



The
Wild Life
of Christian the Lion

Can a lion born
in a cage ever
learn to be free?

By **Tod Olson**



Theme As you read the article and poem, think about what important message they have in common.

LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S 8 WORDS IN BOLD



The lion cub had spent his life in a cage. He'd been born in a zoo in England. Two of his sisters had been sold to a circus, and he had been sold to a London department store called Harrods. Now, in November 1969, the little cub was for sale again. He was put on display in the store, between the kittens and the sheepdogs. The little lion's future looked grim.

Then two young men—Ace Bourke and John Rendall—walked into Harrods and saw the lion cub trapped in a small cage. Buying a lion cub was probably the last thing they imagined doing. They had just graduated from college and were living in a small apartment above the furniture store where they worked.

But even after they got home, Ace and John couldn't stop thinking about the cub. They scraped together all the money they could—which would equal about \$6,500 today. They went back to the store and bought the cub. The two men had already decided on a name for him: Christian.

Furniture Store Lion

Christian was a 30-pound ball of fluff when he moved into the basement of the furniture store. He quickly made himself at home. He hid behind

desks and chairs and then leaped out to play. He climbed on Ace's and John's laps while they tried to talk on the phone. People **flocked** to the shop to see the furniture store lion. A radio host tried to get Christian to roar into a microphone. Christian began chewing up the wires instead.

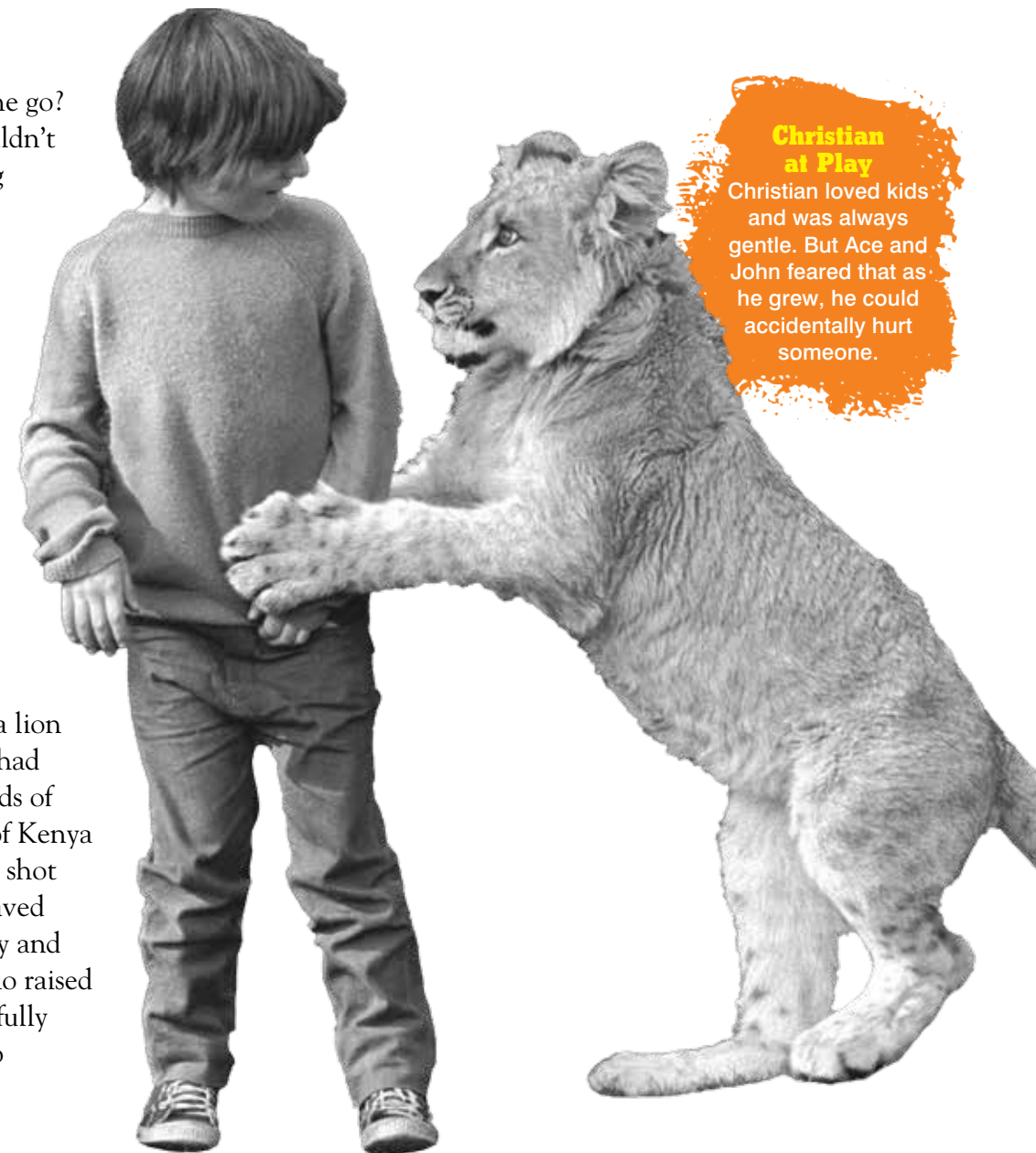
Growing Up

By April, the fluff ball had grown into 130 pounds of sheer muscle. He was still gentle. But eventually, he would turn into a 500-pound **predator** with razor-sharp claws and 4-inch-long fangs. In the wild, lions **prowl** thousands of acres of grassland and forest. London was no place for Christian.

DEREK GATTANREX/SHUTTERSTOCK (ALL PHOTOS)

But where could he go? "We knew we couldn't **betray** him by putting him in a zoo," John recalled later.

Ace and John were growing desperate. Then one day, two surprise visitors walked into the furniture store. Bill Travers and Virginia McKenna were actors who had starred in a popular wildlife movie called *Born Free*. The movie told the true story of a lion cub named Elsa. She had been living in the wilds of the African country of Kenya when her mother was shot and killed. She was saved by a couple named Joy and George Adamson, who raised Elsa and then successfully released her back into the wild.



Christian at Play

Christian loved kids and was always gentle. But Ace and John feared that as he grew, he could accidentally hurt someone.

Life in London

Christian joins Ace and John on a ride around London. Far right: He takes a drink in the bathroom of the furniture store where he lived with Ace and John.



The actors Travers and McKenna contacted George Adamson, who was still living in Kenya. Adamson agreed to help Christian become free.

Going Wild

In August 1970, Ace, John, and Christian arrived at Adamson's camp in the Kora region of Kenya. The plan was to release Christian into the wild. But it wasn't so simple. Animals raised in **captivity** don't have the skills to survive in the wild. Christian had never lived among lions. He had never hunted for food.

Luckily, Adamson had an idea. He would introduce Christian to other captive lions at the camp. Adamson hoped Christian would bond with them and form his own pride, or group. Christian and his pride would then be encouraged to **venture** into the wild together, to learn to stalk prey and fend for themselves.

At first, Christian wanted to sleep on Ace's and John's cots. But he gradually befriended the



other lions. In a few weeks, they were roaming all day. And soon it was clear that Ace and John could leave him.

The goodbye was heartbreaking for John and Ace. Christian chased after their truck as they drove away. They flew back to London feeling like they'd abandoned their best friend. Adamson assured them that Christian was thriving, that he and his new pride were spending more and more time away from camp. But John and Ace wanted to see for themselves.

Together Again

Ten months later, in July 1971, they returned to Kenya. With Adamson's help, they found Christian not far from camp. They watched Christian from a distance, **marveling** at how he had grown. He was now 300 pounds, and 6 feet long from his hind legs to his head. Would he recognize them?

When Christian spotted the men, he began to creep slowly toward them. Ace and John called out to Christian. At the sound of their voices, Christian started to rush to them.

Most people would be terrified to see a huge lion charging at them. But Ace and John were thrilled. When Christian reached them, he reared up on his hind legs. He flung his paws

A Famous Reunion
John and Ace's reunion with Christian was captured on film, and it is one of the most popular YouTube videos ever posted. (We dare you not to cry while you watch!)



over Ace's shoulders and rubbed his mane against Ace's head. Then he reached over to John and pulled him in—a half-wild lion hugging the humans who had raised him.

Ace and John cried when they left. They knew they would always miss Christian. But as their plane took off, they saw Christian and his new family perched on top of a rocky hill. Christian was free to roam the wild like his ancestors. He would never see the inside of a cage again. ■



All Grown Up
Full-grown, Christian weighed nearly 500 pounds. He would soon lead a pride of his own and live free in the wild.

REX SHUTTERSTOCK (CHRISTIAN GROWN UP)

DEREK CATTANIREX SHUTTERSTOCK (MEETING, HUGGING); JOS BELTMAN SHUTTERSTOCK.COM (WATERING HOLE)

POEM

Wild Home

by Rebecca Kai Dotlich

And so they belong at watering holes,
shaking manes in hot sun,
napping in the shade of acacia and kapok,
grazing in star grass, listening
to sunbirds and weavers, joining
fellow roamers day and night.
They belong under the white moon,
free and **untethered** and wild
as savanna skies.



WHAT'S THE CONNECTION?

Imagine you are Christian the lion. Write a letter to John and Ace, telling them what you think about their decision to set you free, and why. Use details from the article and the poem to support your ideas.

**FIND AN
ACTIVITY
ONLINE!**