oscar, really *was* Mack, and the bed was the Lost Truck itself!

The lion turned back to the beginning yet again but, for the first time in his life, it was Oscar who decided that he’d had enough. He’d heard a gurgling sound and was very pleased to realise that it had come from his own stomach.

Not the lion’s.

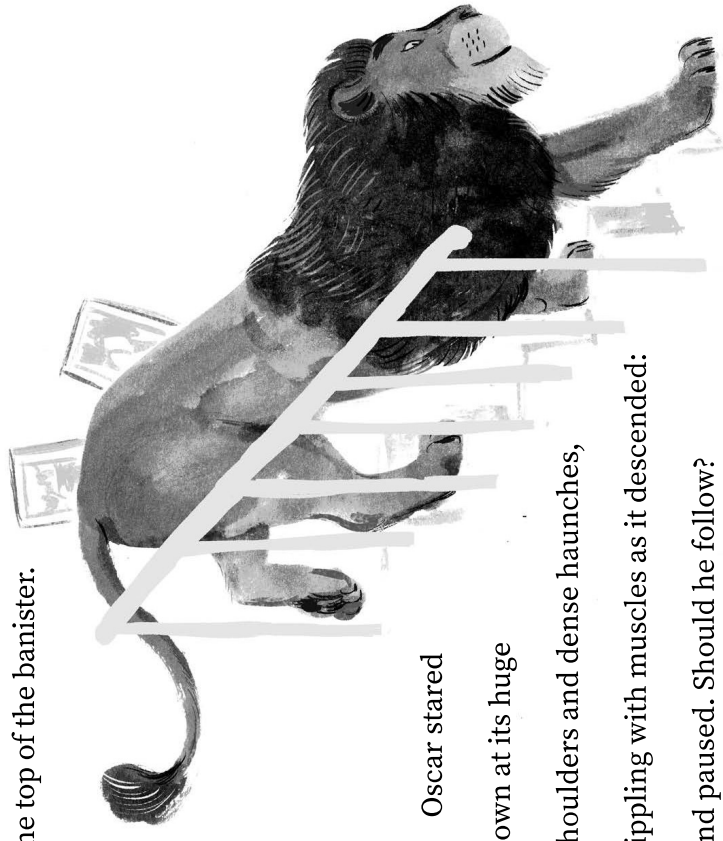
‘I’m hungry,’ he said.

The lion laid the book down on the duvet. ‘We’d better go and have our breakfast then, hadn’t we?’

Oscar stared.

‘Sorry. I mean, *you’d* better go and have *your* breakfast. Come on.’

And, with that, the lion hauled its huge frame on to all fours, its head knocking the lampshade to and fro. It stepped off the bed on to the floor, and Oscar slid down too, trailing after the lion as it padded out to the landing, where it left giant indents in the carpet before rounding the top of the banister.



Oscar stared down at its huge shoulders and dense haunches, rippling with muscles as it descended: and paused. Should he follow?

Really?

I mean, was this happening? Had his parents actually been . . . ?

Oscar didn't know, though one thing was clear: they weren't here to look after him, were they? The answer was a definite no, something underlined when Oscar turned back to the doorway he'd just come out of. He stared at the very vacant, now slightly crumpled bed.

On the floor, beside it, two pairs of empty-looking slippers sat, side by side.

