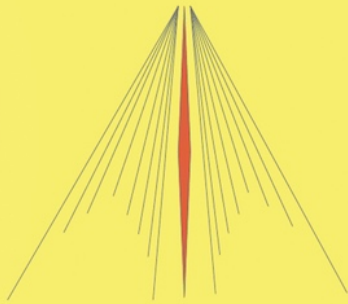


WHAT HAPPENS MATTERS



A Charade

JACK COPPEDGE

In this city the crime rate is dropping. Health problems are improving. Zoo animals are experiencing behavior changes. All this only in this one city!

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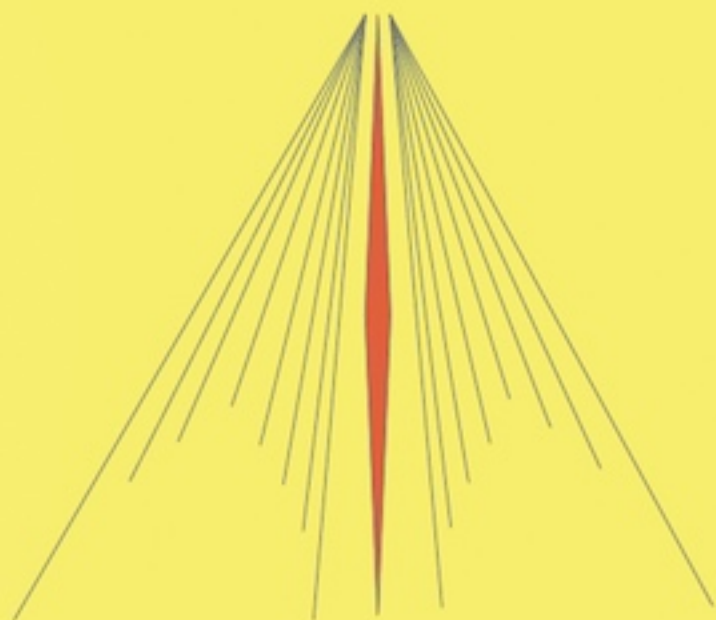
by Jack Coppedge

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ISBN: 978-1-64438-660-6

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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No factual reference is intended in any respect.

This a fairytale,
but just imagine...

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2019

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Coppedge, Jack

What Happens Matters by Jack Coppedge

Fiction/Medical | Fiction/Mystery & Detective/General |

Fiction/Science Fiction/Crime & Mystery

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019905026

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So there is this: some things are harder to explain than others. Usually I can figure out the bones of things I encounter, but this has me stumped.

It was when my friend Les Seine called me and asked if I wanted to go to lunch that I started to have my suspicions that something strange was going on. Les was a long time friend who was a detective with the police department.

After my hello, he said, "Hey Ardan, you up for lunch?" He never calls to ask me to meet for lunch because he is always snowed under and doesn't have time for lunch. He is one of those who eats on the run if at all, except of course for his morning coffee.

When I commented on the unusual nature of his call, he responded with, "Today I have plenty of time. Just closed another case this morning. The perp confessed, if you can believe it. In fact I got another confession yesterday afternoon. Don't know what's up but I'll take it."

About 1:30, when we got to lunch at the best lunch restaurant in town, Bakers Bistro, there was no crowd. Any earlier and we would have had to wait, but there was my favorite table available toward the back of the large, well lit, and airy room. Green was the dominant color, not a dark green but a "new spring time green". I like to sit facing the front windows and took my seat after being escorted by Traci the part-owner. "You alone again?" she asked.

"No," I replied, "Les is meeting me here. He is on his way and should be here in a few minutes."

"Les never comes here for lunch, why today?"

"You can ask him yourself, he is right behind you."

"Hey, Les, good to see you. Don't see you and Marilyn in here much anymore. You two couples used to be regular as sin," Traci said.

Then she remembered I was no longer part of a couple. "Sorry Ardan, I forgot myself for a moment there."

The table is for four set at an angle so both Les and I were able to sit facing the windows. The table covering was a shiny cloth but not slippery. Plant patterns are on it to match the wallpaper. The way the sunlight shown in made the room very bright as is usual, but as Les is never there for lunch, he was surprised by the lighting. "Wow it's bright in here. I need my sunglasses on."

"You keep those on no one will recognize you," Traci said, "how did you get away for lunch anyway?"

"Yeah, strange isn't it? I'm just not as backed up. Can't tell you why though," he continued.

"Have you made any progress on that article you were working on?" Les asked me.

"Not much," I replied, "but that's no surprise. Sometimes it takes awhile to get anywhere on a story like this one."

I do freelance writing. My favorite stories are those with an element of "out of the ordinary".

Currently I was working on a story about global warming altering the reproductive habits of wildlife. It appears that some researchers have made a connection between the number of endangered species and the elevation in the temperature trend of the earthly climate. I had been approached by two major publications interested in finding out if the suspicions were supported by evidence or just someone trying to make a name for themselves.

So far I haven't formed an opinion, but I have talked to many scientists with opinions of their own. As it turns out, the opinions are as numerous as the people I have consulted. It will take a lot more study and research before I'll know if this is a live lead or a dead end.

Because I was lucky in the silicon valley boom, I have been able to pick and choose what I wish to spend my time on. I have many successful feature articles in my past and two books. One did well and the other not so much.

What I heard Les say piqued my interest. Why couldn't he tell me why? So I asked him.

“No, I don't mean it's a secret and so I can't tell you, I mean that I don't know the reason why I'm not so busy. Well, really, I know the reason; I just don't know the cause of the reason. I'm not so busy because there is a slowdown in the crimes being committed,” he explained.

“My job keeps me in touch with those whose job it is to solve those crimes and others yet whose job it is to bring the criminals to justice. They are telling me that there is something happening that they have never seen and do not understand. They are telling me that there is not a similar change taking place in other areas of the state but just in our vicinity. There is a newness to the change as it has only recently started to show up in the statistics. It takes a while for statistics to be generated, so no one really knows how long this has been going on. The first sign of an issue was that they were catching up with their work load. That never happens.”

Well, that really caught my attention.

I ordered my usual chicken pot pie and Les, having no usual, ordered a ham and cheese sandwich with chips on the side. We both had an Arnold Palmer to drink.

I chided him for his lack of creativity and he replied, “Compared to what I usually don't eat for lunch this is really special.”

After our little chuckle, I resumed questioning him about the crime slowdown, “So tell me more about the reverse crime wave.”

“There is really not much to tell. My first awareness of anything unusual was when I came on duty Monday of last week and there was no big stack of files waiting for me to process. I don't mean there was nothing there, but usually after the weekend we are swamped, and really have to prioritize the cases and assign on the basis of severity or size or something. But that Monday everyone split the load and there were enough of us to go around. We all were saying things like, ‘We could get used to this.’”

“We were all joking that it won't happen again and enjoy it while we can. But the same thing happened again this Monday.”

“So what do you think happened to cause it?” I asked.

“We really didn't think much about it. I think it is just a fluke. You know, one of those once in a lifetime things. I'll let you know if it

continues, and that would be very unusual because as we both know, human nature doesn't change."

About this time our common friend, Dr. Sam Cosa, came into the restaurant. She often lunched here too. She was wearing a light blue matching pantsuit that looked like it was designed to look like a uniform. This is the way she usually dressed if she had been at the hospital. I hailed her with a wave. She came over to our table.

"Want to join us?" I asked.

"No, I'm just picking up. I have a meeting across town and will have to eat as I drive over. I ran late at the hospital and I gotta hurry. We had a problem at the hospital with the MRI. Interference of some sort, and it ran me late. Hey, it's unusual to see the two of you here for lunch. Usually late evening when we all end up here."

"Boy, what a big deal everyone makes of a guy doing something different. Can't I change something up once in a while without everyone going crazy over it?" Les answered.

"As a psychiatrist, I can tell you that we are indeed creatures of habit. It's like we become programmed to repeat ourselves," she responded.

"Les tells me that he's here because someone is breaking a habit, and that their pattern change is causing him to change his. What do you think of that?" I asked.

"Sounds reasonable to me," she said as she hurried out the door. "Catch up later."

As we were finishing our lunch I received a call on my cell from the head of the nearby Zooarian. The Zooarian is our combination zoo and aquarium and is very well thought of.

She was returning my call and was available to see me in a couple of hours. I wanted to talk to her about the research I was doing on the global warming article. She suggested we talk at the zoo and gave me instructions for getting to her office.

Les and I talked as friends will for a while longer, then we both went on our way.

I decided to get to the zoo early, and so I went straight there. Good thing I made that decision because there was a traffic delay at one of the major intersections that held me and everyone else up for a full 15

minutes. It looked like the utility crews were installing more of those traffic cameras. The police officers directing traffic didn't appear any too pleased with the aggravation the utility crews were creating.

I wanted to get there early so I could look around and see if there were any endangered species represented. I was especially curious to see if there were any baby animals.

I had not been to the zoo in five or six years and it had changed a lot. I was surprised by how tidy and orderly it was. The last time I was here it appeared very disorganized and rather ordinary. Now it was very visually pleasing. The walkways were very inviting and widely spaced. It was also busy, and even though it was during school hours I saw many children. It was also larger than I remembered. There were a lot of bright colors and all the exhibits looked new.

I found my way to the office and was advised that the director had been called to the aviary for a problem, and I could go there or wait in her office until she returned. Since the aviary was very near, I chose to go there.

The zookeeper and some staff members were discussing the best way to rescue a bird that had become trapped in the netting overhead and was in danger of injuring itself in its attempts to get free. I observed and listened. It only took a few minutes to resolve the problem and the zookeeper headed back to her office. She was dressed in the sort of clothes one would wear in the jungle, if the old movies I used to watch were correct. She even had the pith helmet.

I intercepted her and identified myself as Ardan Healy, writer. She said she was Betty Tiergarten the zoologist zookeeper, but I could call her "Bet" as everyone else did.

She apologized for the delay in meeting me, but "Such was a zookeeper's life," she said. We made small talk as we walked to her office.

I learned that she had wanted to care for animals since she was a young girl. Her first pet was a rescued newborn squirrel which had fallen out of a tree in a storm. She had raised it with a bottle at first, and then by feeding it the things that squirrels eat. When it came time to let it go, she placed its cage in her yard with the door open, and it gradually weaned itself away from the cage but would still come to her

when she called it. Eventually it stopped coming back and was on its own apparently. Since then she has been hooked on animals.

She said the emphasis of Zooarian is on conservation breeding and is a hallmark of the facility. Everyone loves baby animals, and that was a big draw here as well as elsewhere. I asked her about the large number of children I saw. I was surprised, since we were in the midst of the school day. She said, "Almost every day there was at least one field trip from a school, and some days several. What better learning environment is there than a zoo?"

She was pleased with my comments on the improvements to the facility since my last visit. She told me that before the organization could participate in the breeding programs she wanted them to be associated with, they had to make major improvements, and with a lot of effort, they had. They were a regional center for breeding of a few endangered species and would be expanding over time.

I explained to her that I was doing a piece on the possible harmful effects of global warming on wild animal reproduction. I had just started my research and wondered if she would answer a few questions for me.

"Shoot," she said.

I asked, "What do you think of the premise that global warming is interfering with wild animal reproduction?"

"Who knows? Throughout the ages there have been many periods of species loss due to various effects of environmental change. This may be no different, but I cannot tell yet," she replied.

"I can tell you that recently we have seen a drop in the natural reproduction rates of our residential populations, not the artificial, but natural reproductive success. A lot of animals don't reproduce in a captive environment anyway, but lately we have seen a drop in the mating behavior of some of our past successful animals. We are investigating that trend.

"Of course, we also have the aquarium, and that is a totally different set of problems. I can't tell you anything about the effects of warming on water life, because we set our own temperatures, and we aren't doing any special breeding in that part of our facility. We are

only doing normal maintenance of populations there. We don't appear to have anything unusual going on there."

I then asked her, "Are there other factors than the weather, through temperature change, that could influence the wild animal reproductive rates?"

"Yes," she said. "Such things as food supply, predator populations, habitat encroachment and other factors could be at play. It may not even be a single factor but several factors at once. We even notice there are times when the reproductive rates appear to vary on their own, for reasons we haven't identified yet.

"That is a consideration in our studies here. We are not sure if the changes we are seeing in our resident populations are due to an outside influence, something within our animal environment, or just natural variation. We hope to complete our evaluations soon but it is taking longer than we would like."

"If there is something to the premise that warming temperatures are causing a change, does that doom us to a loss of our animals?"

"Not necessarily, think of it this way, why assume it will make reproduction worse? Couldn't it also make it better? Some species might show increased numbers of offspring, not less. Since you are asking about the wild animal populations, those populations may move to a more hospitable locale, may adapt to the new environment, or even evolve to the changing circumstances if the changes are slow enough. Take the example of some of our domestic animals. We have bred them to the size, shape and weight we want them to be, and some of that takes place naturally without human intervention. The jury is still out on what impact warming will have. A lot of what happens depends on just how warm it gets and how long it stays that way."

"It sounds to me like the matter is very complex. With that complexity, it would appear to be very hard to predict what outcomes we will have. Maybe the story is in that complexity and not the knee jerk statement that warming will be disastrous. How do you feel about that?" I asked.

"I think you are right about that. It is very complex and too much remains to be seen to know how the story turns out. We are just going

to have to wait and see, if we don't intervene and alter the trend," she replied.

I thanked her for taking the time with me and asked if I might call her again when I had more questions?

She said, "Of course you can call me. I can see you are not just taking a superficial look, but you're very sensitive to the quest for the truth."

She told me I should do an article on the Zooarian

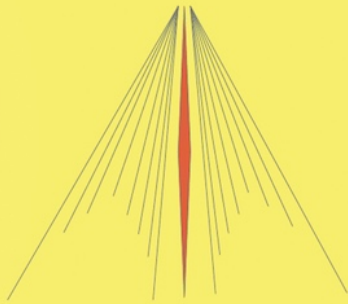
I told her that I might use it as a source or example if my current project panned out.

I knew she meant something more in detail, but I didn't want to commit to any more at this time.

She volunteered to be a resource in any way she could and seemed eager to participate. We exchanged cell numbers, and I left.

I did go by the baby animal exhibits. They were very well done, and also very well attended. Who doesn't like baby animals?

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