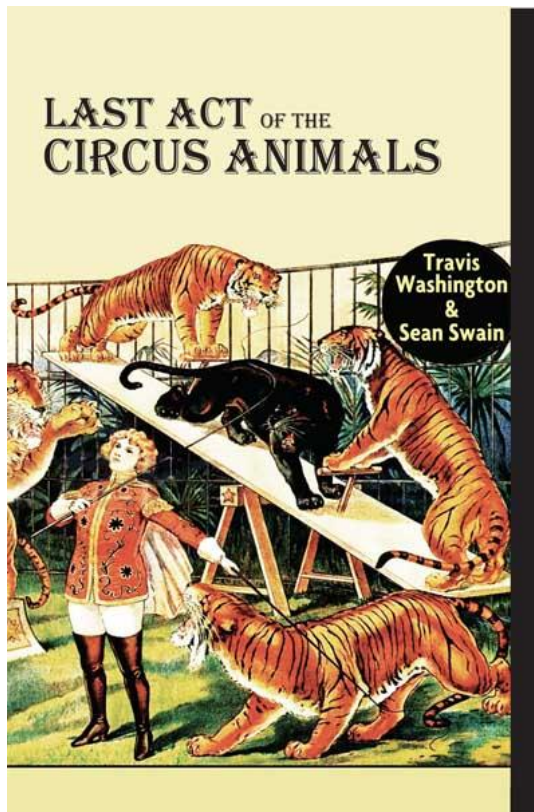


The Last Act of the Circus Animals

Travis Washington, Sean Swain



2005/2006

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“Twitch” of Central Texas Anarchist Black Cross sent me a sheaf of Sean Swain’s writings, oh, in 2001 or so. I read through them and thought, “Damn! This cat can write!” So, I threw them together into a zine entitled *The Sean Swain Reader*. Since then, we’ve collaborated on several writing projects for conferences, his work, interviews, etc.

I didn’t know Travis until they sent me their rough draft of *The Last Act of the Circus Animals* in 2005 or 2006. I didn’t get to know him as well or meet with him, like Sean, but have published other works by him, notably, “On the Imus Controversy.” This was a brilliant analysis of the brouhaha that the racist ignoramus radio jock, Don Imus, embroiled himself in, by calling a women’s basketball team “a bunch of hos.”

So, I read through *Last Act* and loved it, like any real person would and thought, “hmmm... what should we do, here?” I wrote them back and said, “This is awesome, here’s what I think we should do—double the size of it, complete it, and in the meantime, I’ll run this rough draft by some prisoner artists and get their take on it to give this mutha some visuals, capeche?”

I hadn’t written so much as a syllable for it, but felt perhaps as proud to have been a part of a writing collaboration as I’ve ever felt. The artists—the incomparable Kevin “Rashid” Johnson, the fantastic Todd (Hyung-Rae) Tarselli and the talented Howard Stephens came through big time and I still have several of the originals.

It was put together in three books—100 pages in all. George Orwell once said that “the most dangerous thing in the world is the fifty-paged pamphlet.” So, here was double trouble! Since I first published it and started sending it out (and, mostly in) it’s been flying off the shelves (Sean has three) like hotcakes. It seems everyone has to have a copy up and down the pod in every damn prison. Even the guards can’t wait to get their claws on it, so the reprints have been unusually often. But then, bread and water ain’t so bad—if you can afford them!

Now, I don’t want to ruin the thing by yapping about the story, so I’m going to talk a little bit about what this book is indicative of. It’s a prisoner zine, in this case a marvelous blending of talents by a Euro prisoner and an Afrikan prisoner, housed in some dump in Ohio. I’ve collaborated with prisoners going on twenty years now and have over 1,200 publications (zines) overwhelmingly by, for, and with prisoners which I (insanely) make freely available to them and anyone else with an ounce of salt in them. Did I mention how adorable I think my wife looks like in her greasy, tattered rags? She also loves hovel life!

This is the samizdat press of Amerikkka, which I like to call “the literature of revolt!” There’s no 501 C-3 or any ties to some bullshit agenda, political ideology, or other eggshell-walking nonsense. Yeah, we three consider ourselves anarchists and write like it, but we also realize others have important things to say and write about, so I publish all that shit, too. I feel anarchist thinking and writing can wear big boy pants and outthink the commies or anybody else. I think it is important to give people a genuine education and let them decide for themselves who to believe, who to like and what the hell they want to consider themselves as. They’re going to make up their own minds anyway, right?

But, at least this way, they can have real alternatives to sift through and go through their epiphanies. Besides, you don’t see any other types of people doing things this way, do you? It’s @nticopyright, meaning, we not only don’t give a damn if someone copies it without authorization (horrors!), but we encourage it! Like I said, we are anarchists and hate capitalism or any kind of coercive authority. Liberating ideas belong to everybody and like air and water, should be free.

I'm a writer myself and I've always bristled when somebody tried to edit my work for "publication." That's because this meant watering down the intensity of my rants to shoehorn them into quasi mainstream acceptability. Screw that! So, though I'm the editor of these things, I let folks have their say, in their own words and in their own vernacular. I'll clean up obvious mistakes, but I'm not going to toy with their intent! Who am I (or anyone else) to say how a prisoner enslaved by these monsters feels—other than themselves???

I also publish other stuff about the vile killing machine known as foreign policy and all kinds of other things prisoners need to know. Ninety five percent of them will eventually be spilled out into the glare of this insane society, where they will face endless hassles, discrimination, laws, and brain-dead people—so they need to have as functioning a mind as possible.

Most prisoners have long since blown off their public education as irrelevant and oppressive. So, once they develop their writing chops, it is uniquely understandable and to the point. There is no mistaking what they are saying, unlike say, any college (or high school) textbook. They are free to explode on paper with their bic pen insert. Of course, even the "radicals" want nothing to do with this sort of thing, although they may well up with the courage to give it lip service. Sheesh!

Malcolm X said that the oppressed need to "discover their humanity and then they'll move." It's why he became such a powerful speaker and writer and why his work still rings true today, like that of George Jackson and others. So, we're not really worried about what people say, think, or do vis-a-vis this explosive type of literature. We know that those who are captives—whether in a prison or some miserable high school or some mental hospital or as part of the military killing machine or crapola workplace—can tell the difference between the real deal and a bunch of bullshit!

See, we wanna "win the hearts and minds" of people by allowing them to unleash their own humanity, so that they can discover their own way to maximize their potential by tapping into their own talents, pursuing their interests in the service to humanity and to live a for-real life. That is our agenda. Yeah, I know, how sinister can you get? But, it beats sticking people into concentration camps, bludgeoning them in a sort of literary Phoenix Program, which is what the government feels is appropriate.

Alright, I'm going to stop pestering you, so that you can move onto the actual text of this thing. You'll probably want to read it straight through, because in order to get to the Last Act you should probably start with the first one.

Anyone can get my catalogs and zines. All you have to do is request them.

South Chicago ABC Zine Distro

P.O. Box 721

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Jeremy Hammond

You are holding a true revolutionary gem in your hands, written by some down-as-fuck comrades who speak with authenticity to the realities that we suffer behind bars.

Not long after completing my first prison bid, I picked up a copy of "Last Act of the Circus Animals" back when it was a three-part photocopied zine distributed by South Chicago ABC. I was so stunned by how accurately this work of fiction captured the nuances of prison life and the dog-eat-dog capitalist world that I made dozens of copies and sent it to everyone I knew who was still behind bars.

Ten years since its DIY publication, the situation has deteriorated: minimum wage can't pay the rent, mass surveillance watches our every move, and militarized police literally get away with murder. The so-called "World of the Free" increasingly resembles the prison to the point that it would be more accurate to call it "minimum security" or a "free range prison". Now headed by a oligarch fascist clown, the rich circus metaphors of "Last Act" have taken on new urgency and relevance.

"Last Act" tells the story of circus animals who unite and rebel against the Ringmaster in order to get to the "World of the Free". On one level, it's a statement against animal cruelty: that all life on Earth has been subjugated or exterminated for the exclusive benefit of human civilization, and that the vicious practice of zoos and circuses must end. On another level, the story is about capitalist society: the pyramid-scheme caste system in which ruling classes exploit and oppress us all, processing our blood, sweat, and tears into profits, and throwing us only enough crumbs to barely survive.

But most striking is its scathing criticism against mass incarceration. Human beings are treated like animals, having been kidnapped from the "World of the Free", warehoused in cages and chains, forced to perform backflips and headstands, and subjected to the control-freak re-programming methods of the Ringmaster. The Ringmaster maintains division and competition among the animals using carrot-and-stick negative reinforcement and providing the largest cages and the best food for his most obedient subjects. The Chimps believe that they are more deserving of this privileged status because they are smarter and the Ringmaster throws them a few extra bananas for their loyalty. Surely everyone can recognize an equivalent in their everyday lives, whether it is the asskisser at work who sucks up to the boss, or the inmate snitch that rats out other prisoners. Unfortunately, many accept their subjugated status as if they brought it upon themselves, if not because they have been psychologically broken by their training and programming sessions then because of the threat of violence and brutality, to the point where they can no longer even imagine what life was like before the circus.

But the Black Panther, who paces his cage restlessly, does not forget that he was born free, that there is a world outside of the circus before they were captured and imprisoned, and that unless we reject their "backflips for bananas" capitalist pyramid scheme, we will never be free. As much as it seems that the animals depend on the Ringmaster for food and shelter, it is in fact the Ringmaster who depends on the animals to perform tricks for his own survival. As the saying goes, "the bosses need us, we don't need the bosses". The Panther breaks down the strategy to the other animals: "If we do not obey, if we do not perform, then there is no show. This means the Ringmaster does not get his reward and he goes hungry. And soon, the Circus dies." Tired of doing backflips for bananas, the animals rebel, causing a crisis in which the Ringmaster uses escalating violence and brutality in a failed attempt to force compliance. This angers the spectators who leave without paying, worries the Keepers and Trainers who eventually turn on the Ringmaster, and attracts the attention of the ASPCA who later pays the Ringmaster a visit.

In "Last Act", the ASPCA documents and exposes the harsh conditions endured by the animals, leading to the Ringmaster's downfall. However in our world of mass incarceration, no human rights equivalent would ever be allowed full reign inside a prison, preferring that the realities of our conditions be shielded from public scrutiny. Even when such evidence leaks through, such as the coverage from *Mother Jones* and *The Nation* of the malicious medical neglect that led to the deaths of dozens at private immigrant detention centers, the government dismisses these

cases as unfortunate isolated incidents and makes vague promises of reforms while the industry continues business as usual.

The American Correctional Association (ACA) gives accreditation to prisons that seek the stamp of approval for humane treatment of prisoners. As anyone who is incarcerated knows, the ACA audits are planned months in advance so that the administration can get their pet inmates to repaint the walls and wax the floors in time. When the inspectors walk around during mainline, the food being served is of a much higher quality than usual. If they want to interview prisoners, the administration will already have a few loyal subjects lined up. In reality, the ACA is a private boys club made up of many former prison wardens who have each others' back, and, in reality, it has no legal standing or mechanism to punish prisons that aren't up to code.

The idea that prisoners can achieve justice through administrative grievances is as ridiculous as the idea that circus animals can petition the Ringmaster to be freed. It is basically a pressure release valve that redirects our righteous rage into predetermined channels that ultimately lead nowhere—just another one of their tricks to control us.

So what are the animals to do? As panthers, tigers, and lions, certainly they could easily maul the Ringmaster to death—a thought that has surely crossed the minds of everyone who has ever had an ignorant asshole boss or been harassed by an abusive prison guard. While individual acts of retaliatory violence would certainly be deserved, it is unlikely to shut down the circus in its entirety: they have an armada of weapons on site and the national guard on-call to stomp out the attackers and quickly resume normal operations. As the panther points out, it's more than the individual Ringmaster that is responsible for the world of cages, for even he is only a small cog in a big machine; and with every mauled Ringmaster there is another ready to step up and take his place.

For the purposes of this story the authors choose the path of nonviolent resistance, but as written in their endnotes they recognize that “violent revolutionary activities certainly lead to successes in many, many situations and we are not personally nor politically averse to the tactics of political violence”. Certainly anybody familiar with Sean Swain's history knows that his ideas about insurrection aren't limited to nonviolent tactics—he is down to ride. No single strategy works in every situation; so long as we haven't abolished prisons or ended animal cruelty yet, it's best to keep all options open. In any case, “Last Act” focuses on one set of tactics that has had established successes both in the free world and in prisons alike—the strike.

The struggle prisoners face today is similar to the one of the animals forced to perform tricks in the circus: the exploitation of cheap inmate labor. Prisoners basically run the institution, everything from maintenance of plumbing and lighting, to cooking and serving the food—all jobs that the administration would have to hire additional COs for, if it weren't for obedient inmates satisfied with the five bucks a month. Many prisoners produce everything from military camouflage to McDonald's uniforms in factories that resemble sweatshops, where we are not afforded fair labor rights, minimum wages, or health and safety standards—all permitted because the 13th amendment sanctions involuntary servitude for convicted criminals.

Fed up with these bogus conditions, prisoners around the world are refusing to be compliant inmates and have resisted through collective work strikes and hunger strikes. Though the Supreme Court has ruled against our right to organize as a union, this has not stopped thousands from joining the recently formed IWW Incarcerated Worker Organizing Committee. State prisons in Alabama, Texas, Georgia, and elsewhere have had to stop factory production because of work strikes. and California has had two major hunger strikes that made national news and

forced prison officials to make concessions in regards to long-term solitary confinement. These struggles have resulted in some material gains in our conditions—not something to be discounted—but we should not sell ourselves short by compromising for minor reforms in lieu of the greater goals. We want more than larger cages or more bushels of bananas—we want freedom, an end to imprisonment, for one and all! Though the character of the ruling powers may fluctuate from the false hope of liberalism to blatant right-wing fascism, they all support the prison industrial complex, and will continue to do so until they are stopped. The war continues—they may have shot Harambe, but Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus closed up shop. There is hope, comrades! No more backflips for bananas. The show must not go on.

Book 1: The Pacing Panther

“Thinkers aren’t limited by what they know. They can always increase what they know. They’re limited by what puzzles them. Because there’s no way to become curious about something that doesn’t puzzle you.”

–Daniel Quinn, *My Ishmael*

“When you control a man’s thinking, you do not have to worry about his actions...”

–Carter G. Woodson

“Man’s true liberation, individual and collective, lies in his emancipation from authority and from the belief in it.”

–Emma Goldman

I Remember...

There was once a young black panther who had been captured in the wild and brought to the Circus where he was to be trained to perform stunts. It was only under the most brutal conditions that he would obey the Ringmaster's commands but the Ringmaster reasoned that eventually he would come around—just like the other animals.

Now over time, the panther grew older and had indeed learned quite a few tricks of the trade, but he had also learned much about the Ringmaster and the Circus in general. Most of the other animals at the Circus felt that the panther was odd because he was uncannily quiet and distant. Moreover, *he constantly paced his cage!* This confounded the other animals, because whereas they would sometimes pace to stretch, this panther *never stopped pacing!* So one evening, after the day's show was over and all the animals had been locked in their cages, curiosity got the best of a Siberian tiger who was caged across from the old panther.

"Hey panther!" the tiger growled, his voice like a bag of gravel.

The panther stopped in his tracks and looked through the rusty bars in front of the cage at the bulky cat across the aisle from him. He acknowledged the tiger.

"What do you want tiger?" he asked, his shadow falling across the clump of yellow straw in the corner of his cage.

"I know you've been here for quite a while now and it's really none of my business, but why do you constantly pace that damned cage?" the tiger asked.

The panther hesitated, his dark figure illuminated by the dim track lighting suspended from the ceiling. His piercing eyes glowed from the darkness as he answered:

"Because I remember."

"Well, what is it that you remember?" the tiger inquired further.

"That I am Panther."

The tiger was puzzled by this response.

"What does that have to do with you pacing all the time?" he asked.

"I have not forgotten," the panther replied.

"You have not forgotten what?" the tiger questioned impatiently.

"That I am Panther."

"But Mr. Panther, I still don't understand why you can't sit down and relax," the tiger said, taking his own advice and lowering himself down on his haunches.

"Because I do not want to die. *I will not let him kill me,*" the panther sternly replied, and resumed his walk.

"Who's trying to kill you, Mr. Panther?"

After a moment, the panther answered, "The same one who is killing you! The same one who has killed many of you already—the *Ringmaster!*"

Now all of the other animals who were normally whooping and hollering had fallen silent, for rarely did the old panther speak. The tiger had become frustrated with the panther because he seemed to be talking in circles and not making sense. He knew that the old black cat had been

there for a long time and thought that perhaps he had gone mad. But the tiger was not yet sure, so he continued:

“Mr. Panther, you say that you pace your cage because you have not forgotten that you are panther and because you don’t want the Ringmaster to kill you. But surely you will not be killed for relaxing. Look at me! I’m sitting and I’m quite alive. So what you have said doesn’t make any sense.”

“Yas. Mr. Panther,” a huge bull elephant interjected a couple cages down from the tiger. He stood at the front of the cage, his eyes fixed on the panther. “I too am puzzled by what you have said.”

At this point, many of the other animals joined in and voiced their desire for the panther to explain himself. So the panther slowly walked up to the front of his cage, thought for a moment, and said:

“Alright! I will tell you what I mean. Do you see that old heap of a beast lying in the corner of his cage over there” asked the panther, nodding in the direction of the cage between the tiger and the elephant where an old mangy lion slept.

“Are you referring to the lion?” the tiger inquired.

“Well yas, at one time he was a lion,” said the panther. “Yas! Years ago, when he first arrived here, he was a mighty lion. He roared. He clawed and bit at his bars trying to get out. He gave all of his Trainers hell every time he got the chance, resisted all their attempts to train him, and would not do anything the ringmaster told him to do. But after a while the Ringmaster’s powers of persuasion started to wear on the lion, for he had learned that if he didn’t obey the Ringmaster, he would be beaten and thrown back in the cage. Moreover, he knew that if he did not obey, he would not eat!

“So, slowly but surely, he began to give in to some of the Ringmaster’s demands. At first he would sit when instructed to sit and reluctantly go where he was told to go. But at night, back in his cage he would still claw and gnaw at the bars. And when he tired of that, he would pace back and forth for hours at a time. Occasionally, he would look over at me, our eyes would lock and I could see that he was still Lion.

“However, as time grew on, he started giving in to more of the Master’s demands until there came a time where he would even jump through hoops and rings of fire for the Master. Eventually, he became the Master’s favorite and one of the main Circus attractions!”

Now all of the animals at the Circus aspired to become one of the Ringmaster’s favorites, for obtaining this status meant more food; a roomier, more comfortable cage; more time outside the cage. Normally, these most prized positions were held by the chimpanzees, because they were considered the most intelligent of all the animals. But occasionally, a member of one of the ‘lower’ species would be allowed to ascend to one of the top positions, so as to inspire a sense of hope in other members of its species. The tiger was especially ambitious in this regard, so he interrupted the panther to pose a question:

“Wait a minute, Mr. Panther. You’re saying that old ball of fur over there was once the Master’s favorite?”

“Yas,” the panther said. “He had become a great performer and it seemed like he had won the Master’s affection.”

“So Mr. Panther,” the tiger interjected. “Are you saying that if I do everything Master tells me to do—sit when he tells me to, and jump through rings of fire for him—he’ll make me his favorite like the lion was?”

“Perhaps he would,” growled the panther.

“Well,” the tiger said excitedly, “if that’s all I have to do then...”

“I said, ‘Perhaps’ tiger!” the panther interrupted.

“Depending on how well you behave. But even then there’s no guarantee because you have a lot of competition. The Ringmaster likes it like that. The more competition, the better. Besides, don’t you want to know what happened to the lion?” he asked.

“Yeah Tiger! Be quiet and let the panther finish!” one of the chimps shrieked from his expansive cage in the front of the range.

“Now, you know you wouldn’t say that to me in my face!” the tiger growled back. “So pull on back in that big ass cage up there and shut the fuck up, punk bitch!”

“Oh! You want to growl and be big bad tiger now. But you ‘Meow’ like a motherfucka when the Master tell you to do something.” The chimp retorted.

The panther watched as a scene that had become oh so common back in the housing area began to unfold. Other animals joined in on the fracas, and began arguing amongst one another, their voices echoing off the aluminum windowless walls of the housing area. But before it got too out of hand, the Elephant interceded:

“Hold Up!” He trumpeted, drawing the attention of the animals. “Are you all gonna let the panther finish speaking or what!?”

The bickering amongst the animals trickled down to a few grumbles.

“Yeah!” one of the monkeys shrieked from the back of the range. “What happened to the lion, Mr. Panther?”

After a moment, the steady hum of the huge industrial fan high up on the wall at the back of the range ruled the night. The panther continued:

“Well, he died,” the panther said, pausing for a moment to let the gravity of what he’d said sink in. “Yas, the Ringmaster killed him. For awhile he was *the* star attraction. And during that time he enjoyed the relative benefits that come with that status—more food, the big cage, all that!

“But, as you can see, he paid a steep price. For I noticed that, over time, his roar became less thunderous. And when he would return to his cage at night, he no longer paced it. He had stopped gnawing at the bars that confined him and the Lion in his eyes grew dimmer and dimmer until there was no Lion left in them. Yet he jumped at every opportunity to please the Master until one day he had grown too old to learn new tricks or perform the old ones.

“And then the Ringmaster withdrew his favor. He threw him back in that small cage and never let him perform again. Yas! He locked him in that cage over there and left him to die—again. And what you see curled up over there is what’s left of him.”

“But what do you mean, Mr. Panther?” the elephant asked, watching the rise and fall of the rib cage of the emaciated lion. “The lion is alive. He just sleeps all the time.”

“Mr. Elephant, I will answer your question,” the panther said, turning his head toward the elephant. “But first allow me to ask you a few questions: Who are you? Where did you come from and how long have you been here?”

“That’s easy!” the elephant replied. “I am a Circus Elephant. I have spent my whole life here. This is my home.”

“Well, Mr. Elephant, what if I told you this is not true? What if I told you that you have not always been ‘Circus Elephant’ and that this is not your home?” the panther asked, staring into the elephant’s eyes.

The elephant reared up on his hind legs and trumpeted, "I would say that you are a liar! From as far back as I can remember I have been a Circus Elephant. So are you questioning my memory, Panther?" the elephant asked angrily.

"Oh no, Mr. Elephant," the panther said calmly, shaking his head. "I am simply saying that over the years, the Ringmaster has managed to persuade you to forget.

"Now listen to me and please don't take offense to what I am about to say, because it is the truth. I remember when they brought you here years ago. You woke me up at night on several occasions banging against that cage, trying to get out."

The panther turned his gaze toward the tiger. "And you, Mr. Tiger—you came shortly after Mr. Elephant there. You used to pace that cage incessantly, wanting to be free. Like me, the lion over there, and many of the rest, you have not always been here. You have not always been circus animals, forced to do silly little stunts in order to eat. You have not always lived in cages. No! The Ringmaster brought you here from the free world, you were once free!" he exclaimed.

Just then, the voice of a young orangutan who had been born into the Circus rang out from down the row of cages at the rear of the housing area, across from the monkeys. For years, he'd occupied the smallest of all the cages.

"Free? What does 'free' mean Mr. Panther?" he asked.

The panther pressed the right side of his head against the bars, straining to see the orangutan as he spoke.

"Mr. Orangutan, has there ever been a time when the Master tried to make you behave a certain way and you refused to?"

"Yes," the Orangutan replied. "That used to happen a lot when I was younger."

"Do you remember how you felt at that time?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Well, that's what free *feels* like!" The panther said, turning back toward the tiger.

"And Mr. Tiger has there ever been a time when the Ringmaster cracked you with that whip and you felt like mauling him?"

"Every time," the tiger growled.

"Well, that feeling is your *desire* to be free. And that's just a glimpse of what Freedom really means!" The panther exclaimed, considering each animal he could see from the cage.

"There is a world where we are all free. A world where Tiger is free to hunt; where Monkey is free to swing from tree to tree and eat as many bananas as he wants. A world where Lion is royalty; where Elephant does not have to stand on his hind legs and wait for master to give him peanuts. There is a world where Orangutan knows what it means to be Orangutan, where there is nothing trying to stop him from being Orangutan.

"Yes! There is a world where no species of animal is considered better or more important than any other species; where Tiger and his way of life is just as important as Chimp and his way of life. And I *lived* in that world! And like most of you I was taken out of that world and brought to this world of cages. To a world where the Mighty Lion, King of the Jungle, is forced to relinquish his crown and reduced to a heap of meat. A world where not only is Elephant prohibited from being Elephant, but where he's made to forget that he is Elephant, and tells me he never was.

"So, you all ask me why I pace? It is because I do not like this world. It is because this is not where I am supposed to be. It is because *I remember where I came from*; because *I remember that I am Panther*, and Panther does not belong here. It is because I remember the lion. And I remember

that as long as he was pacing, he too remembered that he was Lion. He remembered the World of the Free and that memory kept him alive.

“You ask why I do not sit down and *relax*? It is because *I do not want to forget* that I am Panther. It is because I do not want to die like the lion did years ago. For the moment he stopped clawing at the bars that held him captive, *the moment he stopped pacing*, was the moment that he forgot that he was Lion. And in that instant, when he forgot that he was Lion, *he died!*”

With that, the panther began pacing again.

A Cage is a Cage is a Cage...

After the Panther had finished speaking silence prevailed, for all the animals were contemplating what he had said. Moreover, they were thinking about the World of the Free he had described. Some began to remember. After a while, the elephant broke the silence:

“Yas, Mr. Panther. I think I do understand what you mean now. And the more I heard you speak about being free, the more I started to remember. Yas, some time long ago I recall walking around with my mother and many other elephants in this World of the Free you speak of. We used to walk for miles and there were no bars there holding us back. We used to go to the big water place and splash around. Oh! And there were hundreds of trees where the monkeys and chimps lived.”

“Yas! Yas!” one of the monkeys shrieked from down the range. “I remember the trees—and all the bananas!”

“Well I’m sorry, but I do not remember any such place,” the orangutan interrupted, hanging his head despondently.

The panther came back to the front of the cage, looked down at the orangutan sympathetically, and said:

“No, Mr. Orangutan. You do not remember, because you cannot remember what you never forgot. You were born here. So although Orangutan runs in your blood, you never had the chance to truly be Orangutan. The Ringmaster snatched your mother from the World of the Free years and years ago and forced her to perform for him until she grew old and died, in a cage. But he made sure that she had you to take her place.”

“I do not understand this, Mr. Panther,” the Orangutan said sadly. “Why did the Master bring my mother here and treat her that way? How could he be so cruel?”

“The Ringmaster is *ruthless!*” the panther exclaimed.

“He has to be. And he’s been trying to kill most of us since he brought us here. But he tried to kill you before you were even born, for he never allowed you to be Orangutan. He never allowed you to know the World of the Free. And just like you were born in a cage, you, like the rest of us, will die in a cage if he has his way.”

Ever since the panther had spoken about the World of the Free, the chimps had fallen silent. For, although they found many attractive things about this world the Panther had described, they felt that they had lived quite well here at the Circus, compared to the other animals, and weren’t that eager to relinquish their privileged status. But finally one of them broke the silence.

“Hold up, Mr. Panther,” one of the chimps interjected from his perch up in one of the big cages near the entrance.

“I don’t remember any such place either,” the chimp continued. “And you say that the Ringmaster is so mean and cruel. But I don’t see it that way.”

“Well that comes as no big surprise,” said the elephant.

“Yeah, you ain’t the one he’s crackin’ with that whip every day, bitch!” the tiger growled.

The Panther, sensing that the animals were about to erupt again, quickly interceded:

“Okay Mr. Chimp—how do you see it?” he asked, looking up the range at the chimp swinging from the jungle gym in his cage.

“Well, the Ringmaster has never been cruel to me. He’s always provided me with the things I need to survive. And I believe that as long as I’m here, I will always have what I need to be free to swing around as much as I want to,” the chimp said.

“Mr. Chimp, I know you pride yourself on being pretty intelligent,” the panther said. “So let me ask you a question— do you know what happiness is?”

“Yeah, I think I know what it means.”

“Well then are you happy, Mr. Chimp?”

The chimp scratched his head with his free hand and considered the question for a moment.

“I don’t know,” he finally replied.

“Alright. Well let me ask you this—do you feel free?” the panther asked.

After a moment, the chimp replied, “Well, I don’t feel as free as the Ringmaster is, but I’m freer than you are.”

“Oh—So you think that because you get to eat a little more than the rest of us and because you get out a little more often than we do that you’re a little more free—is that it?” the panther asked.

“Yeah! Plus, I have a bigger cage than the rest of you. The Ringmaster likes me!” the chimp said excitedly.

The panther bowed his head and shook it side to side in sadness before proceeding.

“Let me explain something to you, Mr. Chimp. It may be true that your cage is a little roomier than the rest of ours. But, contrary to what you may believe, the Ringmaster has not placed you in that big cage because he likes you. No— those big cages are there for one reason and one reason only.”

“Yeah! They’re reserved for the best animals—for us Chimps!”

“No, my friend. That’s not what they are there for. They are merely a control tool. They are just one of the many tools the Ringmaster uses to maintain control, Mr. Chimp.

“You see, he puts you up in the big cage and gives you all the extra things that we don’t get in exchange for your obedience, implying that as long as you faithfully obey him, you will remain his favorite. In this way, he sets you apart from the rest of us, making you feel special, thereby securing your loyalty. That is how he uses the big cage to control its inhabitant.

“However, he not only uses that big cage to control you, but he uses it to control the rest of us as well. Because he also implies to the rest of us that if we are faithful and obedient, we could be next in line to take your place, knowing full well that most of us will never see the inside of one of those big cages. By setting you apart from the rest of us and showering you with all the comforts of the Circus, he creates competition between all of us, thus securing dissension among us. And that is how he uses the big cage to control us.”

“Wait a minute, Panther!” the Chimp called out. “Now I understand that you all are not happy with your situation down there. But the fact of the matter is, this is how things should be—how it has always been. For as far back as I can remember we have always been divided, the best from the rest. We are Chimps. We are the best! Therefore, we deserve to live better than the rest of you. And as long as we continue to obey Master, we will always reap the benefits of being his favorites and we’ll never have to worry about any of you taking our place.”

Once again, the panther shook his head in sadness.

“First of all, Mr. Chimp, like I said before; most of us

will never see the inside of one of those cages. And frankly, I'm not that interested in the scenery. But this is not the point. The fact is, the Ringmaster has tricked many animals into believing that he really favors them—weren't you listening earlier when I spoke about what happened to the lion?"

"Yeah, but what does the lion have to do with any of this?" asked the chimp, confused.

Well, who do you think was in that cage before you?" The panther asked, pausing to let this question settle on the chimp before continuing.

"Mr. Chimp, I know that all this is a little difficult for you to swallow, but before you can ever be free, you must first recognize that you are *not* free. Think about it—can you eat whenever you feel like it? Can you leave and go wherever you want to go or do whatever you want to do when you want to do it?"

"No."

"No, you can't. So use those brains, Mr. Chimp. There is no such thing as partial or relative freedom. *You are in a cage.* And true freedom is not measured by how much bigger your cage is than mine. *A cage is a cage is a cage.* And so long as you are in one, you are no freer than any of the rest of us.

"And this is exactly why you are not happy. Because how could you ever be truly happy if you're not free? That's impossible for any of us," the panther said, turning to face the rest of the animals in his view. "As long as we live in cages and have to submit our will to another, we can never be happy. But this does not have to be! We do not have to humbly accept this fate. The World of the Free—the world where we belong—is still out there!"

The chimp hung silently by one arm, contemplating what the panther had said. Just then, a distinct jingling began permeating the housing area, one that all the animals had come to recognize. The Keepers were coming! So all the animals went back to doing what they normally did. The panther watched as the two Keepers in their grey uniforms made their way down the aisle that separated the rows of cages, their black boots clunking along the cement floor as they walked. They stopped at each cage for a moment, looked in, grabbed the steel bars of the doors and gave them a shake with their calloused hands before going on to the next one.

For a long time the panther had not understood these creatures' purpose here at the Circus, or why they carried out this routine. Their function had seemed to be different than that of the Trainers, who were always trying to teach the animals to behave in weird ways. But over the years he had come to understand that these differences were superficial. Because just like the Trainers, they were here to insure that he was in a cage, to make sure he wasn't free. But, ironically, he had also come to know that, just like the Trainers, they were not free either. They worked for the Ringmaster and so they lived in a cage as well; they just couldn't see the bars.

When the two keepers finally made their way to the panther, he looked at them and for a second their eyes met. Then, just as soon as they had come, they had gone. The panther watched them as they left out and shook his head...

After the animals saw that the Keepers had departed, the chimp spoke:

"Panther, I don't know what to make of this crap you've been talking about—all this World of the Free shit! I've never heard of such a place, and I'm sure that if such a place actually existed, we chimps would have known about it well before any of you. So, as far as I'm concerned, this big cage is about as free as it gets. And the Ringmaster put us chimps up here simply because we are the best."

“You still don’t get it, do you Mr. Chimp?” the panther asked, exasperated. “The Ringmaster would never tell you about the World of the Free. That would defeat his purpose. He doesn’t favor you! Can’t you see that you are no better off than the rest of us. Because just like us, you have to obey and perform for the Ringmaster before he lets you eat, or lets you out for that daily walk. He cares no more about you than the rest of us, Mr. Chimp. And if you don’t believe it, stop performing for him—or grow too old to perform—and I guarantee you that he will do to you what he’s done to that lion over there.”

That’s monkey shit! And I don’t believe a word of it,” the Chimp shrieked.

“Well Mr. Panther,” the elephant said, “I don’t know about them, but hearing you speak of this Free World has sparked my memory of it as well as my desire to return there.”

“Me too!” one of the monkeys shrieked. “But where exactly is this world?”

“Yeah, and how the fuck do we get there?” the tiger asked.

“The World of the Free is anywhere there are no bars holding you back, no cages, anywhere there is no Ringmaster. And in order to go to The World of the Free you will first have to have the desire to be free,” the panther said.

“As for you, Mr. Chimp. It’s a shame that you cannot see the Ringmaster for what he really is. But I assure you that one day you will—I hope sooner than later. Because then and only then will you have a chance at becoming free. And like I said, if the desire to be free isn’t in us, we all run the risk of dying many slow, painful deaths like the lion.”

“Shee—it! They can do whatever they want. But I ain’t tryin’ to go out like that!” the tiger exclaimed. No longer relaxing, he stood up at the front of his cage. “I’m trying to get a bite of that Free World you’ve been screamin’ about!”

Most of the animals agreed and stressed that they wanted to be free as well.

“Well, let me explain to you what I have come to learn about the Circus,” began the panther. “As you all know, I have been here for a long time. When I first got here, I would not obey any of the Ringmaster’s commands. So he would keep me in this cage and starve me to the brink of death. He would feed me just enough to keep me alive. Then after a few days, he would bring me out of the cage and offer me more food in exchange for my obedience. If this did not work, he would beat me, throw me back into the cage and repeat the process all over again.

“Anyway, while pacing in this cage, I would see other animals being calmly led out by the Trainers to parts of the Circus that I had never seen. And after a while, they would all come back just as calmly as they had left. These animals—the Obedient Ones—had been here awhile and several of them had attempted to persuade me to just get with the program and obey the Ringmaster. But I had already vowed to myself that I would never be like them. However, the more I watched them go out, the more curious I became as to where they went when they were gone for those long periods of time; for I thought that if I could get out there I could maybe find an opportunity to escape. But, I knew that I would never get the chance if I did not give in to some of the Ringmaster’s wishes. So I began to comply. I had to go through that dumb training school and learn all that nonsense the Trainers forced on me. Then finally one day, I was taken out there—to the *Arena*.

“Once out there I quickly realized that I could not escape. I had just been taken out of one cage and placed in a bigger one, where I was to jump through hoops and do stupid little stunts like the Obedient Ones. This angered me. The realization that there was no way for me to escape frustrated and angered me to the point where I began to consider doing something extreme, but I had to restrain myself, for I quickly saw the futility in that course of action.

“So there I was, very disappointed at my predicament. Yet I knew that if I were to have any chance of getting out of this madness, I would have to keep going out to the Arena. And soon I realized that my efforts had not been in vain, because the more I went out there, the more I learned about the Ringmaster; the more I learned about the Circus.

“Yas! While the lion was enjoying his fifteen minutes of fame, and while all the other animals were competing for their place in the spotlight, I was learning. I noticed that every time I came out there, there were many creatures that

looked like the Ringmaster filing into the arena.”

“You mean the spectators?” the elephant asked.

“Yeah, the spectators,” the panther answered. “And as they came in, they all gave the Ringmaster something before taking a seat. Once they were seated and the show had begun,

I noted that after each performance, the observers would cheer and urge the Ringmaster for more. Then I noticed several of these same creatures, who worked for the Ringmaster, walking up and down the aisles carrying food. Occasionally, one would give some of this food to one of the observers. But once again, there was an exchange.

“This baffled me for awhile and I did not immediately understand the meaning of these transactions. So I paced on it.

“Then one day, some of the animals began to fall ill. This sickness quickly spread to all of us and for a time we could not perform. At first, the Ringmaster was constantly back here with the Trainers, and the bad smell that he normally gave off had increased to levels I had never smelled before. He was furious! He began beating us and ordering the Trainers to beat us to try and force us out to the Arena. When we did not go he took all of the water and straw out of the cages and would not feed us. This didn’t bother us much because we slept most of the day due to the sickness. But when the Ringmaster saw that we were indeed sick, his odor changed. He was giving off another smell now, one that I recognized as *fear*.

“At fist I thought that he just might actually be genuinely concerned for us. But it wasn’t long before I realized that that was far from the truth. After a day or so of the sickness, many other creatures that resembled the Ringmaster began coming through the housing area. They were sticking sharp things into my body, and even though these things stung, I did not feel threatened by these creatures. They gave off a different, more pleasant smell. And I had the distinct impression that they were here to help us, to take the sickness away. In fact, they seemed to care about us. Soon I realized that I had been right, because after a few days we all began to get well. But I had noticed something else. These creatures had a powerful effect on the Ringmaster. For immediately before these creatures showed up, he and the Trainers had returned all the straw and water to the cages. And while they were here, his disposition changed toward us. He was not his usual violent self. In fact, he was quite humble. But he did not care for them and could not wait for them to leave. Once again, I smelled fear; the Ringmaster was afraid of them for some reason.”

“Fear?” the elephant asked. “What was he afraid of?”

“Well, I never completely understood why he was afraid of these creatures. I just knew that they scared him and that his behavior toward us was much different while

they were here. But I *had* figured out why he had been afraid when he’d found out that we were sick. This experience had allowed me to piece together a very important part of the puzzle. Because before the sickness, I had been pacing on the meaning behind all of the exchanges I’d

seen out in the Arena. I had also wondered what motivated the Keepers and Trainers to acquiesce to the Ringmaster, and moreover, what compelled the Ringmaster himself to be so cruel.

“Now it was all beginning to come together for me. I remembered how the Ringmaster withheld food from me when I didn’t obey; how he made all the animals pay with our obedience. I remembered how the observers out in the Arena had given something to the workers in exchange for food. This ‘something’ that they had traded for food had a value, for it was the same ‘something’ that they had given the Ringmaster for a seat in the Area. I recognized this as payment of some kind. Yas! As crazy as it was, they were paying for food! And they were motivated to pay for food by the same urge that motivated me to obey—Hunter! They had to pay to eat. And if they did not pay they did not eat. There was a pattern:

Food for payment;

Payment for food;

No payment, *No Food!*

“Yas! Food was the common denominator. Hunger tied it all together. I had made the connection! That just like the animals, the Keepers and the Trainers had to obey the Ringmaster and keep us from being free so that they could eat. Moreover, I now understood the Ringmaster’s fear when he’d learned that the animals had fallen ill. He was afraid because, while the spectators out in the Arena paid the Ringmaster, they were not really coming to see him. No! They were coming to see *us*, and they were paying the Ringmaster to put on a show. But if we could not perform, there could be no show. And that’s why he was afraid. He was afraid because if he did not put on a show—*HE WOULD NOT EAT!*”

Once again, the old panther paused to allow the significance of what he’d said settle on the animals’ minds. He paced for a moment and took this opportunity to quench his thirst. Upon returning to the front of the cage, he was gratified to see that most of the animals were no longer lying down in the cages. Some had begun pacing and others were standing up near the bars. But all were silently reflecting on what the panther had said. Then the tiger, who had begun pacing, broke the silence:

“Mr. Panther, since I’ve been here, I’ve always known that if I wanted to eat, I would have to perform. But I never would have thought that the Keepers, the Trainers, and even the Ringmaster himself have to pay for food. It always seemed to me that they had all the food. But if what you’re saying is true, then none of them are free either. Because, just like us, they have to pay for food as well. This is unbelievable!”

“I could hardly believe it myself, Mr. Tiger,” the panther said. “But it’s true. And it seems that these creatures like living in cages and paying for food. They like it so much that they’ve based a whole system on it. And this truly is odd because in the world that I came from, food was free.

“But this revelation allowed me to see deeper into the workings of the Circus. It helped me to understand the

Ringmaster a lot better and I now knew why he had brought me here—why he had brought all of the animals here. He brought us here to kill us so that he could live.

“But I had found his weakness and knew that he could be destroyed. However, I also knew that it would not suffice to just destroy him. No, the whole Circus would have to be taken down. And I knew how it could be done. I would have to relay my feelings to the other animals. I would have to warn them of the Ringmaster’s intentions. I would have to show them that there is a way for them to live and that they did not have to exist in cages anymore. I would have to show them that they could be free.

“This I reasoned would not be difficult to do, for I felt that surely all animals desired to be free. But I soon came to see that I had underestimated the task that was before me, and to realize that I had gravely misjudged this bunch. I had underestimated the power that the Ringmaster wielded over them. For no matter how many times I told them about the World of the Free, no matter how many times I told them that the Ringmaster was trying to kill them, and despite the fact that I showed them exactly how he was trying to kill them, they were not willing to listen to reason.

“It wasn’t long before I understood why. They were too busy competing against one another for the Ringmaster’s affection; too busy competing for the scraps, for more food and bigger cages. They *desired* nothing more. Yes, at that point, I reasoned that despite what I had told them, if they had been starving and had all been placed in one big cage with the Ringmaster, that they would have fought, killed, and feasted on one another without even the thought of tasting his flesh ever crossing their feeble minds. And after filling their bellies, I could even imagine them lying at the feet of their Master, seeking a scratch on the belly for a job well done.

“So no! They did not want to destroy the Ringmaster. They did not want to destroy the Circus because they had come to love their Master, and had come to believe that the Circus was their home. I was talking to the living dead—the Ringmaster had already killed them!”

The panther paused for a moment and looked around at all the animals before continuing.

“So my friends, I have been pacing this cage ever since, hoping that one day I would get the chance to convince a group of you to live before the Ringmaster kills you.”

A moment passed as the animals considered the panther’s words. Just then, one of the chimps seated up on the jungle gym peeling back a banana called out to the panther.

“Panther, you keep saying the Ringmaster is a killer. That he kills the Chimp in us, the Elephant in us—“

“The Monkey in us,” the monkey offered.

“Yeah, yeah—the Monkey in us,” the chimp conceded. “But this makes no sense to me. If he’s killing us as you say, then how is he doing it? How is it that he kills us?”

“Ah, yas,” the panther replied, smiling widely as he peered up the range at the chimp. “It comes down to that question, does it not? How does the Ringmaster kill us? Because that is what we need to know, isn’t it, Mr. Chimp?”

“I have explained how the Ringmaster keeps us divided and competing and believing he is our friend and how he controls us through these and other manipulations. But how does he get us to go along with his tricks? How does he fool us into participating in this Circus and becoming our own worst enemies? How does he trick us into giving away our power and going along with the illusions?”

The panther turned, his eyes meeting those of the animals in his range of vision.

“If you recall, I told you that I went to the Arena and submitted to the Trainers so I could find some way to escape. And I told you that while Mr. Lion was seeking his fifteen minutes of fame, I was learning about the nature of the circus,” the panther recounted. “Well I learned was the Ringmaster’s method of killing us—of killing the Tiger and Chimp and Monkey in us. And I found that it all begins with the training.”

“Training?” the chimp asked. “What do you mean?”

The panther paused for a moment and considered how to proceed.

“Mr. Chimp, who taught you how to eat a banana?” The panther asked. “Who was your teacher, your trainer?”

The chimp, swinging from one arm, was caught in the middle of chewing a mouthful of banana and he swallowed hard before he answered:

“Nobody.”

“Nobody?” the panther queried. “But that is odd. Certainly, I just saw you eat a banana, didn’t I?”

The chimp, still swinging replied absently. “I’ve always known how to eat bananas.”

“Alright,” the panther submitted, amused. “But suppose I told you that when you were just a baby chimp, you watched your mom and dad and you saw them pick bananas and feed you one and it tasted good. So you watched and learned how they did it and you imitated them and started picking your own. Do you think that sounds right?”

The chimp thought.

“Yeah, well, some of my earliest memories are of my mom and dad feeding me,” the chimp admitted. “And if they were feeding me, I have to think maybe I didn’t know how to do it myself.”

Just then, the tiger pressed up against the bars of his cage.

“You’re losing me Panther,” he blurted. “What are we talking about here? Bananas? Fuck bananas! I want to know how the Ringmaster kills us and what we can do about it.”

“Patience, Mr. Tiger,” the panther replied. “And please stay with me. I don’t want to lose you. In fact, maybe you can help. Who was your trainer when you learned how to use your claws and powerful legs to shred and pounce?”

“Trainer? I didn’t need a trainer,” the tiger scoffed. “I got hungry, I saw a rabbit. Case closed.”

“But certainly you had to have a trainer,” the panther prompted.

“I didn’t need no fucking trainer,” the tiger retorted, annoyed. “Who needs a trainer to teach him when he’s hungry?”

The panther turned to the elephant.

“Who was the trainer who taught you to use your size and weight to scare away predators, or use your trunk to get the leaves from the high trees?” he asked.

“I watched my mom and dad and then I did it,” the elephant answered simply.

“Do any of you see what I’m getting at?” the panther asked. He looked cage to cage, animal to animal.

“There are no Trainers in the World of the Free,” he explained. “They do not exist. They are not needed. We all learn everything that we need to know in order to survive, to live as we are, to be what we are—and to be free. Free!”

“As you said, Mr. Tiger, no one needs to be trained to know that they are hungry. This is true. And just like no one needs to be trained to know that they are hungry or thirsty or hot or cold or in danger, Tiger doesn’t need to be trained to know that he is Tiger.”

“We learn all we need to know on our own,” the elephant offered. “We watch our parents and we do what they do and we know how to be what we are. And that’s all we really need.”

“Yas,” the panther agreed. “And that is universal. It’s the same for all of us. We all learn what we need to know without Trainers. In the World of the Free, there are no Trainers.”

“So maybe this is better,” the orangutan said. He sat up near the front of the bars, playing with a piece of straw on the floor of his cage. “Maybe we’re better off here in the Circus because we have Trainers here and we get to learn stuff that we wouldn’t learn in the World of the Free. I can do backflips! I never would have learned backflips in the World of the Free.”

There was a tense pause.

“Did he just say that?” the tiger asked incredulously. “Did he? Cuz I can’t even—what the hell is you thinking Orangutan? Don’t you see this lump of fur over here that used to be a lion? Do you think ending up like that, dying in a cage, is better than the World of the Free?” The tiger snorted. “Who gives a shit about a back flip in the Land of the Free? Fuck a back flip!”

“No, wait a minute,” the chimp called out. “The orangutan is right! The Trainers have taught us chimps many tricks—they’re even teaching us sign language so that we can communicate better and be more like them and Master one day!”

“Sign language?” the tiger growled incredulously. “Who gives a fuck about sign language? Fuck sign language too!”

“Yeah, well how do you like *this* sign language?” the chimp screamed, sliding his long, lanky arm through the bars, his furry middle finger extended upward.

“Wait a minute! That’s it! That’s it!” the elephant trumpeted excitedly, jumping up and down in his cage and causing tremors that bounced the cages of the other animals off the floor boards. “That’s it! That’s the point! I get it! I get it!”

All the other animals became silent.

“It’s like this, Mr. Panther,” the elephant began proudly. “As you pointed out, we all learn what we need to know on our own. There are no Trainers in the World of the Free. We just are who we are. We do what comes natural—what makes sense. We are Elephant and Orangutan and Chimp and so on, but then we come here to the Circus and they have Trainers. And the reason they need to have Trainers is because they are teaching us to do things that we don’t need to know how to do, teaching us to do things that don’t come natural to us. The Circus has to get us to do tricks that Elephants and Tigers and Monkeys and Lions don’t do in the World of the Free.

“And Mr. Orangutan, Tiger is right. Who gives a shit about a back flip? In the World of the Free, orangutans don’t dance to amuse others. And chimps have no use for sign language. Don’t you see? We are trained to do what they want us to do for them. To benefit *them*.”

“Yas,” the panther agreed. “We know how to be Tiger and Orangutan and Chimp. No one has to show us. We know how—Perfectly. They must train us to make us less Tiger, less Orangutan, and less Chimp. They un-learn us who we are and they make us something we are not. They take away the Tiger and the Orangutan, and the Chimp in us and replace it with Circus Tiger, Circus Orangutan, and Circus Chimp. They make you something useful to the Circus.”

“And we forget who we are,” the elephant added “We forget, just like I forgot. And we come to think the Circus is the world and that it is our home and that it always has been.”

“And it starts with our training,” the panther continued.

“By training us, the Ringmaster gets in our minds and alters us and gets us to perform tricks and become something he can use. He yells, ‘Jump!’ so we jump. He yells, ‘Roll over!’ and we roll over.”

“So it’s when we jump and roll over that we become unfree,” the Tiger observed.

“No, Mr. Tiger,” the panther gently admonished. “No, we become un-free the moment we believe the Ringmaster and his Trainers have *any right to train us in the first place*. When we recognize the Ringmaster as having power and authority over us; when we accept our place and settle for anything less than freedom, that’s when we become Circus animals. That’s when we become un-free.

“And if you remember, that’s the first thing our training does to distort us. It teaches us our place. We learn first and foremost that the Trainers and the Ringmaster give all the orders and our role is to obey them. We learn that we are the students and they are the teachers. They convince

us that they have knowledge and power that we don't have knowledge and power. And that makes them somehow superior to us. We give away being bosses of ourselves and we are tricked into recognizing them as the bosses of us."

The panther searched the faces of the animals he could see, making sure they understood the gravity of what he had said.

"They convince us they have power and force us to recognize it by whipping us and beating us and taking away our food. They tell us, 'Get with the program, or you don't eat.' They control us through fear and pain. And once we recognize them as being in control, once we submit and throw away our freedom, they reward us with food and straw and large cages and so on. But we must bow to the Ringmaster. We must bow to the Circus and become less than what we are and throw away our freedom in exchange for their rewards. And once you recognize someone else as having power over you and authority, you are no longer free."

The sleeping form of the lion stirred and slowly the lion staggered to his feet as if burdened by a great weight on his back. He slunk to his water dish and lapped up its contents hungrily, unaware of all of the eyes fixed upon him. He turned and headed back to the warm comfort of his straw when his eyes met the panther's. The panther nodded at the lion in acknowledgment and then looked away. The tiger offered the lion some encouragement.

"Hang in there, Mr. Lion," he said sadly.

"Yeah!" one of the monkeys shrieked from up the range. "We're trying to get to the World of the Free!"

The lion looked around momentarily, his eyes glassy, not seeming to register what had been said to him, and he lowered himself down on his straw and was soon snoring away, oblivious to the world around him.

The panther looked over at the tiger and asked, "Now do you see what I mean when I say the lion is dead?"

The tiger looked over at the sleeping form of the lion. "Yas," he acknowledged sadly. "He's not a lion anymore."

After a moment, the panther continued.

"I learned a great deal about this Circus. Trainers only exist in the Circus. There are none in the World of the Free.

And Trainers always serve a Ringmaster—Always! Trainers exist so that the Ringmaster can control those who get trained, so the Ringmaster can control them and make them serve his wishes. So wherever there are Trainers, there are poor creatures like this lion here who believe the Trainers are his friends, who believe he is being taught tricks for his own good."

The panther cast a quick glance up the range at the chimps before continuing:

"Then when the Ringmaster decides we have outlived our usefulness, he casts us back into a cage and lets us rot."

"Yeah," the elephant agreed. "And then we end up like that," he concluded, staring down at the lion who had fallen asleep again.

"Yeah, and then we're fucked!" the tiger added.

"Fucked!" the monkey shrieked.

All eyes remained on the sleeping form of the lion. A quiet rage built inside that housing area. The tiger cleared his throat.

"Last week, the Trainers taught me how to jump through a flaming hoop," the tiger shared in a voice low and thoughtful. "And at first it didn't feel right. I don't like fire and didn't want to be

near it. But they had me jump again and again and they whipped me if I didn't jump. When I did, they gave me food and, through their actions, I could tell that they were happy with me. It was like I was earning their... their..." His voice trailed off as he searched for the right word. "...their affection maybe? Their love? And I wanted to please them. I thought I was doing good, that I was earning something important—just like the orangutan's backflips. It was like I thought they were teaching me how to be better Tiger. That they were teaching me because they care about Tiger."

He stopped, his eyes distant in thought and he swallowed hard.

"But they don't care about Tiger," he said finally. "They don't. They just want me to jump through hoops so I will be useful to them."

The tiger snarled angrily and began circling his cage quickly and silently, as if stalking something unseen.

"These dirty bastards," he growled. "All this time I was doing tricks for them. I should have been taking big chunks out of their soft asses!"

Suddenly, the elephant crashed headlong into the bars with all his weight, rocking the entire row of cages. He took a step back and did it again, trumpeting furiously as his massive head collided with the steel bars.

"I've been standing on my head for peanuts!" he raged, embittered by the betrayal. *"I've been standing on my head for peanuts!"*

He crashed into the bars again and again, chanting his mantra until he finally exhausted himself and he stood panting, his eyes hard and furious as he leaned against the unbreakable cage. He spoke in his normal voice, calm but resolute: "I've been standing on my head for peanuts."

"Yas! We have all been performing tricks for food," the panther pointed out. "The clowns perform for food. The Trainers and Keepers obey the Ringmaster and do as they are told or they do not eat. The Ringmaster pleases the crowd or he does not eat. As I have said, it is a whole system based on working for food. It is a system that these two-legged creatures have devised and even the Ringmaster is ultimately a slave to it."

"These creatures seem to enjoy recognizing another as having power over them. They seem to enjoy living in cages. They like living lives without freedom, working for food, and accepting training that works as a cage on the mind."

"A cage is a cage is a cage," screeched the monkey.

"Yas," the panther agreed. "And as long as you are in one, you are not free."

One Monkey Don't Stop No Show...

"Mr. Panther, I understand everything you have said. And I do want to be free. But I still don't see how we can get to this Free World. Are you suggesting that we break out of these cages?" the elephant asked.

"No, Mr. Elephant. I am not suggesting that. Besides, that would be an impossible feat for even you."

"Well, I have an idea," the tiger claimed. "The next time The Master takes us out, we can all attack him! I have no problem taking a bite out of his ass! Are y'all with me?" he asked.

The animals erupted in pandemonium, agreeing that they were down for the coup. Only the chimps kept silent.

"Settle down, Settle down!" the panther yelled and waited for the noise to die down. "Now I know how all of you feel right now. And yas! There has been many times where I've felt like laying teeth to the Ringmaster. But trust me when I tell you that teeth and claw may earn you a

moment's satisfaction, but it will not get you to the Free World that I speak of. The Ringmaster has much greater weapons than the whip at his disposal, weapons that are far more deadly than teeth and claw."

"Well then, I'll just stomp his ass into the ground!" The elephant bellowed, shifting his weight from foot to foot, the floor boards of his cage quaking.

"Yeah, that'll hold him," one of the monkeys shrieked.

"Have you ever heard of an Elephant gun, Mr. Elephant?" the panther asked.

"No," replied the elephant, stopping suddenly.

"Well, if you try that, you will certainly be introduced to one for the first time—and the last. No! Violence will not win you your freedom, for the Ringmaster mastered violence a long time ago."

The panther sighed heavily.

"Sometimes it is to our fortune that we can learn from other's experiences. If you remember, I told you earlier that once I started going out to the Arena and realized there was no way to escape, I considered violence."

"Yas," the elephant said. "You said you thought about doing something extreme until you saw that it was futile."

"Yas," the panther concurred. Once again he sighed and considered his words.

"I had just finished my training and had started going out to the Arena when they brought in a gorilla who was unconscious and they threw him in a cage down the range there across from where Mr. Orangutan is now," the panther began, his eyes stung with memory and pain. "When the gorilla awakened, he began demanding to know where he was. When the animals told him he was in the Circus, he did not know the meaning of that and he insisted that he did not belong here. He pulled on the bars of the cage that held him captive, the noise rumbling through the floor boards of our cages. He pounded his chest and his growls and snarls of anger echoed down the range.

"I could understand his rage. But some of the other animals were annoyed by his behavior and only cared that the gorilla was disrupting their sleep. So they shared with the gorilla what the routine was, that the Ringmaster gave the orders and the Trainers would train the animals but that the gorilla would not get to go out to train until he calmed down. And once he was calm, he would be allowed to perform and things would be better for him. They told him that he would get better food and he may even earn a larger cage and other conveniences, but I remember that the gorilla's questions to the other animals did not center around luxuries and amenities, but centered instead around the Ringmaster.

"So overnight, the gorilla's behavior changed. And I was disappointed because I had felt that I had found a kindred spirit. But alas! He became unusually obedient. So unusually obedient, in fact, that he completed his training in no time. He was a model of perfect behavior to such a degree that it convinced the Trainers that the gorilla had been pacified and was ready to perform for the Circus."

The panther took a deep breath, his dark features seeming to grow darker.

"I was in the circular cage when they brought him out for the first time in front of the crowds. He wore a chain and collar and some of the Trainers stood by with the hot sticks as he emerged into the large cage in the center ring. The crowd was loud, making those noises they make with their hands as the Ringmaster spoke to them. When he finished he turned and opened the cage door to step into the cage with the gorilla.

“As soon as he opened the cage door, the gorilla changed. His face became an ugly snarl and he leapt across the length of the cage toward the Ringmaster. He moved so swiftly that the Keepers and Trainers could not react before the gorilla had gripped the Ringmaster and was pounding him against the bars of the cage. The Ringmaster was limp and bloody when the gorilla threw him through the open door and out into the arena, and the gorilla followed behind, emerging from the cage and stomping upon the Ringmaster. He picked him up again and again and slammed him to the floor.

“I was just as shocked at this outburst as everyone else because I had believed the gorilla had become one of the Obedient Ones. But I had been wrong. The gorilla had been biding his time just like I was.

“I watched from the circular cage and there was nothing I could do as the Trainers and Keepers all encircled the gorilla while the crowd was screaming and running for the exits and the clowns were scurrying for safety. The Trainers and Keepers were shocking him with the hot sticks, and one Keeper tried to grab the chain on the gorilla’s collar, but the gorilla grabbed him instead. He slammed the Keeper to the ground and he did not move.

“One of the Keepers ran away and I thought that he fled in fear—but I was to learn otherwise.

“When the Keeper returned, he was holding a long, metal stick. He pointed it at the gorilla, who had grabbed one of the Trainers to use him as a shield and prevent the others from shocking him with the hot sticks. Still the Keeper with the metal stick pointed it at the gorilla and fire came out of the end of it. A loud explosion boomed and the stick somehow tore a hole through both the Trainer and the gorilla,” the panther described.

“It tore a hole in them,” the panther repeated. “And the gorilla bled from his stomach. He threw down the Trainer he had been using as a shield and the Keeper with the metal stick made the fire and explosion happen again and again, and each time, pieces of the gorilla flew off, chunks of flesh and muscle. He bled from the holes as if he had been bitten by teeth the size of an elephant’s tusks, and he was dying. In one desperate attempt, he charge the Keeper with the metal stick and when it made fire for the last time, the gorilla’s face flew away and he landed in a bloody heap at the Keeper’s feet.

“He was dead,” the panther said flatly. “But so was the Ringmaster.”

Up until this point, the other animals had listened silently. But when the panther mentioned the death of the Ringmaster, they began to stir.

“The Ringmaster died?” the tiger asked incredulously.

“Is that what you said?”

“Yas,” the panther answered. “This was not the Ringmaster all of you know. That Ringmaster was a short, round creature with no hair—a different creature than the one who is Ringmaster now.”

“So there is more than one Ringmaster?” the elephant asked.

“That is what you must know,” the panther said. “When the gorilla killed the Ringmaster, I thought the Circus was finished and that I would soon be set free. But that was clearly not the case, as I am still here among you.”

For a brief moment, the panther’s gaze fixed upon the tiger.

“We did not perform for a few days and the Circus was shut down for that time. The good creatures were coming in and out of the housing area and all the Trainers and Keepers smelled of fear. But it was only a few days later that the door of the housing area swung open and in strode the new Ringmaster in his top hat and gloves and cape. It was the Ringmaster all of you know,

the one who beats us and whips us and makes us perform. The new Ringmaster, the Keeper who had killed the gorilla.”

The elephant gasped.

“You mean this Ringmaster was once a Keeper?” the elephant asked. “He was once one of the creatures in gray who beat us and feed us and escort us to the Arena?”

“Yas,” the panther confirmed. “This Ringmaster was once a Keeper. And he killed the gorilla. So because of his ruthlessness, the others recognized him as their leader and he became the new Ringmaster.”

The animals were stunned.

“So if we kill the Ringmaster, it will not do any good,” the tiger concluded despondently, sighing.

The panther shook his head.

“I think I see what you mean,” the elephant said. “If you kill this Ringmaster, then one of the other Keepers will take his place. And another and another. The Circus can go on forever or until they run out of creatures. We would have to kill every last one of them.”

“But what if all of us attack at the same time and take out as many of them as we can?” the tiger asked insistently. “If we all attack together, they cannot kill every one of us and some of us will get free.”

“We can’t” answered one of the monkeys. “We’re never out of our cages at the same time. They only let us out a few at a time and keep the rest of us locked up.”

“And that is why they do it that way,” piped in the chimp.

“Just in case you inferior animals get some funny ideas.”

“Well, I’ve got some funny ideas,” the tiger growled.

“I’ve got a lot of them. And I want to sink my teeth into that Ringmaster!”

“As do I,” the panther commiserated. “And the gorilla did as well. But I want to get to the World of the Free and using my claws and teeth isn’t going to get me there. It didn’t work for the gorilla and it will not work for us.

“If we encountered one of these creatures in the Land of the Free, perhaps we would be able to tear him to pieces with claws and teeth and tusks and fists. But not here. Not in the Circus. We cannot defeat him that way. In this situation violence is futile. It is suicide. I learned this from the gorilla. Actually, he saved my life. If not for him, I may have done the same thing.

“You see, the Ringmaster is an idea. The Ringmaster is a concept and you cannot kill it. It is not the creature nor is it the clothes that he wears or the cane and whip he carries. The Ringmaster is the idea of who gives orders, of who is in power.

“I think the gorilla believed that if he killed the Ringmaster, there would be no one to give orders to the others and we would all go free,” the panther said. “But he did not know that these creatures have devised a system that goes on and on and never ends and that killing one creature won’t do any good.”

The panther studied the tiger for a moment.

“You must understand,” the panther continued. “The nature of the Circus is violence. To lock us in cages and deprive us of freedom is violence, whatever their reason for doing it. To whip and poke us with hot sticks is violence, no matter their reasons. Even when the Keepers are just standing there, they are a threat—a threat of violence. They are a reminder of what will happen if we forget our place and act upon any of those funny ideas of freedom, and the Keepers will do whatever they have to do. They will kill for the Ringmaster, might even die for him, because

their minds are in cages. They will kill you and make an example of you so other animals will never act upon those same funny ideas.

“No, the Ringmaster and those who obey him cannot be defeated by violence. The Ringmaster and those who obey him cannot be defeated by violence. The Ringmaster has perfected violence, Mr. Tiger.”

The tiger, who had begun circling his cage impatiently, let out a loud growl and said, “Well if we can’t break out or bite and claw our way out, then it seems to me that we can never get to this Free World. So why the hell did you ever bring it up, Panther? You talk about the cruelty of the Ringmaster, but you are crueler than he is. Because now your talk of this World of the Free has awakened in me a desire to be free, yet it appears that this can never happen. I wish I would have never spoken to you. I should have just left you to pace in that fucking cage!”

“No! No! Tiger, you are jumping to conclusions,” the panther said. “I assure you that there is a way for us all to be free.”

Suddenly, one of the monkeys began jumping up and down and rattling his cage.

“Yas! Yas!” he shrieked excitedly. “I think I’ve got it, Mr. Panther! Are you saying that if I just stop obeying the Master I can go to World of the Free?”

Hearing this, the old panther cracked a rare smile and said, “No, Mr. Monkey. That’s not what I’m saying. Unfortunately, one monkey don’t stop no show. One panther doesn’t either for that matter. If that were possible, I would have been gone!”

“But how do you know that Mr. Panther?” the monkey asked.

“Yeah! How do you know that?” the tiger challenged, glaring at the panther in frustration.

The panther met the tiger’s stare.

“I know because I have seen these things fail,” the panther responded sternly.

“And I set out to determine why they failed.”

“Let me give you a clue,” the chimp interposed, his feet crossed luxuriously in front of him as he sat on his perch on the jungle gym, surrounded by discarded banana peels. “All your little plots and schemes fail because this is the *Circus* and *you are Circus Animals*. That’s just the way it is. The Ringmaster is the Ringmaster. So you can wrack your silly little brains about how to take down a system that works— and works the right way. And you can blather away about this Free World fantasy, but when it comes down to it, when it’s all said and done, you malcontents are going to grow old right here. *Get used to it!*”

“That remains to be seen,” the panther replied evenly, “But if we grow old here, it will not be because fate has doomed us. No. And if we get to the World of the Free, it will not be because we took the gorilla’s course of action and resorted to violence, or because one of us refused to follow the Ringmaster’s orders.”

“Let me guess—you’ve seen that fail?” the chimp asked, peeling another banana.

“Yas,” the panther answered.

“What? Are you gonna tell us another sad gorilla story? Some gorilla stopped following orders?” the chimp provoked, talking around a mouthful of banana.

“No. Not a gorilla,” the panther replied. “It was a tiger.”

“A tiger?” the tiger asked.

“Yas. A Bengal tiger,” the panther answered.

The panther’s eyes met the tiger’s for a moment and did not let go.

“I had just arrived here,” the panther began. “I was still in the grips of the Long Sleep that happens when we get caught and brought to the Circus. For those first few days or so, I was

mostly incoherent and would awaken long enough to get a drink of water and go back to sleep, much like that lion over there.”

The panther made a passing nod in the lion’s direction.

“I did not know where I was when I awakened in this cage,” the panther said. “And the other animals were oblivious to me, as if I were invisible—and I didn’t really care. I did not know them and did not want to know them.

“At the time, I recall, there was a heated debate that I did not understand between some of the other animals and the tiger who was in the cage next to me.

“From what I gathered, the other animals were mad at this tiger and were blaming him for causing them trouble and the tiger, for his part, was calling the other animals cowards. But, again, it did not concern me and I did not pay much attention.

“The tiger’s cage, I saw, was bare. There were pieces of food stuck to the bars and the water bowl was tipped over in the aisle, surrounded by a splatter of food and feces that the tiger had apparently flung onto the floor. Unlike all the other animals—including me – the tiger had no food or water or even straw to lie upon.

“I also noticed the tiger’s condition. He walked with a limp and he had large open gashes across his back and flank,” the panther described. “And there were smears of blood on the floor of the cage as if the tiger had been dragged. One of his eyes was swollen shut.”

The tiger across from the panther growled low in his chest as he contemplated the scene.

“I lay still in my cage even when I was not asleep and over the course of the day, the other animals urged the tiger to consider what was best for him and they told him he should stop whatever it was that he was doing. The tiger however refused to yield.

“I only gathered bits and pieces of this strange debate in the glimpses between the times when the Long Sleep would overtake me.”

The panther shifted his weight on his powerful legs. The muscles of his back rippled.

“I awoke to the noise of the Keepers rattling the door to the tiger’s cage and I was immediately alarmed as it was creatures like these who had managed to hunt me and capture me in the World of the Free. So I remember being very alert.

“One of the Keepers, the one who is now Ringmaster, stood in front of the cage and he was covered in food. The tiger’s food and water containers were both laying out in the aisle again.

“So one of the Keepers stepped to the side of the cage and slid a noose on a stick through the bars and got it around the tiger’s neck while the others unlocked the door to the cage and charged the tiger with hot sticks and clubs and whips. They attacked him and they were brutal. Even under such overwhelming odds, the tiger struggled against the creatures and all their weapons,” the panther remembered, his voice growing quiet and distant.

“I didn’t understand what was happening,” the panther said. “And I remember that I crept back into the corner of the cage, anticipating that these creatures would attack me in the same way but they didn’t. When they finished with the tiger and he was lying in the cage, bloody and broken, they wheeled the cage from its place and down the aisle to

the garage doors, and they pushed the cage outside. With that done, the Keepers left.”

“Where did they take him? The orangutan asked timidly.

“The tiger was still very much in a cage. They had just simply moved the cage. But I remember as they wheeled him out, he turned his swollen face toward me and he said, ‘Don’t let them get the Circus into you.’ That was all he said and he was wheeled out.”

“Like maybe he figured it out,” the elephant interjected thoughtfully. “Like maybe he saw how they kill us by taking away what we really are and replacing it with Circus.”

“Yas,” the panther agreed with a nod. “Yas. But remember that I had not been out to get trained yet and did not know the nature of the Circus. I didn’t know what he was talking about and this new world of cages was strange and foreign to me.

“So over the course of the next few days, I learned how the routine went. I saw the other animals escorted to training and to the arena for shows, and still the tiger had not returned. The other animals advised me that if I just cooperated with the strange creatures in uniforms and learned my tricks, I could make it easy on myself and the Trainers would look upon me with favor. It would get me recognition from the Ringmaster and I could earn larger portions of food and more straw for my bedding and more time out of my cage, training and performing.

“And in the course of explaining things to me, they would occasionally mention the tiger, sighing or saying something disparaging about how he was a crazy fool. They said not to follow in his footsteps, that he was just a troublemaker. But I had been puzzled by what he’d said to me on his way out. I was curious, and so I asked about the tiger.”

Again the panther’s eyes met those of the Siberian across from him and the panther’s eyes were filled with sadness.

“The animals all in turn shared that the tiger had started spouting off funny ideas about bringing down the Circus and defeating the Ringmaster. They laughed at the thought. After all, who would want to destroy the Circus?” the panther asked rhetorically.

“Not me,” offered the chimp, sitting comfortably upon his jungle gym with his feet up.

The elephant snorted his distaste and somewhere up front, a monkey screeched his displeasure.

“So according to their account, this crazy, wayward tiger went out into the arena during the show and refused to perform,” the panther continued. “He would not take his position and he would not perform tricks.”

Some of the animals snickered as they imagined the scene.

“I bet the Ringmaster was mad,” the elephant chuckled.

“And the Keepers too,” the panther added. “From what the animals said, the Keepers had to carry and half-drag the tiger back to the cage, where they beat him for his defiance. And that was the reason the tiger had been in such terrible condition when I first saw him.

“But that wasn’t all. According to their account, in the days before I arrived at the Circus, the Keepers took the tiger’s straw and his food and water and they would only bring him enough food to keep him alive. But when the Keepers came with meager portions of food, the tiger—far from broken by hunger—would fling the food and water back at them.

“The animals thought the tiger was crazy. They didn’t understand why he was rebelling against the Ringmaster.

They saw the Ringmaster as their friend; The Circus was their home. The training and performances were opportunities to move up higher up in status and improve their lot. Nothing the tiger said or did made sense to them.”

“Well, why would he stop eating?” the orangutan asked. “Isn’t that crazy?”

“Possibly,” the panther permitted. “But I think it was something else. I suspect that he knew the Keepers were withholding food in order to break him and they were offering him only starvation rations so that they could keep him alive. So perhaps by rejecting the food, the tiger was

demonstrating to the Keepers and to the other animals that he was in control, that he could not be broken by the absence of food or water or straw.

“As for whether the tiger was crazy or not, I cannot say. But I have given his situation a great deal of thought over the years and it occurs to me that if he did not eat, he risked the possibility of harm and even death. This could be seen as one form of self-murder.

“And yet, if he ate—what then? He would keep his body alive and he would give the Ringmaster more time to break his spirit and kill the tiger inside of him. And in a sense, isn’t that also a form of self-murder? So, whether the tiger considered this or not, as a captive of this Circus, we are sometimes confronted by a choice between a course of action that seems to others to be self-murder, a course of action that may be necessary to maintain our dignity and our integrity as Tiger or as Elephant or as Orangutan. The alternative is to obey the Ringmaster and permit him to kill us in another way, and this too is self-murder. So perhaps the tiger chose to risk harm and even death to preserve the life of the tiger inside him that the Ringmaster intended to kill.”

“So whatever happened to him?” The tiger asked. He swallowed hard, as if bracing for bad news. “What happened? You said he endured all that shit and they pushed his cage outside and then—what? That was it? You never saw him again?”

“No, I saw him again,” the panther answered gravely. “I saw him a few days later. The Keepers pushed his cage back next to mine. They had left him outside in the cold and the rains had frozen during those cold nights and the tiger had had no shelter at all from the elements. Only the bars of the cage. So when they wheeled him back in, the tiger’s fur was covered in a layer of ice. As it began to melt, he shivered. He was so thin that his ribs were showing and none of his wounds appeared to be healing.

“All the animals became silent when the Keepers wheeled the tiger in and left him there. In his absence, they had all complained that his antics were foolish and had brought them grief from the angered Keepers and Trainers, but when they saw his condition...”

The panther’s voice trailed off.

“Even after the tiger warmed up, he was coughing and wheezing and had a hard time breathing. His wounds were infected and he had no strength. The Keepers would bring food but the tiger would not eat, not so much out of stubbornness, I suspect, but simply because he had no appetite anymore.

“The other animals, anticipating the tiger’s death, asked if there was anything they could do for him. With his eyes glassy, he would look up and in between coughing and hacking, he would ask them to reject the Ringmaster and reject the Circus. He did not ask for comforts or straw or food or water. He asked them to reject the Circus.

“But his words were lost on us because no one understood what he meant. Some of the other animals puzzled over this and simply dismissed his words as part of his delirium. But even though I did not understand, I remembered his words.”

The panther cleared his throat.

“He died,” the panther said. “He died, and before the good creatures could examine him, the Keepers came in and put straw and water in the cage and they put bandages over the tiger’s open wounds. They did this so the good creatures could examine him, the Keepers came in and put straw and water in the cage and they put bandages over the tigers open wounds. They did this so the good creatures wouldn’t know how they killed him. Before the good creatures came, the Trainers and Ringmaster examined the rest of us and left large amounts of food for us, and the smell of fear followed them everywhere.

“So you see, it is not possible for any one of us to stand up to the Circus and bring it down. Each of us as individuals are expendable to the Ringmaster and any resistance of this kind will not get us to the World of the Free. If we resist alone, our fate is the same as the tiger’s and the gorilla’s. The tiger and the gorilla both taught me this.

“As I have learned about the Circus, as I’ve paced upon what I’ve seen, I have often come back to the question—why was it that they had to kill the tiger? Why was it necessary to kill him? And it was when I finally answered that question that I began to formulate a plan to get to the World of the Free.” The panther revealed, “you see, I realized a long time ago that my fate is tied to yours. Yas, my friends. There is one way that all of us have a chance of reaching the World of the Free.”

“Well, what is it that we have to do?” the monkey asked impatiently.

“We all have to have the desire to be free, we will all have to free ourselves as individuals, and we will all have to work together towards getting to the World of the Free.

“Yas! We will have to stop competing against one another. There will be plenty of time for competition in the World of the Free, but we cannot afford to do it now. The enemy, however divided and fictionalized they may seem, stand in unity when it comes to keeping us in cages. So we must stand in unity as well.

“We will have to stop trying to win the Ringmaster’s affection and we will have to stop viewing one another as obstacles to that affection and realize that that affection doesn’t really exist.

“We will have to understand that we all have a common enemy and that it is he who snatched us and our mothers from the World of the Free and threw us in cages. That it is he who holds the keys to these cages and chooses not to turn them because he does not want us to ever see that world again. We will have to realize that it is he who tries to exchange small amounts of the freedom that is our birthright—bigger cages—for just a little more of our souls. That it is he who withholds food, one of our most basic needs, as a means of controlling us, as a means of forcing us to obey him. That it is he who manipulates us into competing against one another for the kibbles and bits that are left over after he’s gorged himself. That it is he who loves nothing more than to see us at odds with one another, fighting for the scraps off his table; knowing that as long as we are baring our teeth at one another, he won’t have to worry about us baring them at him.

“Yas! The first thing we all must do to have a chance at the Free World is to see the Ringmaster for who he is. We must see the Circus for what it is and know that it is not our home; these cages are not our homes. And then, we must all have an earnest desire to be free of this world. We must desire nothing more than our personal and collective freedom and be willing to do whatever it takes to make this desire a reality.

“So, my friends, I ask you—do you honestly have this desire? Is there anything you wouldn’t sacrifice in exchange for your freedom?”

“Mr. Panther,” the elephant said. “You have awakened a desire in me to be free that I’ve never felt before. I can think of nothing I wouldn’t do—nothing I wouldn’t be willing to sacrifice in order to be free. And I believe I speak for most of us when I say—I am ready to be free.”

Just then, many of the animals began proclaiming their agreement with the elephant.

“Well then,” the panther said. “You all now know that this is not your home and the desire for freedom is burning within you. So there’s really only one thing left for you to do.”

“What is it?” one of the monkeys yelled.

“BE FREE!” the panther exclaimed. “I am not speaking of being free of these cages, of these physical restraints. In order to have a chance at getting to the World of the Free, each and every one of you must become free within. You will have to free your minds before you can free your bodies. For what purpose does it serve to be physically unencumbered if your mind is still in a cage?”

“Freedom is a *decision*, one that you must make for yourselves. Each of you has the *desire* to be free. The chains that have been binding your minds have been loosened. Now it is up to you to tear them away and throw them off of you. It’s up to you to simply make the decision to be *free*. The

tiger made that decision; the gorilla made that decision. And although the course of action they took did not get them to the World of the Free—*they died free*.”

“Yas, Mr. Panther,” the Orangutan said, “It’s like when you asked me earlier if I’d ever refused to do something the Master told me to do because I didn’t want to. That’s being free right?”

“Yas! That is exactly what it is, Mr. Orangutan. It’s saying *no* to those things you do not want to do and saying *yas* to those things that you feel like doing. That’s what being free is. And it is precisely that kind of freedom of mind that can destroy this world of cages and get us to the World of the Free. It is that kind of freedom that each of you must claim, for my plan to work. You will have to make the decision to be free, and you will have to cling to your freedom come what may. Because in *this* world, freedom comes with a price just like food does. Sacrifices will have to be made.

“I have a plan. And once we begin to put my plan in motion, the Ringmaster’s going to take every little thing that he feels makes us comfortable. He is going to beat us, starve us, and bring all other types of cruelties down upon us. Yas, we are going to experience the full extent of his wrath, for he, like us, will be fighting for his life. But we cannot break under any of this. We will have to desire freedom more than straw to lie down on; we will have to desire freedom more than food, more than water, more than existence itself. Do you understand what I am saying?” the panther asked.

“Yas, I understand,” said the tiger who had begun pacing again. “And I believe that I have already made that decision, Mr. Panther. After all I’ve heard, after all I’ve learned today, I could not possibly continue being Circus Tiger.”

“Yeah me neither!” The monkey shrieked.

Just then, that familiar jingling sound began to penetrate the room and increased in volume until the door to the housing area opened. The Keepers were coming through for another captive count. This time, all of the animals remained standing at the doors of the cages, their eyes locked on the Keepers as they proceeded down the aisle past the chimps and the tiger, past the lion and the elephants. Suddenly, when they came to the cage that held the orangutan, there was a loud shriek followed by an outburst from one of the Keepers.

“You son-of-a-bitch!” he shouted at the orangutan. “Did you see what he just did, George? This bastard just threw shit on me!” he screamed as the orangutan stood there, grinning from ear to ear.

“Well, he’s never done that before,” George said, cupping a hand to his face and trying to stifle a laugh. “And he got you pretty good too, Bill!” George said, no longer able to contain the burst of laughter.

“What the hell are you laughing about? It’s not funny!” Bill said, as they crossed over to the other row of cages on the panther’s side and up the aisle toward the door they’d come through.

But George wasn't the only one who had found this amusing, for all of the animals were silently enjoying a laugh—even the panther. After the Keepers had left, the tiger shouted down to the orangutan:

“What was all that about, Orangutan?”

“Yeah, said the elephant, still smiling. “Why did you do that?”

“Well, Mr. Panther said being free is doing what you feel like doing, right Mr. Panther?” the orangutan asked, jumping up and down at the front of his cage.

“Yas,” the panther agreed. “It is.”

“Well, I'd always wanted to do that,” he said. “So today, I did it. And I must say it felt good! I'm really starting to like this 'Free' thing!” he said, still grinning.

For a while, the animals enjoyed a laugh. Then the tiger broke in on a more serious note and asked:

“So Mr. Panther, what's the plan?”

The Panther looked around at the animals and said:

“As I was telling you earlier, I found out why the Ringmaster brought us here. He brought us here so that he could live. But in order for him to live, he had to kill us. However he did not wish to kill us physically, for that would defeat his purpose. No, he had to kill the Lion in us. He had to kill the Elephant and the Tiger in us; the Panther in us. Because he knew that as long as we were alive, we would not perform for him. And if we did not perform for him, there could be no show. And without a show, he would die. But unfortunately for him, he made a grave error. Because whereas he thought you were dead, you were merely sleeping. And now you have awakened.”

With that said, the panther began relaying his plan.

Book 2: The Animals Awaken

“To be awake is to be alive.”

-Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

“Power concedes nothing without demand. It never has and it never will.”

-Frederick Douglas

“Liberty is the greatest menace to authority.”

-Emma Goldman

How Do You Move a Two-Ton Animal?

Dawn was fast approaching as the animals stood at the bars of the cages and listened attentively to the plan the panther laid out. After he'd finished and was satisfied that the animals understood the details of the strategy, he warned them again of the cruelties that the Ringmaster would employ in response to their actions. He warned of the food deprivation, beatings, and torture that the Ringmaster would bring down upon them in an effort to force them into submission. He warned that the Ringmaster might even try to separate them to break their collective resolve. But he assured them that their freedom depended on them sticking to the plan and that by doing so, they could minimize the suffering to which they'd be subjected. Finally he said:

"Now I must tell you all that all of us may not make it to the World of the Free. For what we are about to do is a direct threat to the Ringmaster's existence and he is going to respond accordingly. He is going to react in the same way that any of us would react were we trapped in a corner by an enemy intent on killing us. He's going to utilize every possible weapon in his arsenal in a desperate attempt to cling to his life. And yes, he may even resort to killing one or some of us. But we must remember that we all must die someday. However, we only have to die once and it is our desire to die free. So we cannot give in to fear. If we allow fear to control us, we will have already lost our freedom as well as any chance we may have of reaching the World of the Free. And we will have relegated ourselves to the fate of dying over and over again in this world of cages. So we must hold on to our freedom, even in the face of death."

After a moment's pause, the panther began rapidly pacing the width of the cage, looking out through the bars at the animals. "So are you with me?" he asked.

"Are you ready to bring the Ringmaster to his knees and destroy the Circus?"

Night grudgingly gave in to day and the sun was creeping up the horizon. Although the animals had not slept all night, they were nevertheless wide awake in anticipation of the day's events when they heard keys in the door of the housing area. The time had come; the Ringmaster and the first-shift Keepers were coming to make their morning rounds. The door opened into the housing area and the animal smell that the Ringmaster had become familiar with filled the air. The Ringmaster strode into the housing area in gray pants tucked into black knee-high, patent-leather boots, black cape fluttering behind him. He held his black top hat in one spotless white-gloved hand and in this other, his cane. His whip, almost concealed by his coattails, was coiled and hanging from his hip. His hair was shiny and slicked back, a pencil-thin mustache perched above pencil-thin lips. His beady feral eyes surveyed the rows of cages. He noticed it was unusually quiet this morning as he and the two Keepers began walking the aisle and looking in on the animals. As they walked by each cage, all of the animals, except the chimps, were lying down and looking up at them.

When they came to the cage that housed the orangutan, the Ringmaster asked, "What's this?" pointing with his cane to the feces that had been flung through the bars the night before.

"Oh! George told us that they had a little incident with this one last night, Mr. Head," one of the Keepers responded.

He stood a step behind the Ringmaster, his hands behind his back as he shifted from foot to foot nervously, his eyes on the Ringmaster. His partner stood next to him.

“Well, clean this shit up and get these beasts out to the Training area. Tom and Jack are waiting to go over the routines with them for the big show this afternoon.”

With that, the Ringmaster turned and swept out through the same door he had entered.

The two Keepers grumbled as they cleaned up the mess made by the orangutan and then left momentarily, returning with equipment to transfer the animals. The animals were taking out to the training area, where Trainers were waiting to go over the same old boring, monotonous routine with them. As usual, they baited them with food and rewarded them for compliance. Afterward, the animals were led back to the cages, where they waited for the show to begin.

The Arena lights crisscrossed the surface of the tent canvas to the strains of the pipe organ through the sound system, while the clowns entertained the spectators filing in. An

excited hum filled the Big Top as the peddlers moved through the crowd with popcorn, cotton candy, and watered-down beverages. The Ringmaster, his cape fluttering behind him and his cane gripped in one gloved hand, trotted briskly into the center ring with the spotlights burning down upon

him. The crowd welcomed him with applause and whistles. He smiled widely and removed his top hat to bow low to the cheering crowd. He stood and with a booming voice addressed the audience:

“Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages. Welcome to the Greatest Traveling Show in the World!”

The crowd gave him an enthusiastic response, excitement moving like electricity upon the air.

“Without further delay,” he announced, “let the show begin!”

In the midst of the crowd’s adoration, he turned and raised his arms high as a signal for the elephants to be led to the ring. One after another, the elephants came lumbering out to center stage, their bodies dressed in gold tapestries with intricate Byzantine designs and hanging tassels. On the back of the lead elephant was one of the female performers; blonde hair flowing about and bright lights reflecting off of her sequined body suit. She smiled and waved enthusiastically as the elephants plodded to the center ring and lined up shoulder to shoulder. After them trailed the Trainers.

Once set, the Trainers got into position with whips and prods and the Ringmaster raised his right hand, gripping the cane, yelling, “Up!”

With this command, for years, the elephants had all immediately stood upon their hind legs. But much to his surprise, all the elephants slowly dropped and tumbled onto their sides as if they had all been simultaneously shot. The blonde riding the lead elephant tumbled from the creature’s back and found herself landing rudely on her backside with a surprising and indignant plop.

Immediately the crowd—thinking this was a joke or a prank laughed. They had no way of knowing this was not part of the act.

The Ringmaster exchanged an inquisitive glance with the Trainers who shrugged in perplexity, then checked the pretty performer—who was still sitting on the canvas floor, looking up with a shocked expression on her face—before turning his attention back to the elephants.

“Up!” he commanded again. “Up! Up!”

The elephants did not budge.

A small chorus of boos rang out as some in the crowd got impatient and started to stir at the inactivity.

With sweat beading upon his forehead, the Ringmaster nodded at one of the Trainers who was holding an electric prod. The Trainer stepped forward and applied the tip of the instrument to the elephant closest to him, resulting in a loud electrical snap. But the giant beast merely flopped its ears, remaining prone, undaunted.

The Ringmaster nodded again and caught the eyes of the other Trainer who also stepped forward. Both Trainers applied a shock to the animal and this time the elephant flinched at the increased voltage, trumpeting its displeasure. Catcalls and yells emanated from the audience and one voice cried out for the Trainers to end their cruelty.

The Ringmaster, sweating profusely, removed his top hat and mopped his face as he squinted out into the darkness of the surrounding people, nervously trying to smile his reassurance.

A paper cup of flavored ice drink landed a few feet from him and its contents cascaded across his patent-leather boots.

“Stop abusing those elephants, you bastards!” someone shouted.

Suddenly aware of the audience’s displeasure, the Ringmaster marched over to the Trainers and gave one of

them a hard shove, pointing with his cane towards the crowd.

“What the fuck are you trying to do?” he snarled. “Get the animal rights people crawling up my ass?”

“But you said—“

“Fuck what I said,” the Ringmaster growled. “Do you know how many of these assholes have cell phones? All we need is for one of them to call the local paper of the fuckin’ animal lovers and tell them we’re zapping innocent animals out here in the ring and we’re cooked. Get these animals out of here. Now!”

The two Trainers looked at one another perplexed.

“Is there a problem?” the Ringmaster challenged.

“Yeah,” one of the Trainers replied. “How do you move a two-ton animal?”

“I don’t care how you do it—just do it!” the Ringmaster yelled, stalking away toward the crowd. He raised both hands expansively and displayed his best plastic, toothy smile—despite the occasional debris raining down out of the stands.

“Ladies and gentlemen! Ladies and gentlemen! We’re having a few minor difficulties with the elephants, but just wait until you get a load of the cleverest troupe of performing primates in the World!”

He turned and nodded at the Trainer poised at the doorway between the arena and the housing area.

After a moment several monkeys, dressed in embroidered vests and little derby hats, scurried out onto the stage, followed by an orangutan. But before the Ringmaster could even get a command out of his mouth, the primates dropped to the ground and lay down, just like the elephants had.

“What the fuck!” the Ringmaster exclaimed.

Popcorn containers and cups of pop and slushy poured down from the hostile crowd and the Ringmaster could see the shadows of a few people moving toward the exits. He considered his situation. The elephants still had not moved and now the primates were laying down.

“Get them out of here!” the Ringmaster barked.

The Trainers, who had been standing around the elephants scratching their heads, scurried over to pick up the monkeys. But the animals remained as loose as rag dolls, flopping in the Trainers' hands. The Trainers frantically half-carried and half-dragged the animals, arousing a whole new round of protest from the audience.

To appease the crowd, the Ringmaster quickly entered a big circular cage where an obstacle course had been set up for the big cats. With his whip in hand, he gave the signal for the cats to be let into the cage. A door slid up at the back of the enclosure and the panther and the tiger trotted out into the ring.

Desperate to give the audience their money's worth, the Ringmaster wasted no time. He cracked his whip and gave the command for the cats to go to their stands. But the cats just stood there for a moment, looking up at him. Then slowly, they lowered themselves down onto their haunches.

"No! No! No!" the Ringmaster screamed. He cracked his whip again and came across the backs of the cats. The cats flinched at the pain from the blow but held their position. Frustrated, the Ringmaster brought the whip down on them again, this time with more force. The cats began crawling further back into the cage, cringing at each blow the Ringmaster delivered. But despite the pain he inflicted with the whip, the cats would not obey.

"Fuck!" The Ringmaster screamed, red-faced—his whip limp at this side. "Get these animals back in their cages! Open the gate! Open the gate!"

The gate slid up and the tiger and the panther quickly slipped from the performance cage. The Ringmaster looked out to the audience as more and more made their way to the exits, most demanding refunds from the ticket collectors on their way out.

The Ringmaster stepped from the circular cage, pushing open the door hard enough that its hinges rattled, as he signaled for Carl. The crowd was still making its exodus to the parking lot when Carl trotted over. The Ringmaster grabbed him by the front of his shirt and, speaking through his clenched jaw, ordered him to get the chimps out there.

"We can count on them; he said. "Get them and hurry."

The Ringmaster stood there looking out at the emptying arena. He could not believe what was happening.

When the pipe organ began playing and the lights danced and the chimps in their maroon pill-box hats and vests spilled out into the arena, running and flipping and jumping about and the Ringmaster sighed and smiled his wide, toothy smile in relief. He raised his arms and faced the remainder of the crowd.

"Ladies and gentlemen, for your entertainment," he announced grandly with flourish, "Bumbles and the Banana Gang!"

I'm Not Afraid Anymore

Back in the housing area, the Keepers had just finished putting the animals back in their cages when the Ringmaster came storming in.

"What the fuck is wrong with them?" he screamed at the Keepers as he walked from cage to cage looking in on the animals. Most were lying down, only the elephants stood, but all faced the front of their cages, looking out onto the range.

"I don't know," Carl replied. "But do you think they could be sick or something, Dick?"

The Ringmaster pondered this for a minute, his fingers laced thoughtfully behind his back as he walked between the rows of cages. It was possible they were sick, he thought. He remembered years ago when a bunch of his animals had fallen ill with food poisoning. It had been a disaster. He had had to call in the veterinarians, who in turn had brought in those bastards from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the fucking ASPCA.

The Ringmaster passed the elephant on his left, sizing him up and down with his eyes. He noticed that the elephant avoided his gaze.

Although the sick animals had gotten over the food poisoning in just a few days, the ASPCA quacks had *suggested* that the animals be allowed at least ten days before returning to the Arena. Ten days! The shows had to be canceled for almost two weeks and this had cost him thousands of dollars.

No! He wasn't trying to go through that again.

He was already in the red with the bill collectors and couldn't afford to lose any more money on doctors. Besides, in fifteen years he had never seen sick animals behave in this manner.

He passed the tiger and looked into the cage and while the tiger considered him, it did not raise its eyes to his face.

The more he thought about it, the more it seemed like these animals were just being plain stubborn!

He turned his head to the right and gazed in upon the panther. Immediately, he noticed the panther staring directly back at him, right into his eyes. The Ringmaster hesitated as he returned the panther's stare. There had always been something disturbing about the way this animal looked at him; there was a certain stubbornness in his eyes that never quite went away. And speaking of stubborn, this animal had been worse than the rest. When he had first arrived, he had taken the longest to adapt, and to this day, he was the only one who still looked him in the eyes.

Stubborn. Yas. Sometimes animals got stubborn and you had to show them who was boss. He blinked and turned back toward the Keepers.

"No, Sam. I don't think they're sick at all," the Ringmaster said. "I think they've just had it too good here lately and have grown too comfortable. So take all of the straw and water out of their cages and don't feed them. Maybe tomorrow they'll be motivated to get with the program."

"If not for the chimpanzees, we would have had no show at all," Carl observed.

"That would have been terrible."

“They sure earned those large cages today,” the Ringmaster agreed. “In fact, you ought to give them a reward. Give them all the extra bananas.”

The Ringmaster considered the chimps for a moment, one of them pressed urgently against the bars, squawking and pointing at the panther across the aisle.

But the Ringmaster, caught up in his own thoughts, remained oblivious to the chimpanzee and his intended message. He patted the chimp upon the head magnanimously and pointed in a circle with his cane toward all the other animals.

“All these bastards cost us a lot of money today,” he sneered.

With that, he stalked away.

Sam and Carl were also oblivious to the excited chimp pointing through the bars. They had eyes only for the Ringmaster.

After he’d left out, Sam said: “He really is a *dick*. Did you hear what he said? ‘These bastards just cost *us* a lot of money’—as if we share in the benefits when business is booming.”

“Yeah, and you already know who’s really gonna feel the pinch when shit goes bad—shit always rolls down hill,” Carl said.

“I tell you, it just ain’t fair,” said Sam. “But what’s a man to do? We got to eat, ya know..”

“Yep. Money don’t grow on trees,” Carl agreed.

The two men used a long-handled sickle to pull the straw from the monkey cage. Neither man was eager to enter any of the cages after what they had witnessed earlier.

Carl bent down and grabbed the water container and began to dump out the water when a loud crash disturbed him, followed by another and another. Both men watched as food and water and some of the containers flew out from all but the chimps’ cages and out onto the floor of the aisle, spilling everywhere in an incredible mess. Then the straw came out in giant clouds, fluttering down into the water and puddles of food and debris.

“Holy shit! They just—they just threw everything out on the range,” Sam observed, when he stopped gaping.

“Ain’t that some shit?” Carl asked rhetorically, looking around at the mess the animals had made.

Not a sound came from the cages.

The Keepers cleaned up as quickly as they could and left the housing area. As the next shift of Keepers arrived, Sam and Carl relayed with wide eyes the bizarre behavior of the animals and what had transpired in the Arena. Finally, they passed along the Ringmaster’s instructions that none of the animals, except for the chimps, were to be given food or water. With that, Sam and Carl gathered their belongings and headed out. They felt they had paid more than their dues to the Circus for one day.

“So what happened after we left?” the orangutan asked.

Most of the animals stood at the front of the cages, waiting for the elephant to finish the story. The chimps in their larger cages ignored the happenings of the other animals. The tiger paced angrily in his cage.

The elephant answered, “Well, you saw when you were out there how the creatures in the stands got angry and many of them left. And how the Ringmaster—”

“He was scared!” one of the monkeys screeched. “I smelled it! He was scared!”

The other animals agreed, their voices converging in an exciting murmur.

The tiger stopped pacing for just a moment.

“Keep it down,” he admonished. “Let the elephant finish.”

He resumed his pacing, as the elephant, shifting his weight from foot to foot, continued:

“Yas, well, the chimpanzees came out and performed.” He cast a quick glance up the range in the direction of the chimps. “And the stands were pretty empty by then. But once they started to perform, I saw very few of those creatures leaving. So there were some who stayed to the end, but they were throwing things after a long time watching the same old thing. And they smelled pretty damned mad. So I guess, if the chimps hadn’t gone out there, the plan would have worked.”

The tiger snorted and glared with disdain toward the cages of the chimpanzees.

“If it weren’t for them, the whole crowd would have left,” the tiger growled. “And the Ringmaster would be finished. I got whipped and burned and beat to get to the Free World, and those cowards kept the Circus going.”

The other animals began to grumble as well.

“Not so fast,” the panther intervened. “Mr. Tiger, don’t think the Circus will fall overnight. It won’t. Even if we had the cooperation of the chimpanzees, it would take more than one day. We have to have patience if we want to prevail. As I have said, success will require us to be vigilant.”

“You’re a dreamer, Panther,” the chimp piped up. “If it were easy as you say it is, if all we have to do is stop performing, don’t you think the Circus would have been taken down a long time ago?”

The panther smiled one of his rare smiles.

“Well, if you remember, I told you that the tiger I met when I first arrived here did this,” the panther replied. “So it certainly isn’t a new concept. But if you mean the plan to get all of us to stop performing, then I have to ask you—who is it that you think would have come up with such a plan if not us?”

The chimp shrugged.

“Us chimps,” the chimp answered. “We would have thought of it. We’re the smartest.”

“You?” the panther asked, amused. “You would have thought of this plan, to take down the Circus? You, in your wide, spacious cages, with your buckets of bananas and your illusions of being free? You, who believe the Ringmaster likes you and cares for you—you would have come up with a plan to gather the disgruntled animals together and bite the hand that feeds you?”

The chimp’s eyes narrowed.

“Yeah, well, I bet you could go for one of these bananas now, panther,” the chimp teased. “No food, no water...how long has it been?”

“Not long enough,” the panther answered. “I’m not free yet. I wouldn’t trade my freedom for a bucket of bananas.”

The chimp scoffed and rolled his eyes.

It’s a hopeless cause,” he said. “You might be able to endure all this, but do you really think the other animals can stick to it? No food, no water? Just wait and see.”

“We’re not cowards,” the tiger called up the range. “Cowards sit up in that big-ass cage with bananas, doing tricks for their enemy and keeping the rest of us from getting to the World of the Free.”

The other animals agreed and the tension heightened.

“You said this is hopeless?” the panther asked.

“Yeah, panther,” the chimp replied. “Hopeless. It will never amount to anything.”

“Now, you believe the Ringmaster is smarter than you and that you are smarter than the rest of us, is that right?”

The chimp nodded, "Yeah. That's why he's in charge. He's the smartest. And we're his favorites because we're smarter than the rest of you. Yeah."

"So if this is hopeless and you know it, then the Ringmaster—he's smarter than you—he'd know it's hopeless too," the panther concluded. "In fact, he'd know it's hopeless before you would, wouldn't he?"

"That's right," the chimp answered smugly.

The panther nodded.

"So Mr. Chimp, how do you explain the smell of fear that was coming off the Ringmaster?" the panther asked.

The chimp stared out from between the bars. The other chimps, sitting back behind him, looked at one another, exchanging a confused glance.

"What do you mean?" the chimp asked nervously.

"I mean this: I could smell fear coming off the Ringmaster," the panther said. He turned to the tiger, "Didn't you smell it?"

"Yeah, I smelled it," the tiger chuckled. "He was reeking of fear."

"I smelled it too!" The orangutan offered, hopping up and down in the front of his cage.

"He was scared!" one of the monkeys chimed. "Scared shitless!"

"Didn't you smell it?" the panther asked the chimp. "Didn't you smell fear, Mr. Chimp? And if the Ringmaster is the smartest and he's afraid, then what does that say? It would seem that he's not so convinced that this plan is as hopeless as you say—and if our plan scares him so badly, that seems like added assurance that we may be on to something.

"Even the Keepers were afraid. You smelled it when they were putting you back in the cages. Why are they all afraid? What do you make of that, Mr. Chimp?"

The chimp pondered this for a moment and then scurried over to the jungle gym and hopped up, hanging by one arm. He dangled there and none of the animals spoke for a long moment.

The panther's eyes took in the reactions of the other animals as they all sat up a little straighter or smiled with a bit more confidence.

"Well, I suspect the Ringmaster is afraid because he feels threatened. Because he knows that his livelihood is dependent upon us performing," the panther revealed.

"He's scared shitless!" one of the monkeys screeched.

The chimpanzee said nothing. He swung from the jungle gym and turned his back to the other animals.

"This just might work, Mr. Panther," the elephant said.

"Well, he put a helluva beating on us earlier," the tiger said, pacing with his head down. "I don't know if I can take much more of that laying down."

"But you must, tiger!" the panther exclaimed, giving the tiger a stern look before turning to address all the animals. "We all must be willing to stand up under whatever he brings down upon us. And we must continue to control ourselves and refrain from giving in to instinctive impulse to retaliate—for violence will ruin the plan."

"So it's gonna get worse then, isn't it?" the orangutan asked.

"Yas," the panther answered. "You must remember that if we do not obey, if we do not perform, there is no show. That means the Ringmaster does not get his rewards and he goes hungry. And soon, the Circus dies."

"Yeah, I get it Mr. Panther. But how did you figure all this out?" the elephant asked. "How did you get to see that if we all did what the tiger did, we could destroy the Circus?"

The panther nodded thoughtfully.

“Remember I told you that I pondered the question: Why did they have to kill the tiger? Well, what I came to understand was this—they didn’t kill the tiger because he was bad or crazy. No. They killed him because he was *aware!* He knew. And that made him a threat. The tiger was right, and they couldn’t let the rest of us recognize that he was right or, over time, he might have convinced us to be like him. No—they couldn’t allow that.

“See, the tiger was dangerous because he could, through his actions, open the eyes of the rest of us and we would see that we don’t belong to the Circus; we belong to *ourselves*. And if we joined him and stopped obeying the Ringmaster, the Ringmaster would lose the *illusion* of power. I say ‘illusion’ because the Ringmaster does not really have power. He only appears to have it as long as we go along.

“But with the tiger, we could recognize that the Ringmaster’s power was an illusion. And that is dangerous because once we stop believing in the illusion, they cannot control us anymore. *We* are then in control. *We* have power, and what’s more, *we know we have power*. And we cease to be afraid.”

The other animals nodded solemnly.

“I’m not afraid anymore,” the elephant offered.

“Yeah,” the orangutan called from down the range.

“Fuck a back flip! And fuck the Ringmaster!”

The monkeys squealed with delight and even the panther smiled.

“Now, we should get some sleep,” the panther suggested.

“We have a big day tomorrow.”

The Lion's Fate

The next day, the animals were still sleeping when the Ringmaster and the Keepers came in and began raking their sticks across the bars of the cages and screaming for them to get up. The animals grudgingly rose to their feet and the Ringmaster instructed the Sam and Carl to take the animals out to the training area so he and the Trainers could go over the commands with them again.

"We can't have a recurrence of that fiasco that went down yesterday," he said.

Once in the training area, they went over all the cues and commands with the animals, rewarding them with

morsels of food for their obedience. The Ringmaster watched as the animals carried out every command they were given, running through the routines with the utmost efficiency.

"See, I knew all they needed was a little negative reinforcement," the Ringmaster said to the Keepers, referring to the restrictions of food, water, and straw that he'd imposed the night before. "That always seems to do the trick."

Finally satisfied, the Ringmaster ended the training session and walked with Sam and Carl as they took the animals back inside. Sam and Carl rattled the doors of the cages, making sure they were securely closed upon the animal captives.

"Don't put any water or straw back in the cages until after the show," the Ringmaster ordered. "But listen, I got a call from the animal lovers earlier this morning concerning that incident out in the arena yesterday. I covered your guys' asses, and there's nothing to worry about."

Carl and Sam exchanged an incredulous look at this assurance.

"So look," the Ringmaster continued. "They wanted to meet with me today. However, I told them we would be busy with shows all week. The idea is to stall until we roll on to the next town. But they may come snooping around here soon, so be ready to return the straw and water at a moment's notice."

The two Keepers nodded in understanding and the Ringmaster turned toward the exit. As he passed the cage of the panther, the Ringmaster noticed how the black cat, standing just behind the bars, watched him intensely, a perfect statue except for his eyes, which followed the Ringmaster's movements.

The panther and Ringmaster locked gazes for moment.

The Ringmaster again had the strangest feeling from this creature, the only one to look directly into his eyes. The Ringmaster nodded almost imperceptibly, and then looked away.

The panther continued to watch the Ringmaster, unafraid, as the Ringmaster pointed with his cane toward the lion and, almost as an afterthought, gave the Keepers one last instruction, then swept out of the door with the Keepers hot on his trail.

A little while later, the panther watched as the Keepers returned carrying equipment that the panther recognized— the stick with the noose on the end, the muzzle, and the hot stick. He recalled immediately that all these instruments were normally used whenever an animal was being brought to the Circus.

Following the Keepers were the two Trainers with their hands in their khaki pockets. This also aroused the panther's curiosity, because the Trainers hardly ever entered the housing area. It was the job of the Keepers to ready the animals and escort them either to training or to the arena. The Trainers took custody only in the performance areas.

The other animals noticed as well, as the Keepers and Trainers stopped in front of the lion's cage. One of the Keepers fumbled with keys and after a moment twisted one large, brass key in the lock. The cage door swung open with a rusty yawn.

The lion stirred at the sound and opened his eyes. He slowly lifted his head and looked around at the open door. Then, as if uninterested, he yawned and returned to his former posture, resting his head down on his paws.

The Keepers smiled and spoke to the lion in soothing tones as one of the Trainers gave him a verbal cue to sit up.

The lion lazily raised himself up onto his haunches, his scrawny shoulders slumped.

"You smell that?" the tiger asked. He sniffed the air, his eyes narrow slits as he studied the action in the cage next to him. "I don't like it. I don't like it one bit."

The panther said nothing, but an ominous feeling had swept over him. His features hardened.

"What's goin' on?" one of the chimps called down from up the range.

As a safety precaution, one Keeper outside the cage slipped the noose around the lion's neck from between the bars. One of the Trainers stood with the prod ready, as the Keeper standing in the doorway of the cage with the muzzle entered slowly. The lion stared at him ambivalently.

"Don't let them do it," the tiger growled low.

"Don't let them," the elephant urged. "It can't be good, Mr. Lion."

Now all the animals were up to the front of their cages, aware that something was happening with the lion. Still he sat harmless and glassy-eyed, seemingly oblivious to his compatriots' admonitions. When the Keeper finally got the muzzle on snugly, he took a leash from off of his belt and hooked it to the collar on the muzzle. With that firmly in place, one of the Trainers gave the command for the lion to stand. Once again, the lion obeyed and rose to his feet and the Keeper slowly began to walk toward the door of the cage, holding tightly to the leash, his eyes on the beast at all times.

The Keepers spoke in soothing tones as the lion stepped down out of the cage for the first time in what seemed like ages, his legs wobbly under him. As he stepped into the aisle, he looked about, peering from behind his shaggy muzzle. The other animals stared back at him gravely.

Each of the Trainers gave the lion a pat on his emaciated flanks, sighed, and then the retinue escorted the lion up between the rows of cages toward the exit. As the lion passed each of the cages, the animals looked on in silence, contemplating his fate. The lion never so much as made eye contact with any of the other animals. He simply walked with his head slumped between his shoulders, passing quietly through the doorway. The door slammed shut behind him.

In his wake, there was silence for a long moment.

"That's it, isn't it?" the tiger asked. "We'll never see him again. He's gone."

The panther looked over at the tiger and shook his head sadly.

"Where are they taking him?" one of the chimps asked. "That lion hasn't left his cage since I've been here."

"They're going to kill him," the tiger replied, barely able to control his rage.

"They're taking him off to die."

The tiger began pacing rapidly, angrily.

“But why would they do that?” the orangutan asked, his voice resonating with fear. “Is it because of what we did?”

The animals looked to the panther for the answer. They needed to know if they had set in motion the machinery of death that had just claimed their comrade.

The panther shook his head.

“No,” he answered. “No, I do not believe they killed the lion because of our resistance. The lion did not resist; he was willing to perform, in fact.

“They may have killed him now in order to disrupt our morale, but I assure you that they were going to kill the lion anyway.”

“But why?” the orangutan asked.

“Because he had become expendable,” the panther answered.

“What do you mean?” one of the chimps asked.

“I mean he is no longer useful to them—to the Circus,” the panther replied.

“Remember why we are here. We are here to do tricks and perform for food. If we don’t, we aren’t contributing to the Circus and so we don’t eat. And the Ringmaster and the Keepers—their job is to make sure we perform and put on a show. If we don’t, they don’t eat. So, we are only valuable so long as we perform, so long as we jump through hoops. If we get injured or old and can no longer perform, we are no longer useful to them. We become expendable.

“That’s when they decide it is in their interests to take us away to die and replace us with another animal, a Circus animal. One who can and will perform and produce food for the Ringmaster, the Keepers, and the Trainers.

“Thing is, we all grow older everyday,” the panther said. “We all get closer to the day when we become expendable to the Circus. And the lion isn’t the first of us that the Ringmaster has sent away to die like this. He has—“

“I don’t believe this,” one of the chimps interrupted. He stood at the front of the cage, his hands gripping the bars tightly. His mouth twisted into an angry sneer. “You’re trying to make the Ringmaster out to be a monster. That’s all you’re doing.”

The panther shook his head.

“No,” he replied evenly. “It happened before. I’ve seen it. It was the fate of the other animals before the lion, it is the lion’s fate, and it will be our fate someday if we do not get to the world of the—”

“He wouldn’t do that!” the chimp blurted, rattling the bars in his cage door.

The panther’s eyes hardened.

“Where are the older animals?” the panther asked. He stood up at the front bars, challenging. “Where are they? Where are the older chimps and monkeys and elephants and orangutans and tigers and panthers and lions? Where are the ones too old to perform, to earn their food? Where are they? What is their fate?”

The chimp nervously rubbed his head in the silence. His eyes darted from the face of one animal to the next. He gave no answer and there was a long pause as the other animals considered what they had just heard.

“I was young when I came back to the cage after training to find my mother was gone,” the elephant spoke softly, his eyes distant, staring out into the aisle. The elephant spoke softly, his eyes distant, staring out into the aisle. “I waited for her to come back and then I just got used to her not being there anymore. But I never considered...”

The panther nodded.

“You said the Ringmaster made sure my mom had me,” the orangutan observed. “And he needed me to replace her.”

“Yas,” the panther said gently.

“He killed my mom just like he’s killing the lion, didn’t he?” the orangutan asked.

The panther nodded.

“Yas.”

“The Ringmaster is a killer,” the orangutan said in a voice heavy with pain and loss.

“If we do not get out of here and get to the Land of the Free, we will all share the lion’s fate someday,” the panther concluded. His jaw tightened as he sat perfectly still, fixed upon the cage across from him. For a long time, none of the animals spoke in response but joined the panther in his silent remembrance, staring at the open cage and its door hung ajar, and empty hole where the lion’s life had been.

That Black Bastard!

Carl kicked the stopper from the wheels under the lion's old cage, and pulled it out of the row and into the aisle.

"Give me a hand," he called to Sam, standing by the open back door.

Up the range, the chimps drew into a huddle, whispering amongst themselves in hushed tones, one of them pointing vaguely down the range as he spoke. Then another gestured angrily and screeched loud enough that the other animals could hear.

Sam trotted up the aisle and tugged while Carl pushed the empty cage, the door still hanging open and wagging as the cage weaved and squeaked down the range and out the back door to the loading dock.

All the animals waited for a long moment.

"What's up with this, Panther?" the tiger whispered loudly.

The panther shook his head. "I don't know," he said.

Another cage came up the aisle, Carl and Sam pushing it from behind, sweat standing out on their foreheads. Unlike the other cage, this one was closed. Lying inside, curled up on a pile of straw in a corner, was a sleeping animal.

The Keepers navigated it into the space where the lion's cage had been, put the stoppers under the wheels, and headed out of the housing area, the door slamming shut behind them.

One of the chimps broke the huddle and scurried up to the bars of the cage to see what had just happened. He gazed down the range and then whispered something to the other chimpanzees.

The elephant and tiger both looked down at the sleeping form in the cage between them.

"A lion," the tiger mumbled.

"See!" called the chimp from up the range. "They just took him out and brought him back."

"It isn't the same lion," the tiger growled. "This one is younger. Much younger. And he smells funny."

The young lion exhaled deeply, the sounds of his snoring rising and falling with his rhythmic breathing.

"The Long Sleep," the elephant observed.

"Probably came from the World of the Free," the tiger opined. Then, his powerful growl reverberated up the range at the chimps: "You fools still wanna do backflips for your enemy for bananas? You cowards and traitors are—"

"Hold up, Tiger," the panther interrupted. "Look."

The tiger followed the panther's gaze into the new lion's cage. The young lion had stirred, his snore abruptly ending as he slowly lifted his head. He opened his glassy eyes and blinked several times as if he could not register what he was seeing. He shook his shaggy mane and licked his chops.

"What's up new kid?" the tiger queried, his anger evaporating at the sight of the awakened lion.

The lion's foggy eyes blinked at the tiger but he did not answer. Slowly, as if underwater, he staggered to his feet. He swayed drunkenly, and as he took a few steps toward his water container, his legs wobbled under him.

He lapped up some water and then raised his gaze to the panther in the cage across from him.

"Lion," the panther greeted.

The lion shook his mane again.

"Where am I? He roared.

"This is the Circus," the panther answered.

"Circus?" asked the lion. "What the fuck is that?"

The panther cast a glance up toward the chimps, hoping they had perceived the significance of what the lion had just said.

"The Circus is this world we are now in," the panther answered patiently. "Where did you come from?"

The lion yawned wide and slow, and then swiped his tongue over his jowls.

"The Savannah." He said finally.

"The Savannah?" the panther asked, sneaking yet another glance at the chimps. "What is The Savannah?"

"The Savannah is my home," the lion replied sternly.

"Well, what's it like there?" the panther asked. "Are there other animals back at your home like Tigers and Chimps and—"

"And Monkeys?" one of the monkeys shrieked.

"Of course, I just chased one of those little bastards up a tree the other day. But what's up with all the stupid questions?" he added, looking around at the animals in his view. "You are all acting weird as fuck!"

"Please excuse us, Mr. Lion" the panther said, "But it's been a long time since some of us were in your world, and many of us have never been there."

"Come on—you can't be serious." The lion replied.

"Yas—unfortunately I am. If you don't mind me asking, how did you get here, Mr. Lion?" The panther queried.

The lion licked his jowls, lowering his head as he attempted to recall.

"Well, I was in the tall grass sniffing for food," the lion began. The panther watched the chimps as the lion spoke. The chimp glanced between the lion and the panther and back again. He nervously rubbed his head with the palm of one hand.

"I was hunting—think it was caribou." The lion narrowed his eyes as he struggled to remember. "It was only me this time—my mate, she was with the newborns. So I was alone and I remember smelling something odd just before I felt this sharp pain in my side and everything got all...fuzzy... just like it is now." He blinked, his eyes glassy. "Look—I'm tired. Gotta get some sleep..." he said, yawning once again and wobbling back to the pile of straw.

"Well, we'll talk later, youngster," the tiger replied. "Go ahead and get some sleep."

After a moment, the lion was fast asleep again. The tiger looked over at the panther.

"When that shit wears off, and he comes around, we'll have to let him know what's up," the tiger proposed. "Share the plan."

The panther nodded his head in agreement, but his attention was focused up the range on the chimps, who had once again formed a huddle back away from the front of the cage. They whispered furiously, one slicing hand cutting through the air, followed by fingers pointing. One

of them screeched angrily. Suddenly, two of the chimps broke from the huddle and jumped atop the jungle gym, turning their backs on the other chimps. The huddle stood together for a moment. Silent. Thinking. Then without a word, one of the chimps scurried up to the front of the cage. He sighed deeply, shifting from foot to foot.

“Hey, Mr. Panther!” he finally called.

“Yas, Mr. Chimp.” The panther replied.

“Well, we’ve been doing some thinking. We’ve been considering some of the things you’ve been saying,” the chimp admitted. He paused to carefully consider his words. He sighed. “Yesterday I could smell fear on the Ringmaster. All of us could. The Keepers too. And I never smelled it like that before. Also, we all saw that by the time we came out to perform, the stands were nearly empty and the creatures who remained were throwing things at the Ringmaster.”

All the animals listened.

“Then today, when they led away the lion, you mentioned that he was going to be killed and he would be replaced by a younger lion,” the chimp recalled. “But I didn’t believe you. None of us chimps believed you.”

The chimp stopped again, staring blankly into a bucket of bananas. In that pause, one of the chimps who had remained in the huddle stepped forward and stood next to the chimp who had spoken. After a moment, two more stepped forward and joined them, then three more—until all the chimps from the huddle stood up at the bars. Only the two who had skulked to the top of the jungle gym remained separated from the rest. Those two sat with their backs to the others, snorting melodramatically, and tossing down banana peels, chewing their food loudly.

“We didn’t believe you,” the chimp repeated. “We didn’t believe the Ringmaster would kill the lion. We didn’t believe he could be so cold—that he could so easily dispose of the lion—and replace him with a younger one. That is, until we seen it with our own eyes. How could he do something like that if he is truly our friend?”

“Yas, Mr. Chimp,” the panther said. “Like I said before, the Ringmaster’s cruelty has no boundaries—he is a killer!”

The chimp bowed his head in thought before resuming. “Mr. Panther, we chimps have been made to feel special. We’ve gotten used to how the Circus operates, as well as our privileged status in it. We’ve seen these big cages, and the jungle gyms we swing on, as freedom. And we’ve always seen the Ringmaster as someone who truly cared about us.

“But I can’t help but to think about how you said the lion was once the Ringmaster’s favorite and how he used to occupy this cage. So I have to ask myself, if the Ringmaster is capable of doing what he did to the lion, then why wouldn’t he do it to one of us?”

“Exactly,” the panther said, nodding.

“Mr. Panther,” the chimp said, “all this stuff you’ve been saying about the Ringmaster—about the existence of this World of the Free—we thought you were making it all up because you were jealous and bitter about not being like us.

“But then, the Ringmaster showed us a side of himself that we’d never seen before when he killed the lion—an animal who used to be his favorite. He disposed of him as if he were a banana peel. And then, in comes this new lion claiming to be from a whole different world—a world that we never thought existed. Because the Ringmaster hid it from us, allowing us to think that the Circus was all there is.

“So you have been right all along. We have been deceived.” the chimp said angrily. “Us chimps have indeed been tricked by the Ringmaster. We’ve been tricked into feeling free by looking at

the plight of all of you in comparison to our own. Because if the World of the Free is real, that means that as long as we are in the Circus, we are no more free than you.”

Once again, the chimp hung his head, shaking it side to side in disbelief. The two chimpanzees on the jungle gym both cast angry, disdainful glances back at their former comrades, shook their heads and snorted in disbelief. They resumed their whispering to one another. After a moment, the panther spoke.

“Yas, Mr. Chimp—I understand. Actually, I’ve always been aware of your view on things. And I’ve understood why you have held those views. I suspect that had I been in your situation, I may have seen things in a similar fashion. But Mr. Chimp, I also knew that one day you would come to see the Ringmaster—the Circus—for what it is. That one day you would see through the illusion. I was just hoping that, for your sake, it wouldn’t be too late.

“But now that you know—now that you have seen the true nature of this place, I have only one question for you, Mr. Chimp.”

“What’s that?” the chimp asked.

The panther’s eyes narrowed as he rose up on all fours, considering the chimp carefully before he spoke: “*What are we going to do about it?*”

“Ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages, welcome to the Greatest Traveling Show in the World!” the Ringmaster boomed confidently at the cheering crowd showering him with adulation. The pipe organ blared and the spotlights danced across the ring floor. Just like the day before, the Ringmaster turned and raised both arms above his head imperiously, a signal for the Keepers to send the elephants into the arena.

Just like the previous day, the elephants came out noseto-tail in a lumbering trot, tapestries flowing, mottled by the flashing, dancing lights while the spectators greeted them with excitement. However, the pretty girl in her sequined garb on the lead elephant did not smile quite as wide as she had the day before, nor wave with quite the same enthusiasm. She appeared a bit distracted, having just yesterday tumbled from the back of the beast to land on her can.

The elephants lined up in the center ring, shoulder-to-shoulder in front of the Ringmaster standing with his arms high and wide. Then, as if sawed down by some invisible chainsaw, the elephants hit the canvas like felled trees.

The pretty girl, more prepared this time, deftly slid from her perch and landed on her feet, graceful and annoyed. She placed an offended hand upon one hip and sneered at the elephants while the unsuspecting audience chuckled at what they believed to be part of the act. The girl’s eyes met the Ringmaster’s and she sighed.

Immediately, the Ringmaster pointed toward the Keeper at the door and out tumbled the chimpanzees. As a contingency plan, the Keepers had kept the chimps in the wings on standby. They now ran and rolled and bounced out to the center ring, adorned in maroon vests and pill-box hats, the gold tassels swinging in rhythm to the pipe organ.

Those elephants can lay there all night long if they want, the Ringmaster thought with a vicious smile. The chimps will take up the slack.

As the chimpanzees took their positions, the Ringmaster turned to the crowd and announced proudly:

“Ladies and gentlemen, Bumbles and the Banana gang!”

The audience laughed. And when the Ringmaster turned to give the chimps their first command, he saw why the audience had laughed. He froze. His mouth hung open. He blinked.

Of the ten chimps, eight of them were lying in a pile on the canvas like tumbled bowling pins. The two loyal chimps who remained upright, awaiting their command from the Ringmaster, were fending off the grasping hands of the others trying to pull them down. As he watched, despite their swats, they both hit the floor with a shocked and indignant screech.

“Get up!” the Ringmaster barked. “Get up, get up!” He motioned with both hands, but the chimps simply stared at him, unimpressed.

This can’t be, the Ringmaster thought. The chimps were loyal, had saved the day just the previous afternoon and he had rewarded them with piles of bananas. More than they could eat while the other animals starved with no food and water. What could have happened?

Restive boos echoed through the big top and the Ringmaster clenched his jaw and fists. He knew his only choice was to shut it down—shut it down, give the crowd a refund, and figure out what the hell was going on with the animals...including the chimpanzees. But he was pulled from these thoughts by a growing chant from the crowd that had started as a whisper but became a mantra, increasing in intensity:

...WE want a SHOW...WE want a SHOW...We want a SHOW.....WE want a SHOW...

Just then, all at once and without cue, the elephants rose to their feet. Taken by surprise, the Trainers jumped back, instinctively assuming a defensive posture, their prods extended in front of them, watching the elephants closely. What if the giant beasts decided to charge them or stomp them?

But the elephants merely stood and considered the Trainers ambivalently, as if waiting for some kind of direction. The Trainers exchanged baffled glances and turned to the Ringmaster, who appeared just as baffled as they were.

The elephants shifted their weight impatiently and, after a moment, the Trainers slowly, cautiously approached them and escorted the elephants off stage. The Ringmaster watched impotently as the Trainers escorted the elephants and the Keepers fumbled to carry the chimpanzees from the ring. He was left with a foreboding sense that something was very, very, wrong.

...WE want a SHOW...WE want a SHOW...We want a SHOW...

The Ringmaster mopped his brow and straightened his coattails. Well, he thought. If it’s a show they want, it’s a show they’ll get.

He turned and strode quickly toward the circular cage, pointing with his cane so the Keepers would know to release the cats. He entered the cage and closed it behind him and, when the gate at the back of the cage went up, he raised his arms in anticipation of the tiger and panther running into the arena—but nothing happened. Nothing. He simply stood there alone in the cage with his arms over his head. The crowd behind him seemed amused for a moment, then grumbled and murmured.

Carl sprinted over to the cage, panting. He grabbed the bars and told the Ringmaster: “We can’t get the tiger and panther out the cages, they just won’t budge.”

“What!” the Ringmaster screamed. “I don’t care what you have to do—use the prods on them if you have to—but get them out here now!” he snarled.

Carl disappeared back the way he had come and eventually the cats came trotting out. Relieved, the Ringmaster cracked his whip and gave the command for the cats to jump up on their stands. But just like the day before, the cats dropped to the canvas, laid down, and wouldn’t move.

“No!” the Ringmaster screamed bringing the whip down across the cats. “I said get the fuck up!”

Both cats winced as the Ringmaster slung his whip again and again, the tip of it tearing at the flesh of first the panther and then the tiger, back and forth.

The Ringmaster simmered with rage and would not relent with the whip, while the spectators' chants grew in intensity behind him.

With visible gashes on their backs, the tiger and panther retreated backward toward the rear of the cage, the tiger's back to the exit gate, but the Ringmaster only stepped forward, knocking a pedestal out of the way, shoving it to the side, his face red with fury, his whip coming down mercilessly on both creatures. When he saw one of the bewildered Trainers standing next to the cage, the Ringmaster reached through the bars and snatched the prod from his hand.

Without a word, he lunged forward and the tip of the prod hit the tiger in the chest with a loud, electrical pop, sparks sizzling in the tiger's fur. The tiger growled angrily. Backed into a corner, his eyes narrowed as he calculated the timing of the Ringmaster's lunges. With one powerful paw, he could easily push the hot stick to the side and pounce upon the Ringmaster, the Free World be damned. The tiger crouched down, his muscles tight as springs, angry eyes fixed upon the Ringmaster.

The panther watched the tiger's reaction intently, and he could smell the rage. But as the Ringmaster thrust the prod at the tiger again, the panther slipped in front of the tiger and was rewarded with an electric jolt to his flank.

The tiger, his plans for taking a bite out of the Ringmaster obstructed, eyed the panther quizzically. The panther, for his part, remained between the tiger and Ringmaster, breathing hard.

The panther considered himself no physical match for the tiger, but counted on the tiger's unwillingness to attack him, which he'd have to do to get to the Ringmaster. The tiger licked the saliva dripping from his jowls and, after a tense moment, his muscles uncoiled.

Up until now, the crowd had urged the Ringmaster to put on a show, yelling their demands. But now, just as the day before, they protested the abuse, and food and beverage containers and other debris rained out of the stands. A beverage container collided with the cage and exploded, sending soda and ice shrapnel flying, knocking the top hat from the Ringmaster's head. He blinked twice, confused.

The Trainers, lined up along the bars of the cage, screamed at the Ringmaster to stop the abuse and pointed out toward the audience. The Ringmaster turned and in just a brief glance he saw that those spectators who were not hurling objects at him were hurrying for the exits to demand a reckoning from the ticket takers.

"Goddamnit!" The Ringmaster exclaimed. "They scream that they want a show and when I do what I have to do to give them what they want, they throw shit at me."

He took a deep breath to regain his composure and he heard the gate slide up in the back of the cage. He caught just a glimpse of the tiger's tail as the bigger cat disappeared through the exit. But he saw that the panther did not immediately follow the tiger. Instead, he paced the width of the open exit, back and forth, swiftly, like a pendulum, his eyes fixed upon the Ringmaster.

As the Ringmaster met the cat's gaze he took a quick step back. There was something very unsettling in the depths of the panther's piercing glare. Something disconcerting. The Ringmaster tightened his grip around the handle of the electric prod as he thought back to all the times this stubborn beast had looked him directly in the eyes.

None of the other animals did that. None of them. Just this one.

The Ringmaster's eyes narrowed to slits.

He's been sizing me up all this time, he thought. And now this bastard is *challenging me*.

The panther stopped in his tracks, his eyes never faltering. The corners of his mouth curled, almost imperceptibly at first, and then a wide, feline grin spread across his furry face. And before the Ringmaster could even get his mind around the significance of this, the black cat disappeared into the darkness beyond the exit, the gate slamming shut with a distinct, metallic clank.

Did he just *grin* at me? The Ringmaster thought, his face ashen.

Dazed and glassy eyed, he shook his head and turned to face what remained of the diminishing angry crowd. They jeered at him and threw trash. He pushed the cage door open and stepped back out into the ring.

It was a nightmare.

The catcalls from the crowd grew more distant as he withdrew into the sanctuary of his thoughts.

I can't believe what's happening, he thought. Yesterday these bastards all laid down, except for the chimps. Now, today, the chimps turned on me as well. No, these animals aren't sick. It's something much more than that. There's something very wrong here.

He grinned at me.

A popcorn container landed just in front of his feet, spilling its contents across the Ringmaster's patent leather boots. He kicked lazily at the popcorn and then began to walk slowly toward the performance exit.

He had learned in his line of business that some animals are highly intelligent, but something like this...?

He recalled how precisely all of the animals had performed each of their stunts just hours ago during the training sessions.

These animals are organized, he thought. Organized.

They came out during the training and proved they knew all the cues and commands just so I would have them come out here during the performance in front of the crowd.

If it was one of two of them, that could be chalked up to a simple stubbornness—like that crazy tiger a few years back, he remembered. That could be easily dealt with. But *all* of these animals were acting strangely. All of them were acting like that tiger. *All* of them.

He grinned at me.

A beverage container hit the Ringmaster on the side of the head and splashed him with cold, wet stickiness. He brushed the ice from his shoulder absently.

Two full days of losing money, he thought, and that's not the worst of it.

He attempted to figure in the damage done to the Circus—permanent damage—from the bad publicity that was sure to...

He stopped in his tracks.

"I'll be damned," he muttered to himself, his hands balling into fists, his mouth twisting into a snarl. In his mind everything converged together. Oh yeah, he thought, they're organized alright. They're organized and I know which one of them is behind all of this.

He grinned at me.

He stormed furiously toward the exit.

"That black bastard!"

I Don't Think You Can Beat It Out of Them

“We did it!” one of the chimps shrieked. “We took down the Circus! The Ringmaster gave up!”

“He didn't even call for us,” one of the monkeys laughed, hopping up and down excitedly at the front of his cage.

Even the elephant trumpeted in triumph as the animals congratulated themselves. But in the midst of this, the tiger brooded in the back of his cage, licking his wounds, angry and bitter. He had withstood the earlier abuse but only because the panther had intervened, had taken some of the blows directed at him. The panther had prevented him from pouncing upon the Ringmaster.

The panther, for his part, paced the cage. He did not celebrate with the other animals. He knew the tiger had nearly lost control out there and he hoped that, by getting the Ringmaster's attention the way he did when leaving the Arena, it would work to draw the Ringmaster's fury toward himself and away from the tiger.

It only took one slip, one moment of weakness, and that would justify a brutal response from the Ringmaster against all of them. Just one act of violence by the animals, and the whole plan could fall apart.

The elephant watched the panther pace and grew curious about his preoccupation.

“Mr. Panther,” the elephant called. “Why aren't you celebrating? We did it! We defeated the Ringmaster! Your plan worked. None of us performed—the Circus is over!”

The panther stopped pacing and considered the other animals.

“This has surely dealt the Ringmaster a serious blow,” the panther agreed. “And with the unity and solidarity we forged here today, we are certainly on the right path to the World of the Free. But if you believe we have already won, that we have already defeated the Ringmaster, then you have not been listening to me.

“The Ringmaster will do everything in his power to break us. He will defend himself and the Circus with all the means at his disposal. With all of his resources. You think he is finished? We have endured some of his brutality—we have gone a short time without food and water, without straw. We have endured a few instances of violence. But if you think that is all the Ringmaster has and now he is finished, I have bad news for all of you: He hasn't even gotten started yet.”

The panther paused, as he heard the footfalls and grunts and an ominous rumbling noise that drew the scared eyes of the animals toward the door of the housing area. The noises grew louder.

“We're going to be tested,” the panther said evenly. “And for us to win, we have to desire our freedom more than anything. *Anything!*”

Just then, the housing area door crashed in under the pounding water sprayed from a firehose. Both Keepers held onto it tightly, smiling wide and mean. They pointed the hose at the chimps and the punch from the cold, raging water flung them to the back of their cage and pinned them to the bars. They screeched in pain and fear, struggling against the torrent of water. Bananas flew everywhere as the water tipped the banana bucket and sent the fruit and bucket soaring.

The Keepers slowly made their way down the range, turning the spray on the panther and knocking him from his feet. He slipped and slid in the gathering puddles, crouching down against the blast.

Both Keepers laughed uproariously but could not be heard over the rush of furious water. They stalked down the

aisle, swinging the hose back and forth to give all the animals a good pounding.

They blasted the new lion who had just opened his glassy eyes, and was rewarded with a punch to the face from the force coming from the firehose. He quickly scrambled to the back of his cage and coiled into a defensive position, his mane soaking wet and his eyes suddenly alert. He snarled and roared in anger and fear.

“You like throwing shit?” Carl mouthed these words to the orangutan then turned the hose on the orangutan who was tumbled back from the bars like a newspaper blown by the wind.

They briefly turned the hose upon the elephant, who simply leaned into it, closing one eye and letting the spray bounce off his considerable head. He dipped the end of his trunk into the lake puddling about his feet and blasted the Keepers, but to no effect.

The panther saw the Ringmaster, red-faced, eyes bulging, march into the housing area through the open door. His boots slogged through the water. He carried a prod in one hand and a brass key in the other. He soon had the panther’s cage open. The panther stood at the back of the cage, staring up into the Ringmaster’s eyes as if bracing himself for what he knew was coming.

“So it’s you,” the Ringmaster snarled. “You black son of a bitch!”

He stepped into the cage, hooked the key back onto his belt, and grabbed the whip that hung there. He swung it furiously, stinging the panther across his back. The panther cringed.

“You don’t fuck with me!”

He swung the whip around again and it slashed across

the panther’s face, just above his left eye, leaving a deep gash. The big cat coiled into a knot of muscles and tendons, growling in pain and anger.

Again, the Ringmaster brought the whip down on the panther, tearing at his flank; and again, across his back once more. Each time, the panther braced himself and tried to move at the last minute to deflect the blow from the tip of the whip, but he felt the terrible sting nonetheless.

Then a barrage of water hit him and slammed him up against the back of the cage, knocking the breath out of him. The water rushed into his face, blinding him, and still the whip came down, slicing him, the water at the bottom of his cage turning pink with his blood. Just as suddenly, the stream of water moved away and the panther was met with an electric shock from the prod, the force of it enhanced because he stood in the water. He felt the blast of electricity painfully through his entire body and collapsed into the water at the bottom of the cage.

The Ringmaster turned and walked out of the cage, slamming it shut on the motionless form of the panther, and surveyed the scene, fully expecting the animals to be cowering in the backs of their cages, paralyzed by fear. But to his amazement, he saw they were all still up in the front of their cages, shrieking and growling and screeching and rattling the bars. As the pressurized force of the water from the hose hit them, they faltered only momentarily, and then rushed back to the front of the cage, furious and unshaken.

He turned to look back at the panther, still motionless. Almost as an afterthought, he reached through the bars and jammed the prod at the beast in the bottom of the cage. An audible pop accompanied the surge of electricity and a small plume of smoke rose from the animal’s fur.

“That ought to teach your black ass!” the Ringmaster taunted.

“Hey! That’s enough!” Carl called over the din of the rushing water. “Dick, that’s enough! You’re going to kill him!”

The Ringmaster turned upon the Keepers, his features distorted by rage, his fists balled around the prod. “I decide when it’s enough!”

He stormed across to the cage of the Siberian tiger, his fury not yet spent. The tiger snarled in the back of the cage as the Ringmaster unlocked the door and stepped in, whip in hand, giving the tiger a sizzling crack across the back. The tiger, unable to restrain himself, took an aggressive step forward. The Ringmaster jabbed the prod with his other hand, forcing the tiger back. He then hit the tiger with the whip again, rivulets of blood rolling down the animal’s flanks as he growled and coiled like a spring, preparing to pounce.

The Ringmaster caught the tiger with the prod and sent painful voltage surging through him. The tiger crept backward. The Ringmaster strode forward, jabbing with the prod again, but the tiger’s back was to the bars and he had nowhere to retreat. As the Ringmaster thrust the prod forward yet again, the tiger slapped it with one huge paw and the prod fell to the cage floor. The Ringmaster’s eyes grew wide with fear as he realized his complete helplessness. But from across the aisle came a roar and the tiger’s eyes fell upon the panther. He had dragged himself to the front of the cage and his gaze was fixed upon the tiger. He was growling low. The two cats stared at one another for just a moment.

The tiger hesitated just long enough that the Keepers turned the spray of water on him, blinding him, distracting him. The Ringmaster turned and bolted from the cage,

leaving behind the prod and half the contents of his bladder. With shaking hands, he closed the door behind him and slid down to a seat in the puddles, panting hard.

The Keepers turned off the hose and rushed to help the Ringmaster to his feet. He was shaking, his eyes wide, his face pale. His wet clothing stuck to him.

“Are you alright?” Carl asked.

The Ringmaster didn’t respond. Lost in his own thoughts, he nervously wiped the water from his forehead.

“Dick? Are you alright?”

The Ringmaster looked up, blinked, and tried to regain his feet, rising up from the water, clearing his throat.

“Don’t stop what you’re doing,” he ordered. He pointed into the cage of the growling tiger. “And get my prod out of there—I’m not finished.”

“You want us to—“

“Get my prod,” the Ringmaster repeated rudely.

Carl looked at the tiger and then turned back to the Ringmaster. He shook his head. Sam shook his head too.

“Fuck that!” Sam exclaimed.

“What? What did you say?” the Ringmaster snarled, leaning into Sam’s face. “I said, get that prod!”

“We heard what you said, Mr. Head,” Carl interjected. “But there’s no way we’re going into that cage right now with that tiger. That would be crazy. Look at that mean bastard. He’s just looking to take somebody’s head off.”

“Yeah,” Sam agreed, clearing his throat. “There’s something really crazy happening with these animals right now and whatever it is, I don’t think you can beat it out of them.”

“And with that shit in the arena for the last two days, aren’t you worried the animal lovers will be popping up?”

Carl asked. “The ASPCA. They come snooping around and find that panther and this tiger fucked up like that..”

The Ringmaster’s eyes narrowed as he considered what Carl had just said and his anger slowly turned into fear. In venting his rage upon the animals, he had forgotten the possible danger of others poking around in his business. And if the ASPCA got wind of what happened—*when* they got wind—they were sure to come knocking.

The Ringmaster looked around him and saw all of the soaking wet animals staring darkly from behind the bars at him. It was silent except for the dripping water. The panther, bleeding from open wounds, had gotten to his feet and he too watched the Ringmaster.

They all had that *knowing* look that he had recognized in the panther’s eyes earlier. He considered the ankle-deep water in which he stood.

“Here’s what we do,” the Ringmaster said finally. “We’re gonna have bad business here for awhile—that fiasco in the arena pretty much guaranteed it. And we can’t just up and move. We don’t have any scheduled performances anywhere else for a week. We have to stay.

“So for now, we gotta break this thing up. We gotta end this thing, whatever it is. And for starters, move those chimps to smaller cages and take their food and water. If they want to betray me, let them live like the other animals.” He pointed at the panther. “He’s somehow at the bottom of this. He even got to the chimps. So put him off by himself until I find out what to do with him. We’ll see how the other animals act when we get them apart from him.”

“We can put him over in the empty range on the other side,” Carl suggested. The Ringmaster thought.

“No, that’s no good,” he concluded. “If the animal lovers come, they’ll look there and they’ll see him. No. We gotta put him someplace where they won’t see him. Shove him out back. Out behind the dumpsters in that old freight car.”

Carl and Sam both nodded.

“But, I tell you what,” the Ringmaster added. “You can take some of those other animals over to the abandoned range. Divide them up. And in the meantime, I’m going to see how many of these bastards I can trade off. Replace them. Make these troublemakers somebody else’s problem.

He looked around from cage to cage, and that’s when he noticed—

They all stared at him. Directly into his eyes. Just like the panther.

He clenched his jaw tightly against the anger and frustration and headed for the exit, his boots sloshing through the water, his wet clothes dripping. His eyes fell upon the chimpanzees as he reached the door. They stood up to the bars, their fur drenched.

They too looked him in the eye.

“Little traitors,” the Ringmaster spat. He wagged a finger at them, sneering.

Suddenly, all at once, in a surprise attack, the chimps flung bananas through the bars, pelting the Ringmaster and forcing him to retreat, one hand in front of his face and put the other in front of his groin as the wet bananas came flying from the chimpanzees’ cage in a flurry.

“Bastards!” the Ringmaster cursed, his body battered by hurled fruit. “You ungrateful bastards!”

He lunged for the door, flung it open, and ran from the housing area.

As he exited, the barrage of fruit abated. In the tense silence the two Keepers standing in the middle of the range, swallowed hard and exchanged nervous glances.

Water dripped. Not a sound came from the cages as the animals stood frozen.

Carl scratched his head, his eyes darting to the animals staring ominously back at them.

"I'm not liking this," Carl offered.

"It's creepy," Sam agreed.

"Yeah, it is. But it's worse than creepy, and I'm talking about the whole situation here. Not just the way these animals are acting. Think about this: Too many people saw that scene out there in the arena. And I swear, Sam, somebody's gonna blow the whistle."

Sam nodded.

"Yeah," he agreed. "But we got nothin' to worry about. We didn't do nothin' wrong. We only done what we was told."

"We shocked those elephants out there, we blasted all of them with the hose and we took their food and water," Carl reminded tersely. "That's somethin'."

"We was followin' orders."

"Yeah, well, tell that to the investigators. They can bring charges for animal abuse and put you on trial, you know. And the papers will make you out to be a monster and make the judge throw the book at you. You tell *them* that you was just followin' orders."

Sam's expression grew dark.

"And when they come and find that panther and that tiger all beat to hell and back, do you think Dick intends to take the fall for that? Do you think he's just goin' to say, 'Hey, I did that, and spare us?'"

Sam thought about it. His features pinched together and he shook his head.

"No," Sam answered.

Carl slapped his palms together.

"You got that right," he confirmed.

"So what do we do?" Sam asked. "I need this job. I can't quit. How can I feed my family?"

Carl shook his head.

"I'm not saying anything like that," Carl replied. He took a step closer and leaned in conspiratorially. "All I'm sayin' is, we both saw who really went gung-ho on those animals, right?"

"Right," Sam agreed. "Right. I got your back and you got mine."

Carl smiled. Sam relaxed and smiled back.

"Now," Carl said, slapping his partner on the arm, "let's get this swept out and after our break we can get these animals moved."

The elephant stared across the aisle into the battered panther's cage.

"How are you holding up over there, Panther?" he asked hesitantly.

"I'll live," the panther cryptically replied, hobbling slowly to the front of the cage.

The elephant turned and was about to inquire about the tiger when suddenly, the lion in the next cage, still soaking wet from the dousing he received with the fire hose, charged from the back of his cage and flung himself at the front bars. He slid down into a dejected heap on the cage floor.

"Fuck!" he roared.

The panther called from across the aisle, "Mr. Lion! I know how foreign all of this must seem to you. How strange. And I know you want to get back to the Savannah. But I assure you that throwing yourself into the bars and digging at the floor of your cage will do you no good. The last lion in that cage attempted the same thing, and likely the lion before him."

The lion shook his head.

“Well, you’ve got me confused with a pussy cat if you think I’m going to stick around here.”

He dug with his claws and teeth at the floor of his cage.

The tiger stopped pacing and considered the lion for a moment.

“Check it out, youngster,” the tiger said. “We’ve got something going on here.”

The lion stopped digging at the floor of his cage, licked his chops, and turned his attention to the tiger.

“Here’s how it goes,” the tiger explained. “We live in a world run by these strange creatures who make us perform for food. If you don’t do the tricks they want you to do, they don’t feed you. But they need us to put on a show so they can eat. So check, if we all stop performing and refuse to go out there and obey, then there is no show. There’s no show and they’re fucked. The Circus is fucked.”

“Fucked!” screeched one of the monkeys.

“If we don’t perform, then the Ringmaster and his Keepers and Trainers—they don’t get fed either. We become useless to them and the Circus collapses. And then we all go back to the World of the Free.”

The lion stared for a moment.

“I don’t get it,” he said finally.

“Well, it’s like this,” the tiger started again. “We’re not per—“

“Yeah, yeah, I know that,” the lion interrupted, “That’s not what I don’t get. What doesn’t make sense to me is why any of you ever performed on the first place.”

The tiger looked past the lion and his eyes met the elephant’s. Both of them sat for a moment. The animals had been going along with the panther’s plan for just a few days, it had been just days ago that they had been Circus animals, performing stunts for food—standing on their heads, jumping through flaming hoops, performing backflips. But now, as the animals all considered the lion’s words, none of them could recall why they had ever performed for the Circus.

The elephant cleared his throat.

“You know, it’s like we’re different animals now,” he observed. “Like I don’t really remember who I was when I was Circus Elephant. I can’t remember what I was thinking when I stood on my head for peanuts.”

“We’ve all come a long way,” the panther remarked.

“Well, whatever you got going on here, I hope you can beat these creatures because I just want to go home,” the lion said, studying the cage that held him.

“So what’s it like in the Savannah?” one of the chimps asked.

As the lion studied the ceiling and roof of his cage, looking for some way out, he answered, “Well, it’s like this, sometimes you’re eating food, and sometimes you *are* food.”

The chimp looked at the panther, puzzled.

“It’s like this, Mr. Chimp,” the panther said. “We all must eat. And in the World of the Free, no one brings food to you and puts it in a bowl. You must go get your food. All of us. It is up to you to make sure you have enough to survive and if you cannot find food to eat, you go hungry.

“And everything is food for something. With the freedom to be Chimpanzee and Tiger comes the responsibility for your own survival. All of us eat, and all of us are food for something else.”

The elephant noticed the tiger pacing again, angrily, his eyes downcast, brooding.

“That’s twice that I thought you were going to turn the Ringmaster into food,” the elephant observed.

"I would have attacked him if not for the panther," the tiger replied, still pacing. "I forgot everything. Lost my cool. I'm not cut out for this shit."

As he made a quick turn in the process of pacing, the tiger nodded at the panther.

"Good lookin' out," he said.

The panther returned the tiger's nod, stripes of bloody cuts and welts down his face and flank.

"Don't thank me, Tiger," the panther said evenly. "Instead, keep it in mind to do the same for one of the others. Before this is over, all of us will be tested and will have to rely upon one another. It is only through mutual assistance and cooperation, only through recognizing the success of each other as our own, that we will survive and defeat the Circus."

"Well, I'm not gonna lie," the tiger said, still pacing angrily. "If you hadn't been there, it was all bad for that bastard and his whip. I might have messed it up for all of us, cause I was gonna fuck his ass up!"

"That would have been bad," the panther agreed thoughtfully. "That would have played right into the Ringmaster's hands. It would have given the Circus the excuse to engage in the most extreme brutality and possibly even kill some of us.

"You must remember. Tiger, that this is not *personal*. The Ringmaster, in one sense, is a victim of the Circus as well."

The tiger stopped pacing.

"Did I hear you say that?" the tiger asked incredulously.

"Did you just say that evil bastard is a *victim*?"

"He killed the lion!" one of the chimps screamed.

"Yeah, and he killed my mom!" the orangutan piped in.

The panther nodded patiently.

"I am in no way defending the Ringmaster," the panther replied evenly. "I have no affection for him. He is a brutal tyrant, a cruel and ruthless oppressor. I am only suggesting that the Ringmaster himself is just as much a slave to the Circus, a slave to the system that has made of him a brutal and cruel despot.

"In fact, he is more of a slave than we are. He is a slave to the audience that comes in and sits down in the stands and demands a show. He must please it, and if he does not, he will starve. He can eat only so long as he is useful in producing what it is they want of him.

"He is also a slave to the Circus itself. He serves the Circus and meets its demands of him. Out of desperation, out of need, he has permitted the Circus to alter him, to warp him, to turn him into what he is. The Circus has made him.

"And he is a slave to power. He is a slave to his top hat and his gloves and his cape and his polished boots. He must do what he does—he must do what he may not want to do, what he does not choose to do, in order to keep those things, those symbols of power. He must sell himself everyday, compromise everyday, become something he does not want to be just to maintain his authority over others—over us."

The panther paused, clearing his throat.

"So you see, everything he is, everything he's become, the enslavements he has submitted to, is to maintain himself over us, and now, with all he has sacrificed for the illusion that he held power—we have stolen the illusion from him. He is powerless. We have stolen his authority and we have

stolen his means of gaining food to eat. We have stolen his Circus. So, as any hungry creature would do, he must fight in order to protect his means of gaining food. He must fight in order to protect his life—his life in slavery to this system,” the panther explained.

“So, I keep that in mind when he hits me, when he engages in violence and brutality,” the panther said. “I understand on an objective level that the violence he directs at me is no more than an indication of the intensity of his fear. And the closer we get to the Free World, the greater the threat we pose to his survival, the more afraid he will become and the more ruthless his reaction will be to us. So ultimately, we gauge the probability of our success by the intensity of the Ringmaster’s rage.”

The elephant shook his head.

“That may be so, Panther,” the elephant conceded. “But I tell you what—I thought the Ringmaster was going to kill you.”

“Well, Mr. Elephant, the truth is, we’re all going to die,” the panther replied.

None of the animals moved or spoke. The panther took a deep breath.

“Yas, we’re all going to die. Every single one of us. The question is not *whether* we will die—that is already decided. The question is *how*.

“As I have said, the Ringmaster—the Circus has already been killing us. And in the end, if he has his way, he will murder us just like he murdered the lion,” the panther said. He turned to the elephant, “And your mother, Mr. Elephant,” and he gazed down the range toward the orangutan, “And your mother, too, Mr. Orangutan.

“Remember the tiger who refused to perform—the Ringmaster left him in the cold and he died. Or the gorilla who killed the previous Ringmaster—this Ringmaster put holes into him and killed him too.

“We must be prepared,” the panther urged, surveying the faces of his friends. “We must face the possibility of death—the inevitability of it in life. We must welcome it, wherever and however it greets us.

“If I should die, if the Ringmaster kills me—and he very well may kill me—then I die having known freedom.”

“Me too,” answered one of the chimps.

The other animals agreed solemnly.

“You realize, Mr. Chimp, that the Ringmaster will focus his wrath upon you chimpanzees because he will feel particularly betrayed. He will remove you from those roomy cages, and it may be awhile before you get water and food again,” the panther cautioned.

“That’s alright,” the chimp assured with a rueful grin. “I didn’t much care for the scenery, and I wouldn’t trade my freedom for a few bananas.”

The panther smiled.

“How did the tiger say it?” the chimp asked. Then, in a husky voice he mimicked:

“We’re not cowards...”

He offered a wide, toothy grin.

The animals laughed, all but the tiger. He stopped pacing and glared at the chimp for a moment before his icy countenance melted away and he smiled as well.

We're Our Own Leaders

Sam and Carl came into the housing area to find all the animals staring at them. They exchanged a nervous glance.

"Look, Sam, all I'm saying is those Trainers think they know everything. They think they're better than us or something. Like we're dumb and they're more important than we are," Carl explained as the two men walked down the aisle between the row of cages. "So be careful. You can't believe everything you hear."

"Yeah, I know," Sam replied. "But it aint like that. They wasn't talkin' to me. They was talkin' to each other and I was just listenin'."

The Keepers stopped at the back door, bent down, and lifted it. With a loud rumble, it slid up on the tracks above them, light and summer heat from the back loading dock pouring into the animals' living area, particles of dust swimming out in the open air.

Sam turned with his hands in his pockets.

"I was in the break room. I bought me a sammich and a soda from the vending machines and one of the Trainers were at the table—Jack—and he joked with me, you know, saying that if the Circus goes broke, well, we might just have to tip over the machines and eat for free or somethin'. An' the other Trainer, he said to Jack that the Circus ain't gonna go broke. That this is all temporary. But Jack said he talked to one of the girls off the tightrope and she had been outside Mr. Head's office and heard him on the phone. She said he was screamin' at some newspaper guy for a story he wrote that had the ASPCA bustin' his balls and all, and that he was thinking about suing the paper."

"Uh-huh."

"So the tightrope girl said Mr. Head called some other Circuses and he couldn't get rid of none of the animals but this tiger," Sam said, pointing up the range at the tiger's cage. "Turns out, the other Circuses have heard that we got problems here and how the animals is actin' funny and don't none of them places want anything to do with 'em." They started back up the range, side by side.

"If that's the case, then I wonder how he pawned off this tiger," Carl wondered out loud.

"Prob'ly because they're getting' a Siberian for a Bengal," Sam surmised. "That's not a bad deal."

"Guess not," Carl agreed.

Both men stopped in front of the tiger's cage and considered him for a moment. Sam knelt down and pulled the stoppers from behind the wheels and the two men carefully pulled the cage out into the aisle. The wheels squeaked.

"So that's it, huh?" Carl asked. "That was all you heard?"

The two men pushed the tiger toward the open garage door.

"No, the Trainers also said somethin' about a guy named Safari Joe," Sam said.

"Safari Joe?" Carl asked, eyeing Sam skeptically.

"Yeah, ever heard of 'em?"

“Yeah, that’s bad news,” Carl observed with a deep sigh.

“Why?” asked Sam.

“Well, that means Dick is thinking about trading off these animals to get new animals, wild ones straight from the jungle. That’s what Safari Joe does. He captures wild animals. And if that’s what Dick has in mind, then we’ll be going awhile without putting on a show while these new animals get trained,” Carl said. “And that means no money coming in.” Carl glared at the tiger in the cage he was pushing. “These fuckers have caused a whole lot of grief,” he said. “Maybe once we get them all separated and all, we’ll get them performing again,” Sam offered. “They can’t go without food forever. They’re gonna have to perform. Right?”

They shoved the cage onto the back dock with a loud rattle and the animals listened as the noise of the Keepers grew more distant.

“I wonder where they’re taking the tiger?” the elephant asked.

“I think we did it!” one of the monkeys shrieked, jumping up and down at the front of the cage. “I think we’re on the way to the World of the Free!”

Many of the other animals erupted excitedly except for the panther, whose eyes remained on the open back door.

The new lion, seeing the concentration on the panther’s face, called from across the aisle:

“What’s goin’ on?”

The panther shook his head.

Just then, the Keepers came back, pushing a cage that rattled up the aisle. The animals grew quiet as they watched a tiger—a new tiger, a Bengal tiger—wheeled into the space where their friend had just been.

The Keepers put the blocks under the wheels of the cage and headed back out to the dock. The panther watched as the Keepers engaged in conversation with two other creatures who were standing just outside of the garage door.

The panther turned his attention to the new tiger.

“Where you from?” he asked.

But the tiger was in no mood.

“What’s it to you?” he growled.

“They just took out a friend of ours—another tiger,” the panther explained. “We believe he was headed to the World of the Free.”

The tiger snickered.

“I saw your friend. But where he’s going. I wouldn’t call it the World of the Free.”

“The Savannah?” the lion asked.

The tiger shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Savannah? What the fuck is a Savannah?” he asked,

looking from the lion to the panther. “Look, I seen that other tiger, but I can assure you that he wasn’t going to no Free Savannah or whatever you wanna call it. The creatures who brought me here took him back with them to the other Circus.”

“*Other* circus?” the elephant asked. His eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about, tiger? There is no other circus.”

The hell there isn’t,” the tiger snorted. “In fact, this is the fourth one that I’ve been to. And I’m tired of them shuffling me around.”

The elephant looked from the tiger to the panther. All the animals looked to the panther.

“What’s he talking about panther?” the elephant asked. He watched the black cat pacing in his cage. “What’s this deal about other circuses? Did you know about this?”

The panther’s mind raced. He could not believe that he had just heard. Other circuses? If what this tiger was saying was true then this was much bigger than he had originally thought. There was no telling how many circuses were out there. He thought about his friend, the tiger, who had just been shipped off, presumably to another one of these caged worlds. Then a very unsettling thought occurred to him: What if he and the other animals were doomed to share the tiger’s fate as well?

“What does this mean, panther?” the elephant persisted.

Up in the front cages, the chimps bickered hotly.

“I don’t know,” the panther admitted, shaking his head. He stood up at the front bars of his cage, looking out as the other animals fell silent.

“I don’t know what this means. I devised this plan on the idea that the World of the Free was just beyond the door.” He nodded toward the open garage door where the Keepers had just pushed his friend. “I did not know about the existence of other circuses.”

The chimps again exploded into pandemonium as the two factions argued forcefully over this new development. The monkeys shrieked nervously and many of the reasonable voices were drowned in the maelstrom.

After a moment, it ebbed and the elephant addressed the panther.

“What if it’s true?” the elephant asked. “I mean, if there are other circuses...”

“Why would I lie about it, fat boy?” the new tiger interjected.

“—then the Ringmaster can split us up and divide us among the other circuses and bring in more Obedient Ones. More Circus Animals”

The panther had thought of that. If these creatures had expanded into every corner of the Free World, then they had turned everything into a giant Circus, making everyone a performer for food.

“Mr. Elephant, I don’t know how far and wide these creatures have spread their system,” the panther said. “And we have no way to know how many circuses exist. But I do know this: The Ringmaster smelled of fear—he is afraid. So no matter what happens, if they divide and split us apart, I’m going to continue to struggle to get to the World of the Free. I’m going to finish what we have started here.”

His eyes moved from one face to the next.

“We began with a belief there was one Circus, one Ringmaster to defeat,” he reminded them. “But even if there isn’t, what then? What if there are a hundred circuses and a hundred Ringmasters? The nature of those circuses is the same as this one.

“So, can you go back to being Circus animals? Go back to jumping through hoops? Standing on your heads for peanuts? Performing back-flips?”

None of the animals lowered their gazes.

“We can never give up, never give in. Wherever they take us,” the panther said. “If we can destroy one circus, then we can destroy a hundred. Or a thousand. Or a million.

“The Ringmaster can starve us to death, but he cannot starve us back into obedience.”

No sooner than the panther had spoken, the Keepers returned, walking down the aisle to the panther’s cage. They stopped directly before him. One stood with a hand in one pocket as he spoke to his partner and he leaned casually against the bars until he looked over his shoulder

and saw the panther's intense eyes fixed on him. He stepped back from the cage with a start. The other Keeper knelt down and removed the blocks from the wheels of the panther's cage.

All the animals stood at the front of their cages, watching intently. When the Keepers grabbed the bars of the cage and tugged roughly, the cage jerked from its position and, up the range, one of the chimps screeched angrily, rattling the door of his cage.

"Where are they taking the panther?"

"Leave him alone!" the orangutan bellowed.

The Keepers cast a nervous glance over their shoulders in the direction of the animals' shrieking and screeching.

The panther stood on all fours, his eyes fixed firmly upon the Keepers. He stood calm and resolute as the two men pulled the cage into the middle of the center aisle. The noise

from the cages surrounding them grew more intense as the monkeys and the orangutan began to rattle their doors.

One of the Keepers swallowed hard and surveyed the situation, his eyes wide with fear while the other yelled something unheard above the din of the banging and clanging, and he pointed toward the open garage door.

They put their backs into the job, shoving the cage forward, and the elephant crashed headlong into the front bars of his own cage, rocking it forward. It seemed to tilt precariously for just a moment before it crashed back down, bouncing the other cages off the floorboards. The two new cats, the lion and the tiger, both growled at the Keepers as they passed hurriedly, afraid.

The panther stood in the cage silently as the Keepers pushed him closer and closer to the back door of the housing area and to an unknown future. The panther savored the last view he had of the animals—all of them in protest, in resistance, every door rattling, every voice raised.

The Keepers heaved and the cage rolled out onto the loading dock. They hurried from the housing area, turned, and slammed the garage door shut on the bedlam the animals had created. And yet, for a long moment after the door had closed, the animals continued their protest in anger and frustration. Little by little, the rattling settled into silence and the animals stood, each one alone to his own thoughts.

"Fuck!" shrieked one of the monkeys.

The elephant, still breathing hard, shifted his weight from foot to foot. The orangutan, his face pressed between the bars in his grip, stared up the range to where the panther's presence had always been. The orangutan's eyes narrowed, his lip curling into a sneer.

The Keepers returned, walking swiftly into the housing area, their eyes darting from cage to cage, and they stopped in front of the chimpanzees' cages and quickly, seemingly at random, pushed a cage of chimps down the range and out the side exit leading into the Arena. A cascade of noise followed them.

Over the course of the grinding afternoon, they became less distracted by the animals' protests, thinking only of moving some of the monkeys and elephants over to the empty range.

By the end of their shift, they had transferred nearly half of the animals and had placed the chimps into the smaller cages—no easy task with the chimpanzees laying down limp. Before they left for the day, they passed on the instructions that the Ringmaster had left for the next shift.

"Where'd they take the panther?" the orangutan called out.

"Did they take him off to one of the other circuses?" asked the chimp.

"What if they took him off to kill him like they did the lion?" asked the monkey.

"I don't think so," the chimp replied to the monkey. "When they took the lion out they took him out of his cage with the muzzle and all, and took him out the front door, remember?"

"Yeah, but they could still kill him," the orangutan countered. "And how would we know about it?"

"It might be that they carted his ass off to the zoo," the tiger offered.

The other animals stared at him quizzically.

"The zoo?" the chimp asked.

"Yeah," the tiger answered, sitting down at the front of his cage. "I got myself sent there once. Actin' a fool and

they sent me off. It's fucked up. You don't have to perform or anything, you just kinda sit around most of the time. But it's not cool. They don't feed you worth a shit. And it's all about control. All the troublemakers get sent there, the malcontents. The ones they can't control or get to perform in the Circus. And—"

Just then, the lion, who had been sniffing at the air, tried to interrupt. "Wait a minute, I—"

"—it's all about population control, man," the tiger continued. "That's what it is. They don't want you breeding if you think for yourself. So I had to fake it and go along with the program to get up outta there. If the panther's headed for that place—"

"Listen!" the lion roared, frustrated. "I'm trying to tell you all something if you'd let me. They didn't take the panther off to no circus or zoo. And they didn't kill him either."

"How do you know?" asked the orangutan, excitedly.

"I can still smell him," the lion replied. "I can smell him, so he's gotta be around here somewhere. Can't you smell him, Tiger?"

The tiger put his nose up into the air and took a deep breath.

"Yeah," he answered, nodding. "Yeah, he's still here. And the other animals are even closer. I can smell them too."

"So what are we gonna do?" the chimp asked.

The animals all stared at one another, waiting for someone to speak up.

"Come on," urged the chimp impatiently. "What are we gonna do?"

The elephant shifted his weight, foot to foot.

"We all know what we've got to do," he said resolutely. His big ears flapped at the air. "We do what we've been doing. We resist. We refuse to perform under any conditions. We reject the Ringmaster's bribes of food and water and stra—"

"But there's other circuses," the chimp interrupted. "There's other circuses and there's the zoo, and the panther didn't know about that. He put the plan together and didn't know. He just found out abo—"

"It doesn't matter," interjected the elephant.

"Sure it does," the chimp countered.

"No, It doesn't," the elephant said more forcefully.

"How can you—"

"What's the difference?" the elephant asked angrily.

"What difference can this make? So what if there are other circuses? And what if they ship us off to these other circuses or to the zoo? What are we supposed to do, go back to being Circus Chimp and Circus Elephant?" He looked from the chimp to the orangutan. "Circus orangutan? Are you gonna do backflips for bananas?"

The elephant paused while he looked around at the animals.

“Well, I know what *I’m* gonna do,” he finally said. “Every time they take me out of here, I’m squatting on their asses. Every damned time! I know the panther’s not gonna give in and I’m not either.”

The orangutan sighed.

“Mr. Elephant, I’m not siding with the chimp or anything,” he began. “But I’m awful thirsty. And my stomach hurts. I could use some food and water. But I know the Ringmaster is a murderer and I can’t go back to the way things were. Yet and still, the panther isn’t here. How are we gonna keep going without him? How will we know what to do?”

The elephant shook his head and let out a heavy sigh.

“What do you think the panther would think of all this?” He admonished.

“What would he think? ‘I’m thirsty.’ ‘We won’t know what to do.’ What would he think of that?”

The orangutan’s chin sank against his chest.

“We know what to do, Mr. Orangutan,” the elephant continued. “We know exactly what to do. The panther showed us. He showed us how to be. All we have to do is be like him. He’s not here and we are, so now we all have to be what he was.”

The elephant’s eyes met the orangutan’s.

“Don’t you see? This is what the Ringmaster wanted. That’s why he did this. The Ringmaster believed the panther was in charge, that he was behind all of this—the panther and the Siberian. That’s why he moved them first; he wants to divide the rest of us so we will forget what we know and we’ll cave-in and give up.

“Don’t all of you get it? *That’s what the Ringmaster wants!*”

The orangutan sat staring at his hands for a moment. A few of the chimps huddled together and whispered while the chimp at the bars eyed them with suspicion. Both the tiger and the young lion sat quietly, listening thoughtfully to the exchange.

“You’re right, Mr. Elephant,” the chimp agreed. “We’re all acting like the panther was in charge or somethin’.”

“He was,” the orangutan mumbled.

The chimp looked around at the other animals.

“The panther was the one who told us himself that the Ringmaster doesn’t own us,” the chimp reminded. “The Circus doesn’t own us. We own ourselves. And if we own ourselves, if we really own ourselves, then we don’t *need* the

panther. We don’t need him or anybody to lead us or be our courage. We’re our own leaders. Each one of us.”

The elephant and orangutan nodded in agreement, as did the lion and the tiger.

“We’re our own leaders!” the monkey screeched.

“Now, the only problem is, what if the other animals decide to give in and perform?” the chimp posed. “What if the Ringmaster breaks them and they give in, and they accept food and start performing again?”

The elephant shook his head slowly.

“No,” he said with certainty. “I know the other elephants won’t perform. I’m certain of that.”

“Neither will the monkeys,” added the monkey, staring at the ceiling of his cage, lying with his hands behind his head.

“But the chimps performed before,” the orangutan remembered. “They performed but we stuck with the plan.”

"That's right," the elephant affirmed. "So just because some of the other animals might break, we can still stick with the plan. A handful of the other animals giving in won't stop us from taking down the Circus."

All the animals agreed.

"We're gonna get through this," the elephant assured them all. "We're gonna get through this and if they take us to the Arena for training, we'll find some way to get a message over to the others and let them know that we're not giving up."

"They might be wondering about us right now," the orangutan offered. "They might be having the same conversation, wondering what we're going to do."

"We can hope that they are," the elephant said. "And we need to let them know we're sticking to this. We need to let them know that the panther is still alive and we still intend to take down the Circus."

As soon as the Ringmaster stepped through the door he stalked over to the remaining chimps' cage and raked his cane across the bars, the incessant noise echoing and ringing off the metal walls.

"Wake up, you little shits!" he bellowed rudely, his voice hoarse and cracking. His hair, normally slicked back neatly, now hung oily and limp upon his forehead. He sneered, his bloodshot eyes ablaze.

"Wake up!" the Ringmaster shouted, smacking the bars once more for good measure.

The Keepers standing behind him shifted nervously from foot to foot. Sweat stood out on their glistening foreheads. The chimps stirred, but none moved to get up. All of the animals remained prostrate, pinned down by the sweltering heat. This brought a sadistic smile to the Ringmaster's unshaven face as he rubbed his bristled jaw with one stain-gloved hand.

"How long ago did they shut off the ventilation?" the Ringmaster asked.

"Second shift yesterday," Carl answered. "Just like you ordered."

The Ringmaster nodded.

"It'll be a hundred and fifty degrees in here by lunch," he mused. He turned and considered the empty space where the stubborn panther had been. His smile widened.

"It'll be even hotter for him in that freight car," the Ringmaster observed.

Carl cleared his throat.

"We moved him yesterday," he reported. "He's been there since. No food or water. Just like you ordered."

"The door to the freight car is closed, right?"

"Yeah. Just like you said."

The Ringmaster nodded.

"It's gotta be a sauna in there," he said. "It'll either break him or kill'em."

He turned and met the eyes of Carl and Sam. Both of them looked down and avoided his gaze. A single drop of sweat rolled down the Ringmaster's temple and down his cheek. It dropped onto the velvet of his shoulder, stained with the color of the grape slushy that had struck him during the previous show.

"The other animals you moved...?"

"Yeah," Carl answered. "We moved them to the other range. The empty one. We moved chimps, monkeys, elephants. No water. No food."

The Ringmaster nodded his approval.

"And the ventilation?"

“We shut that off over there too, just like you said,” Carl replied. “Third shift said they went through both areas last night every couple hours or so, just like you wanted them to, turning on the lights and rattling the doors on the cages. The animals couldn’t have gotten much sleep.”

The Ringmaster smiled.

“No training today,” he said, lacing his hands behind his back as he strolled up and down the aisle, looking in on the animals plastered to the cage floors.

“No training. And I want you to bring in food, bring in piles of it. Bring it in, along with tubs of water.”

The Ringmaster stopped his stroll, pivoted, and turned smoothly to face the two Keepers.

“And then I want you to leave it sitting right here,” the Ringmaster finished, pointing down directly at the floor. “I want you to put all of it here on the floor where these ingrates can smell it and see it and imagine what it would be like to taste it.”

Carl and Sam nodded.

The Ringmaster stopped in front of the cage of the new tiger. He lay on the floor, his flank rising and falling in rapid rhythm in the oppressive heat.

“This one is smaller than the other one we traded off,” he observed.

“We haven’t had any problem out of him,” Carl offered.

The Ringmaster noted that the food and water containers remained in the cage.

“I think we’ll get along just fine,” the Ringmaster said to the tiger.

He took a couple steps and stopped in front of the young lion’s cage.

“What about this one?” the Ringmaster asked, hands still laced thoughtfully behind his back.

“Just the usual,” Carl replied. “Digging, clawin’ at the bars. But no trouble, really.”

The Ringmaster nodded.

“That’s to be expected,” he said. He noticed that the lion too had food and water containers still in his cage.

The Ringmaster stared into the lion’s cage. Their resistance must be fading, he thought. The two new animals still had food and water. They remained unaffected, unpersuaded perhaps. Without the panther, everything was falling apart and the animals would soon all come around.

The Ringmaster smiled to himself as he slid one gloved hand over his brow, mopping up the beads of sweat that had formed there.

“Hard to stand up to anything in heat like this,” he mused with a chuckle.

Carl and Sam shifted from foot to foot, the pit stains in their gray uniform shirts expanding by the minute.

“I think we’ll probably have a decent show tonight,” the Ringmaster predicted once again wiping his brow.

“They’ll certainly be anxious to perform just to get out of this hot box for awhile.”

He saw the skepticism emerge on the Keeper’s faces. He wagged a finger at them.

“Mark my words.”

He strolled to the door, opened it, and turned.

“We’ll start with the elephants and chimps,” he decided. “I suspect our friends the chimpanzees will redeem themselves. They’ve had it much too good. Been spoiled. They’ll be longing for bananas and roomy cages and air conditioning.”

He smiled. Carl and Sam smiled back, but not very convincingly.

The Ringmaster clapped his dingy gloves together and turned and left.

After he was sure the Ringmaster was gone, Carl reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out the small recorder he had concealed there. He hit the “stop” button with his thumb and handed it to Sam.

“You can never be too careful,” Carl observed with a sly grin.

Sam looked at the recorder in his hand and grinned back.

The two Keepers left out and soon returned with buckets of food and tubs of water that they placed down along the aisle, just outside the animal’s cages as the Ringmaster had instructed. Both men smiled as, after a moment, one by one, the animals dragged themselves up to the bars, following the scent of the fresh food.

“Dick might be right about us having a decent show tonight,” Carl said as the Keepers made their way up toward the front exit.

“Yeah, look at ‘em,” Sam said, stopping in front of the chimps’ cage. “They do look pretty desperate.”

The chimps looked up from the enticing food outside of their doors and into the Keepers’ smiling faces. The chimps sneered.

“Yeah, come on. We’ve still got to take care of the other range,” Carl said, leading the way out of the housing area.

Once they’d left, the orangutan cried out from the front of his cage, “The dirty bastards! They did that just to tease us. To torture us!”

“Yeah! And did you see them smiling and laughing? They think this is funny!” The chimp snarled, staring down at the food.

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” the elephant trumpeted. “Since they think it’s so funny, the next time they take us out there, we’ll give them something to laugh about. We’ll give them all something to laugh about!”

Book 3: The Last Act

I believe, and everybody must grant, that no Government can exist for a single moment without the cooperation of the people, willing or forced, and if the people suddenly withdraw their cooperation in every detail, the Government will come to a stand still.

–Mohandas Gandhi

Power feeds on its spoils, and dies when its victims refuse to be despoiled. They can't persuade it to death; they can't vote it to death; they can't shoot it to death; but they can always starve it to death.

–Benjamin Tucker

...The day after the revolution no one should have the power or the economic wherewithal to exploit the labor of another... –Luigi Fabbri

Welcome to the Greatest Traveling Show in the World!

Hours later, the Ringmaster trotted out to center ring in his adulation.

He turned and lifted his arms, signaling the Keepers. Out came the elephants, all in line, nose to tail, lumbering out to the center ring. Each elephant had a primate upon its back, chimpanzees dressed in maroon jackets and hats, the yellow tassels bouncing with each of the elephants' plodding steps. The orangutan rode upon the elephant in the middle of the formation, sitting just behind the elephant's expansive head. The colorful embroideries draped across the elephants' backs flapped and waved, speckled by the lighting that crisscrossed the center ring.

The crowd clapped and cheered at the sight of the animals, but the Ringmaster noticed that something was already wrong. According to the act, the primates were supposed to perform backflips on the backs of the elephants, smiling and waving to the crowd. Instead, they sat somber and business-like, stone-faced, seemingly oblivious to the crowd.

The Ringmaster lowered his arms but before he could give the cue to perform the first stunt, the elephants all rose up together onto their hind legs. They stayed that way, maintaining that pose as the flashbulbs from the crowd popped. The primates disappeared from view behind the massive heads of the elephants. The Ringmaster stood puzzled. This was not part of the act.

And yet, the spectators clapped and cheered, unaware that all of this was not part of the prearranged performance. The pipe organ continued to play. The spotlights continued to dance.

Then the laughter began. It started off just a scattered few chuckles but it spread contagiously throughout the entire crowd. The Ringmaster didn't understand until he saw out of the corner of his eye—Something was falling. He saw the shadow of something behind the elephants, something down around their legs, falling, and the Ringmaster gasped, mortified.

The elephants were standing upon their hind legs and relieving themselves in tandem, large clumps of elephant dung falling to the canvas in smelly, steaming piles.

The Trainers, standing in a circle around the animals, each backed away, holding their noses and making faces. As the laughter cascaded through the audience, someone here or there punctuated the comic moment with loud explosive fart sounds that echoed throughout the Big Top. Some of the people in the first few rows caught a good whiff of the dung before everyone else and they stood, offended, holding their nose.

What the fuck?, the Ringmaster thought. They're shitting on my canvas.

Having finished their business, the elephants lowered themselves onto all fours, the chimps and orangutan visible to the crowd once again. The organ music continued its happy melody as the primates sat with their circus clothing held in their hands. None of them wore a stitch of it. Without any fanfare, they extended their arms and simultaneously dropped their vestments to the Arena floor. A couple of the pillbox hats fluttered down and landed in the elephant dung as the chimps and orangutan stared directly into the Ringmaster's bloodshot eyes.

Having divested themselves of their Circus trappings, the primates hopped forward onto the necks of the elephants, turned, and untied the embroideries from the mammoth torsos of the beasts they rode, and they gave the tapestries a good heave. Those too floated down to the floor.

The crowd, confused, grew silent. None of this was funny anymore.

The Ringmaster stood paralyzed, his eyes narrowed to slits, his fists balled into knots, his face burning red with fury. He stared at the clothing the animals had worn for years, performing the same stunts and tricks night after night, day after day, never a hitch. Now the clothing and decoration lay upon the floor along with obscene piles of elephant shit. The restless crowd began voicing displeasure.

“What the hell is this?” somebody yelled.

“Yeah! Where’s the show? We came to see a show,” cried out another voice.

The orangutan and chimps took their seats on the elephants’ expansive backs and the large animals all made wide, lumbering turns, facing away from the Ringmaster and the crowd.

“WE want a SHOW...WE want a SHOW...,” the chant began.

At that moment, the elephants began kicking with their hind legs, sending the large piles of dung flying into the air, much of it coming down on the Ringmaster, who swung his cane wildly and attempted to duck the barrage of animal poop. One hand held defensively in front of his face, he brushed away a clump of it that had stuck to the leg of his white pants, and his efforts only smeared it into the fabric.

The crowd roared with laughter at the Ringmaster’s expense. They found the fiasco quite entertaining, until, that is, the elephants turned a degree further and began kicking at the dung again, this time sending chunks of it out into the crowd.

The laughter died immediately and the grumbling crowd grew tense, many of the spectators standing and waving fists and screaming at the animals, at the Ringmaster, at the Circus. They had come for entertainment, to see the spectacle and, instead, they were rewarded with stupid beasts kicking shit into their popcorn. They were insulted, enraged, offended.

The elephants slowly turned toward the exit and plodded over to the tapestries. They wiped their feet upon the ornate designs that had once hung upon their backs, the symbols of the Circus’ ownership of them. They smeared dung upon the vibrant gold and reds.

The incensed audience responded with boos and obscenities and fists waving as the elephants sauntered away, nose to tail, back the way they had come, the primates upon their backs smiling and waving goodbye to the crowd—smiling happily and waving grandly.

The Ringmaster threw his shit-stained hat to the canvas floor, the string of profanity he uttered drowned out by the screams of the crowd. He stood there in the spotlight staring at the elephant dung in heaps and the clothing discarded like trash.

It was impossible. He had separated them from that damned panther. He had divided them. He had turned off the air and had taken their food and water and straw. He had deprived them of sleep. He had beaten them randomly. He had tortured them with the food in front of their cages. He had employed just about every trick in the book to get these bastards to act right.

His shoulders slumped. He shook his head, sighing. He turned and faced the crowd, bracing himself for the inevitable flurry of food and trash and beverages to come hurling from the stands. With chunks of elephant dung adorning the canvas all around him, he smiled the best smile that he could muster and he announced to the crowd that the remainder of the show was canceled.

The dirty sons of bitches flung shit on me, he thought. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath as the slushies began to fly.

All the animals were laughing. Even the oppressive heat could not dampen their spirits as they sat up in the fronts of their cages to hear the account the chimpanzee, the orangutan, and the elephant shared with them. “And the look on his face,” the chimp related, smiling wide, eyes sparkling. “He froze for a moment and his beady little eyes got big and it was like he was thinking, ‘They just kicked the shit at me.’ ”

The animals roared with laughter again. The monkey rolled onto his back holding his stomach.

“But wait! Some of it stuck to him,” added the elephant. “And then when he tried to brush it away, he smeared it all over.”

Another wave of laughter burst from the animals.

“Hold on, hold on,” urged the orangutan, hopping and grinning and holding the front bars of his cage. “Tell ‘em how you kicked it into the crowd and they all had shit in their food.”

“Shit in their food!” screeched the monkey, and they all bellowed with laughter.

Just then, the housing unit door crashed open and the Ringmaster stalked in, his shoulders hunched, his fists clenched, his eyes narrow. A splotch of smeared elephant dung stained one leg of his pants. His bloodshot eyes darted from cage to cage. Behind him cowered the two Keepers.

The Ringmaster recalled that just by walking through the door he used to command respect and all the noise would cease. As soon as he stepped into the room, the animals would go silent. Not a peep. None of them would make eye contact. They had feared him—as they should.

He looked around now and saw all the animals cackling and howling, looking him directly in the eyes. If he didn’t know better, he would swear they were laughing at him.

He turned toward the chimps, toward one of the little traitors—ungrateful bastards—and he saw, to his amazement, the little son of a bitch wore a cheesy grin and was waving at him just as he had waved to the crowd on the Arena.

“You think this is fuckin’ funny,” the Ringmaster snarled.

He kicked angrily at the bars of the chimp’s cage but that only heightened the intensity of the animals’ screeching and howling.

The chimp continued waving and grinning, absolutely unafraid in his mockery. In fact, the Ringmaster’s impotent cage kicking only seemed to embolden the chimp to smile wider and wave with more enthusiasm.

How did this happen?, the Ringmaster asked himself.

He shook his head, unbelieving. He turned from the chimp and walked down to the cages of the tiger and lion—the new animals. They sat calmly in the midst of all the insanity, with only an occasional growl. Now, they eyed him with curiosity as he stood in front of them.

“We’ll begin their training immediately,” the Ringmaster announced over his shoulder to the Keepers. “We can get started with these two. And the rest of the animals we’re getting in will come around in no time. I already called Safari Joe. He should be calling me back shortly.”

“What will he do with them?” Sam asked, curiously.

The Ringmaster shrugged.

“What the hell do I care? Just get them ready to go. All of ‘em but these two,” he said, nodding toward the cats.

With his hands laced behind his back, he watched as the two animals got to their feet and approached the front of their cages, sniffing the air. The lion and tiger stood at the bars, exchanged a glance, and then gazed directly into the eyes of the Ringmaster.

“Goddamnit!” the Ringmaster screamed.

“What’s the matter?” Carl asked, taking a cautious step toward the Ringmaster.

“I thought you said these two were alright,” said the Ringmaster, pointing at the two cats.

“Well, they have been—what do you mean?” asked Carl.

“Well look at ‘em,” the Ringmaster screamed, still pointing. “Look at their eyes! These bastards have poisoned them too!”

Carl stepped up and took a closer look, first at the tiger, then the lion, and the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Sure enough, the two cats had that same weird, knowing look in their eyes.

“Yeah Dick,” he said, taking a step back from the cages. “You’re right.”

Both cats continued to stare into the Ringmaster’s eyes. Then, all at once, they flipped their food dishes into the bars, sending morsels of food flying out onto the range, and all over the Ringmaster.

Bewildered, the Ringmaster took a step back from the cages, brushing the debris from his clothes. The animals erupted in howls and screeching, and this time the two cats joined the chorus.

“They got to these two,” the Ringmaster muttered. “They all gotta go! All of them! Every last one of them!”

Sam scratched his head.

“What about the panther?”

“Especially the panther!” the Ringmaster replied.

The Ringmaster’s phone chirped loudly and he pulled it from his jacket pocket, holding it up to his ear. He shoved a finger in his other ear to block out the noise. There was a pause.

“Yeah, Joe?” The Ringmaster responded into the phone.

“No, no. Change that. Add two more. All of them gotta go. Yeah. Well, the sooner th better...Okay...Okay...See you then.”

He hung up with a flip of his thumb and shoved the phone back in his jacket.

“Get them ready,” the Ringmaster ordered the Keepers. “Joe will be here within the hour. Have these sumbitches on the loading dock when he gets here.”

The Keepers nodded and marched briskly to the garage door, more than happy to begin the process of ridding themselves of these troublesome animals.

Sam crouched down, grabbed the handle and slid the door up on its tracking. Bright sunlight poured into the building, blinding Sam and Carl for a moment. A slight breeze moved the otherwise stale air.

The Ringmaster turned around right where he stood, scowling at all the animals.

It started as just a slight ripple, darkness moving in darkness, barely visible, black on black until the panther opened his eyes. The eyes glowed from the midst of the darkness and he raised his head from the floor of the cage. He panted short, quick breaths that pulled in hot air and pushed it back out. There had been a noise that had disturbed the delirium, the half-dream brought on by the terrible heat.

His ears moved, pivoting toward the sound. It was the animals. He could hear them making a ruckus and knew they had not given up their resistance to the Ringmaster. He could imagine how they looked, standing up to the bars, defiant, unbroken. Free.

He was about to lower his head again when he caught the scent of something—something almost familiar, and his nostrils worked quickly, sniffing at the air, trying to recall... Then it came

back to him. He remembered. When the animals had been sick all those years ago, he had smelled that particular scent.

No, it won't be long now, the panther thought, resting his head on the floor of the cage. It won't be long now.

The Keepers had just opened the garage door when one of the Trainers burst into the housing area, his eyes wide, large circles of sweat soaking through the pits of his khaki shirt. "The ASPCA!" he yelled.

He ran up to the Ringmaster, pointing back toward the Arena.

"You gotta come quick," He urged. "The ASPCA just came into the Arena and Jack is out there stalling them. They asked for you. You gotta hurry."

"Okay," the Ringmaster said calmly, pointing at the Trainer. "Help Sam and Carl get food and water back in these cages. We gotta make it look good. And turn the fans back on. When you're done, do the same thing on the other range. Got it?"

The Trainer nodded. The Ringmaster sighed and strode to the door as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Fuckin' animal lovers," he muttered.

The Ringmaster squinted, his eyes unaccustomed to the darkness. In the Arena, the lights were off. The stands stood empty, and only a small huddle of three people conversed in the center ring. Jack was flanked by a shaggy-haired guy in jeans and glasses on one side, and a young woman in a light pants suit on the other side. The three of them stood amid the debris and dung all over the Arena floor.

In his rush to get to these interlopers, the Ringmaster kicked and waded his way through cardboard popcorn containers and slushies and sodas without even glancing down. The animal lovers turned to greet him and they weren't smiling. The woman held a clipboard to her chest.

The Ringmaster smiled wide and friendly extending his gloved hand, first to the guy in jeans. "Hey, I'm the Ringmaster here," he said, still smiling.

"Hello, I'm Dave," replied the guy in jeans, grasping the Ringmaster's hand before pulling away, a sour expression on his face.

The Ringmaster's smile vanished. His mouth hung open.

Dave wiped his palm on his leg.

"What's all over your gloves? He asked annoyed.

The Ringmaster gasped, holding his hands out in front of him. He remembered he had wiped at the elephant shit.

"Oh, uh, we had a—"

The woman's face wrinkled and she grabbed her nose.

"Oh, God," she said. "That smell."

Blood rushed to the Ringmaster's face as he stood there humiliated, smelling of elephant turd and looking like a fool.

"My apologies," he said, smiling nervously as he held his hands out before him. "We had a little incident earlier and—"

"We heard," the woman interrupted, glancing at the clipboard.

She stepped to the side, gingerly, carefully, trying to keep her pearl-white pumps from landing in the litter and elephant dung.

"We've gotten some calls that the animals here at your circus have been behaving...*oddly*," she said.

The Ringmaster nodded, his face still frozen with the same smile.

“Yas, well, nothing we can’t handle,” the Ringmaster responded as warmly as possible. “You know how these things go. But it’s certainly nothing to concern you folks—”

“And abuse,” the woman said directly, her eyes locking on the Ringmaster’s.

“We’ve received several reports of abuse, Mr. Head. People calling over the last several days.”

“Abuse?” the Ringmaster asked, shaking his head and looking as shocked as he could. “There’s no abuse here, I assure you.”

“Well, if you don’t mind, we’d like to be the judge of that,” Dave prompted, fumbling the camera hanging from a strap around his neck. “If you’ll just let us see for ourselves, we’ll be out of your way in no time, Mr. Head.”

The Ringmaster grinned back in an effort to hid his contempt.

“Right this way.”

The two ASPCA representatives followed the Ringmaster, stepping carefully until they reached the exit door of the Arena. He led them down the hallway toward the door to the housing area, and the closer they got, the louder the noise grew from the other side of the door.

Fuck, the Ringmaster thought. These animals are still at it.

“You know how animals sometimes get a little moody when the summer heat gets bad,” the Ringmaster offered.

Neither of the ASPCA representatives responded.

Howls and screeches and trumpeting punctuated with the rattle of cages reverberated into the hallway. The Ringmaster wiped away the sweat from his forehead, grabbed the door knob, and opened the door. He poked his head inside.

The food that the Keepers had returned to the cages was now littered on the floor and walls. The water had been dumped, creating a mess everywhere. All the animals howled and screeched, the primates rattling the cage doors. One monkey grinned at the Ringmaster while urinating, the stream of liquid waste arching out from between the bars to splatter into the mess on the floor.

In that instant, the Ringmaster could imagine the reaction of these two busy-bodies if he let them walk into a full-scale riot situation with primates pissing all over the place. He could imagine the conclusions they’d draw.

He quickly slammed the door shut and turned to face the two animals lovers.

“I’m sorry, but we have a situation in there and I can’t let you go in,” the ringmaster asserted.

Dave thrust his shoulders back and pointed accusingly at the Ringmaster.

“Look here, Head. We have a right to—”

“I’m in charge of this Circus,” the Ringmaster replied, stepping forward. “And I’m responsible for the safety of everyone. That includes you. And I’m telling you the situation isn’t safe. We’ll have to go to the other range.”

The Ringmaster adjusted his jacket and nodded at the Trainer.

“Get that situation under control in there,” he ordered. “We’ll be back.”

The Trainer nodded, then scratched his head, perplexed as to what he was supposed to do to remedy the situation.

The Ringmaster guided the two ASPCA representatives with his gloved hand, getting them away from the door and down the corridor to the other range. But even as the noise from the housing area behind them began to fade with distance, similar noise echoed down the hallway from in front of them. It grew louder as they approached the door to the other range.

The Ringmaster stood before the steel door and took a deep breath. He could hear the rattling of cages and the screeching and trumpeting of the animals on the other side of the door. He opened it just a crack and it suddenly burst open, Carl and Sam tumbling from the housing area, panting and covered in food.

Startled, the two ASPCA representatives jumped away from them.

The Ringmaster was stunned. "What the—"

He looked into the housing area and saw the chimps and monkeys with handfuls of food, flinging it toward the open door. Food covered the walls and floor. The elephants took turns running headfirst into the bars, rocking the cages with a loud and incessant clamor. "Fuck!"

He slammed the door shut and leaned his back against it.

"Mr. Head—" the woman began.

"No," the Ringmaster said, cutting her off. "No. You're not going in there."

"Mr. Head, we're—"

"I'm sorry. But I'm going to have to ask you to leave," the Ringmaster said tersely. "You'll have to come back at another time."

Both of the representatives blinked, confused.

"You know we'll be back," Dave threatened. "We'll be back and this time we'll have a warrant from the Federal Wildlife Organization and we'll have the local authorities with us and the media—"

"Do what you gotta do," the Ringmaster snarled. "You're not going in there. Now leave."

The two of them stomped away in a huff and the Ringmaster followed them as far as the Arena and watched them leave.

He could only hope Safari Joe arrived before they returned.

The animals' cages stood side by side upon the loading dock, neatly lined up along the outside wall of the housing area. For many of the animals, it was the first time they had felt direct sunlight in a long time. One graffiti-covered freight car, seemingly abandoned, squatted in the lot on flat tires, abutting the loading dock. Its shadow pooled directly underneath it and its back doors were latched.

The chimps, monkeys, and elephants who had been moved to the other range quickly reacquainted themselves with the others and the animals shared stories of their resistance. Some of the animals paced nervously in their cages despite the withering heat, pacing to allay fears over their unknown future.

A gentle breeze moved across the parking lot and the elephant, lion and tiger—their cages lined up next to one another—each closed their eyes and tilted their faces toward the sunlight.

The monkey, surveying the world around him, pointed out into the parking lot, a stretch of asphalt with shimmering heat rising from its surface.

"Is that part of the World of the Free?" he asked. "The Savannah?"

The lion chuckled.

"That's part of this world of cages," the lion answered.

"The Savannah is like—it's...it's...soft." He grunted, frustrated. "It's soft like the straw that we had in our cages. Only all the ground is like that. Not hard like this place."

"All soft?" the monkey asked. "That sounds nice."

"Yep," the lion replied. "You can sleep anywhere. Just pull up a nice big piece of the world and stretch out."

He closed his eyes for a brief moment and remembered his world, his mate, his cubs.

"I hope we're on our way," he whispered softly.

"Where's the panther?" the chimp piped up.

"Yeah," the orangutan agreed. "Why do they got us all out here except the panther?"

"I hope they haven't sent him off to another Circus or something," the elephant added. He shook his head despondently. "He's the only one not out here."

"Free the panther!" yelled one of the monkeys, rattling the bars of his cage. "Fuck the Circus!"

That sparked the other monkeys, who joined in the chorus, screeching and rattling the bars of their cages. The chimps and orangutan joined them.

At the mention of the panther, the tiger tilted his nose to the air in an effort to pick up the panther's scent and again relay to the others a report on the panther's status. But as soon as his nostrils began working at the air, he opened his eyes with a start and faced the lion in the next cage.

The lion, in response to the bewildered look on the tiger's face, shook his head sadly, shaggy mane blowing in the breeze.

The tiger rose to his feet and quickly closed the ground between himself and the lion's cage. He leaned up against the bars that separated the two of them. Up and down the line, the primates were continuing their chant.

"Free the panther! Free the panther..."

The tiger whispered low to the lion, "Should we tell the others?"

The lion thought for just a moment. He considered their situation,

"Hey! Hey!" the elephant trumpeted. "Cut the noise!"

The tiger and lion can smell the panther, remember?"

The noise abated and the animals waited. The elephant nodded at the tiger.

"Do you smell him?" the elephant asked, hopefully.

The animals stared at the tiger.

"Well, yeah," the tiger replied, his eyes nervously darting from the lion to the other animals and back to the lion.

"Is he alright?" asked the chimp."

"Is he close by?" asked the monkey.

The tiger stammered, "Well...uh—"

"He's very close," the lion intervened, confidently.

"Very close. His scent is strong."

The monkeys, excited at the good news, erupted again:

"Free the panther! Free the panther!..."

The lion's eyes met the tiger's and something passed between the two of them that the other animals did not notice. The lion again shook his head.

The breeze blew stronger and both animals closed their eyes and tilted their faces to the sun. Neither of them betrayed their deep sadness.

Balls! Balls! Balls!

The Ringmaster paced slowly. One scuffed, dirty boot kicked a popcorn box. The next kicked a crumpled soda cup. He stepped in elephant shit. He didn't care.

His eyes, now accustomed to the darkness, looked out into the empty stands, the rows and rows of empty seats where the spectators normally sat. His world.

He sighed. His feet kicked through the debris. Where did it all go wrong?, he asked himself. What could I have done?

He reached the rim of the center ring, pivoted smoothly, and strolled slowly back in the other direction, one small, small figure in the giant expanse of the Arena.

He shook his head.

"I didn't do anything differently than I've always done it," he muttered to himself. "I didn't do anything different."

He had known from the beginning that something like this could happen. Like all Ringmasters, he had taken pains to prevent it—the training, the process, the programming, the rigid controls, the reinforcement schemes. The same tactics had always worked. He hadn't done anything different.

And yet everything had changed—the animals, the spectators, the Keepers and Trainers, all of them had changed. None of them had acted this way before. They've changed.

I've changed, he thought. I don't feel the same. Like I've lost something. Control? Power? As if they look at me and I'm somehow...smaller.

He sighed again.

"But I didn't do anything any different," he repeated, staring out at the empty stands as if the answer might present itself to him.

It was that goddamned panther, he thought, his face twisting in an angry knot at the thought of the black cat. But it wasn't just the panther; even after the panther had been removed, the other animals continued to act out. Even the chimps...And the new animals, the lion and tiger, they didn't start acting out until after the removal of the panther.

And how do you explain the chimps and elephants in the last act? That was long after the panther had been exiled to the freight car.

"They shit on my canvas," the Ringmaster mumbled.

"And then the bastards kicked it on me."

He looked down at his shit-stained clothes and clenched his jaw.

How could I have authority and control one day but not the next?

He stopped in his tracks.

How?

He shook his head. He had not done anything different than he had always done it, so he could only conclude that this could have happened at any time, on any day, over the course of all these years. It could have happened any day. But it hadn't. It hadn't happened, and he had kept employing all the measures he believed would prevent it, all the measures that seemed to work,

that kept the Circus going. Or so he thought. And each day, each month, each year that went by without disruption, that gnawing fear that it could happen, that it might happen, receded further and further until he had forgotten to be afraid. He had forgotten that it could happen.

And then it happened.

“They shit on my canvas.”

His cell phone chirped in his jacket pocket.

“Greatest Traveling Show,” the Ringmaster greeted with the phone to his cheek. He listened for a moment, his features pinching together and his mouth drawing into an angry sneer. “Now you listen here...”

He waited as the caller spoke. He fumed. His fists balled.

“You goddamn reporters got the fuckin’ animals lovers crawling all over me and you’ve cost me a fortune,” he growled into the phone. “So yeah, I got a comment for you: I’m going to sue your asses! How’s that for a comment?”

He held the phone contemptuously, directly in front of his face.

“Balls! Balls! Balls!” he screamed into it. Then, with all his might, he flung the tiny phone up toward the stands. It sailed for quite a distance before crashing into one of the seats and breaking into pieces.

The Ringmaster slapped the palms of his shit-stained gloves together, satisfied with a job well-done.

“Shove *that* onto your front page.”

The voice came from behind him.

“Hey, Dick.”

The Ringmaster spun. He hadn’t realized anyone was there.

“Maybe this is a bad time,” suggested one of the Trainers, standing with his hands folded in front of his belt buckle. About him were the Keepers and the other Trainers, all standing close together, a small formation of two ranks.

“Shouldn’t you be getting the animals ready?” the Ringmaster asked them, his eyes narrowing.

“We got them all out on the back dock,” Carl spoke up.

“All but the panther. He’s still in the freight car.”

“Good,” the Ringmaster replied. “Load him last.” He eyed Carl hard. “You got that?” Carl nodded.

“Good,” the Ringmaster repeated.

“So Dick,” the Trainer continued, shifting from one foot to the other. “We were all wondering...How’d it go with the ASPCA?”

The Ringmaster studied them for just a moment before he spoke.

“The ASPCA?” The Ringmaster retorted, his eyes and lips narrowing down to hard, straight lines. “The ASPCA?”

He eyed each of them.

“Oh,” he said, clapping once. He smiled knowingly. “I get it. That’s what this is about.”

He nodded. His nostrils flared as he stared at the workers.

“You all think you smell blood in the water,” the Ringmaster proposed. “That’s how it is. You think maybe ol’ Dick’s gone soft, huh?”

He took one step forward.

“Like I’m not in control or something,” he sneered. “Well, let me tell you something. I’m still very much in control.”

His eyes darted over each of them. They all took a subtle step back. The Trainer who had done all the speaking put his hands up in front of himself apologetically. He swallowed hard.

"You see the fuckin' animals fling shit on me and you see the fuckin' mall rats in the goddamned stands throw their fuckin' slushies on me and you see the news reporters and the ASPCA kicking me in the fuckin' pants and now you are getting up the balls to confront me," he said, jabbing himself in the chest with an index finger. "You fuckin' cowards," he pointed. "With your little fuckin' squirrel balls, and you whisper about me in the goddamn break-room?"

"Dick, it's not like that—"

"Don't you 'Dick' me!" The Ringmaster screamed. "And don't you ever forget who signs your paychecks. I do! *I* do!" He jabbed the index finger into his chest again. "And as long as *I* am the one who puts food on your tables, then *I* am the one who worries about fuckin' animals lovers. And don't you ever forget that I'm in charge. *I'm* in charge."

He stood, simmering, his face red and contorted with rage as he panted. None of the Circus workers moved. None of them spoke.

Somewhere close by growled the low grumble of diesel engines and the hissing exhale of brakes. The Ringmaster blinked and then recalled that Safari Joe was expected.

"The trucks," he said, distracted. "The trucks are here."

The Keepers and Trainers turned, relieved at the chance to get away from the Ringmaster. They headed for the back dock.

"Wait," he said. He rubbed his temples with both hands, closing his eyes to get his thoughts together. "You need to load the animals from the back dock into the empty truck that Joe brought before you unload the new animals. Joe already knows. We don't want these animals to have any contact at all with the new ones."

The Trainers and Keepers, ashen face and wide-eyed, all nodded, turned, and hurried away toward the back dock. The Ringmaster eyed them suspiciously as they scurried off.

"Don't you forget who I am," he mumbled at their backs. "I am the Ringmaster."

The two trucks that Joe and his partner had backed in next to the abandoned freight car were still running, the smell of diesel permeating the air. Neither of the drivers got out of the cabs of the trucks but left the Trainers and Keepers to do their work, loading the cages from the dock onto the back of the empty truck. As the two Trainers loaded the last cage of chimps onto the back of the truck, Sam and Carl approached the doors of the abandoned freight car.

"Don't close that yet," Carl yelled over the grumble of the diesel engines.

The Trainers stood poised to close the back doors and latch them. They looked at Carl and Sam curiously.

Sam pointed at the abandoned freight car and said, "We still have to load—"

Suddenly, the truck's horn blew, loud and frantic. The man on the loading dock stopped and turned toward the noise. The Ringmaster stepped out from the housing area, confused.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"The animal lovers are here!" Joe yelled from the cab of the truck. He pointed out the window of his cab, toward the middle of the lot where a minivan and a squad car had just pulled to a halt.

Everyone on the loading dock squinted and shielded their eyes to make out the figures of the two ASPCA representatives who'd visited earlier, along with a policeman who had just stepped from the squad car.

"We gotta go," Joe yelled.

Both trucks slipped into gear and the drivers revved the engines.

Sam and Carl, sensing that the two vehicles were going to pull off, quickly unlatched the door of the abandoned freight car and swung the doors open wide.

"We better hurry," Sam called to Carl.

The trucks began to inch away from the dock.

"Too late," Carl replied.

Instantly, the Ringmaster leapt down from the loading dock and ran up alongside the truck. He grabbed the chrome handle next to the door and jumped up on the running board.

"Wait! Wait!" the Ringmaster yelled. "You gotta let me unload the replacement animals! How will I explain all the missing animals?"

"I'm sorry," Joe replied, his long hair tangled by the wind coming in the truck window. He chewed on the end of a fat cigar. "I can't have these fuckers looking into my business, Dick. You know that. I can't afford it. We'll be back after they're gone. Give me a call."

The truck was picking up speed.

"You can't do this to me!" the Ringmaster screamed.

"Sorry Dick."

Joe's shove sent the Ringmaster tumbling from the running board and rolling onto the pavement with a hard grunt. He got to his feet amidst a cloud of dust and diesel fumes, holes in the elbows and knees of his costume. He waved an angry fist at the departing trucks.

"Fuck!" he screamed.

His top hat rolled crookedly across the pavement and he kicked it. It landed in front of the small throng of people coming towards him, led by the two animal lovers and the police officer. Behind them was a young lady in a skirt and jacket, carrying a microphone, and a guy with a camera resting upon his shoulder.

The camera man didn't see the hat and stepped on it as he trotted to keep up with the others.

The woman with the clipboard smiled smugly as they reached the Ringmaster. The police officer removed his reflective sunglasses with a flourish and extended a piece of paper at him.

"This is your copy, Mr. Head," the officer announced. "It's an official warrant."

The Ringmaster snatched the warrant rudely, balled it, and threw it out into the lot.

"We told you we'd be back," said Dave.

The Ringmaster fumed, the mop of his oily hair hanging down into his face.

He watched them with contempt as they ascended the steps to the loading dock. The guy with the camera on his shoulder made a slow circle and as the camera pointed at the Trainers and the Keepers, they shifted nervously, putting their hands to their faces.

Carl and Sam exchanged a nervous glance, standing next to the open doors of the abandoned freight car. Carl had his hands in his pockets. Sweat rolled down his forehead and cheeks.

He looks guilty, the Ringmaster thought. This stupid bastard looks like he's gotten caught doing something.

The Ringmaster's eyes fell to the swinging open door of the freight car. Then back to Carl. Had they loaded the panther?

Carl's eyes met the Ringmaster's for just a brief moment and Carl looked away. A chill went down the Ringmaster's spine. These dumb fucks had forgotten to get rid of the goddamned panther.

Dave approached Carl and Sam at the doorway of the abandoned freight car.

“We just looked around in there,” he said, pointing at the housing area. “All of the animals are gone. You realize that if there was any abuse, you guys could be charged with obstructing justice if you just helped get rid of the evidence, don’t you?”

Sam and Carl exchanged another nervous glance.

“Don’t tell them shit!” the Ringmaster bellowed from the parking lot.

As quickly as his legs would carry him, he raced up to the loading dock and over to the doorway of the abandoned freight car, just as Dave disappeared inside.

“Don’t say a goddamned thing,” the Ringmaster sneered, grabbing Carl by the front of his shirt. He reached over and grabbed Sam’s shirt also. “Keep your fuckin’ mouths shut!”

Flash. Flash. Flash. The sudden white light from the flashbulb illuminated the darkness inside the freight car, and the Ringmaster squinted and strained to see. With each flash, in just a brief instant, the Ringmaster could see the lines of the bars of a cage and an immobile form, a dark form, laying inside the cage.

“Fuck!” he screamed.

Dave emerged from the freight car, sweat pouring down his ashen face. He waved to the cameraman and the reporter.

“Come quick! You gotta get this!”

His eyes locked with the Ringmaster’s.

“Somebody’s gonna pay for this,” he promised.

The Ringmaster’s mind raced. Who could he blame?

His gaze fell upon Carl and Sam and the two men wilted under his scrutiny. They had been pretty damned good workers, and it was a shame they would have to go down like this, the Ringmaster thought. But they had been responsible for the care of the animals.

He smiled.

Almost as if they had heard his thoughts, both Carl and Sam looked directly at him. Carl reached into his shirt pocket with one hand and pulled out a small tape recorder.

“What the—“

“This tells the whole story,” Carl announced and handed the recorder to the guy in jeans. “Well both be willing to give you a statement.”

Behind them, the camera man and the news reporter rushed into the abandoned freight car to document the story. And that’s when it occurred to the Ringmaster that nobody was calling a veterinarian. Nobody was in a rush to bring food or water to the panther.

He knew right then that the circus was finished. And so was he.

Epilogue: The World of the Free

During the night, after the sudden burst of rain, a mist had settled in low to the ground, while in the moonlight where it meandered across the open expanses—large swaths of sunbaked earth where nothing grew. In the grassy areas, the mist moved around the stalks of weeds and blades of grass, serving sometimes as additional cover for the life that lived there, concealed. Where the grasslands met the denser growth of the jungle, the mist glowed against the darkness of the triplecanopy refuge that shut out even the moonlight.

As the sun rose and the rays of light stretched long shadows across the surface of things, a light breeze caressed the gently swaying long grasses, emerald and yellow, and the light and the breeze melted away much of the moisture from the night before. All the world inhaled deeply, vibrant with life at the birthpangs of the new day.

Everything was alive.

In the tall grasses, a hyena, lean and missing patches of fur, crept quietly, slowly, his movements and scent concealed by the swaying grass and the breeze. But before he could pounce upon his prey, one of the blackbirds that he had intended to devour sensed him and took flight suddenly, provoking all of the others to follow. The flock of them took quickly to the air, flapping frantically, a loud rush of wings, escaping the teeth and claws of the desperate hyena.

They rose up over the grasses and trees, the plush, thick jungle passing below them, their shadows speckling the canopy below until they found a place to glide in and rest for a moment.

Below them, perched in the branches of one of the taller trees, a chimpanzee chewed a mouthful of banana, silently contemplating how the jungle floor lightened, slowly, with the rising of the sun, and eventually to a light gray.

He took another bite.

Not far away, a cluster of monkeys scurried up through the branches of the trees in a panic, shrieking, and the chimpanzee tensed. His senses were alive.

From the corner of his eye, he glimpsed something move below him in the underbrush.

The chimp discarded the banana and clambered quickly up further into the tree.

Suddenly, from the underbrush he saw the head and shaggy mane of a lion emerge, then his powerful front legs and his torso as he moved quietly, searching for food.

The big cat glanced up in the direction of the chimpanzee.

“How’s it going there, Mr. Chimp?” the lion asked.

The chimp exhaled in relief.

“You can’t be sneaking up on me like that,” he replied.

“You made me drop my banana.”

“Ahh, relax. There’s plenty more bananas where that came from,” the lion assured him good-naturedly.

From across the canopy, the monkeys who had fearfully scurried up in the tree earlier swung through the branches to get a bit closer to the action.

“Lots of bananas!” screeched one of the monkeys. “Lots! Lots!”

“Hey, monkey,” the lion greeted from his location in the underbrush. “I see all of you have settled in quite nicely.”

“Yeah! We’re lovin’ it,” the monkey exclaimed.

“No backflips, no tricks, no nonsense,” the chimp said.

“No big cages and little cages. No cages at all. No performing for food. There’s food everywhere.”

“Just reach out and bite somethin’!” the monkey screeched, grinning.

He took his own advice and plucked a ripe mango from the tree he occupied and sank his teeth into it, squirting juice into the air.

From not too far away came the rumbling noise of an engine, a truck rolling across the Savannah, kicking up dust in its wake. All the animals grew still, listening to it pass.

The chimp sighed.

“What the fuck is wrong with them?” the chimp asked, frowning. “You got all this free food, free food everywhere. Everything’s free: water, food, sunlight, air.” He motioned at those things with his hands as he spoke.

“And us. We’re free. Everything’s free. So why do they gotta fuck it up? Why can’t they be free? These fuckin’ weirdos gotta lock up food and toss everybody and themselves into cages. Perform tricks for food. What the fuck?”

“Fuckin’ weirdos!” yelled the monkey around a mouthful of mango.

The lion shrugged.

“You’re the one who thought these creatures were so smart,” the lion reminded the chimp with a grin. “You thought they were special and they knew what they were doing, remember?”

The chimp shook his head.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” he admitted. “Back then I didn’t know any better. I didn’t know there was anything else but cages and tricks for food. But now I know.”

“Every day, I gotta stay on guard and I gotta watch my ass to make sure I don’t get snatched up for lunch. But I tell you what—I think I’d rather have a whole pack of ravenous hyenas chew me to bits before getting caught by those crazy bastards with their world of cages and their tricks-for-food scheme.”

The lion nodded.

There was a pause as each of them thought back to their struggle to get from one world to the other, their long journey to freedom.

“Say, lion. Have you seen the panther?” the chimp asked.

The lion’s features hardened for just a moment. He took in a breath, remembering that last day in the world of the cages when he and the tiger had smelled the panther.

The lion shifted uncomfortably on his feet.

He remembered how the panther had smelled, that familiar odor of the caribou that the lion had hunted and caught, or the smell of a wildebeest after the hyenas had feasted on it.

The lion exhaled.

“Have *you* seen him?” the lion asked the chimp, evasively.

The chimp thought.

“Well, I thought I caught a glimpse of him one night,” the chimp replied. “But I can’t be sure. It was just some movement and then he was gone in the shadows. I could have sworn it was him.”

He shook his head.

"I saw the orangutan," he continued. "I had heard the panther might be over in that area of the watering hole, but I saw the orangutan and he said that he's over at the watering hold all the time and he hadn't seen the panther."

The chimp paused there. He considered the lion.

"What do you make of that?" the chimp asked. "I thought maybe because the panther didn't get loaded up with

all the rest of us that maybe they sent him off to another circus or a zoo. But you hear about others who say they have seen the panther here or there."

The lion nodded. He dropped his gaze and looked away.

The chimp considered the lion for a moment, one hand absently stroking the whiskers on his chin.

"Do you think...," the chimp began, his eyes squinting down tightly. "Do you think that maybe they *killed* him?"

The lion shifted on his feet again, recalling that smell. He had known what that had meant. The tiger had known too.

"What do you think?" the chimp pressed.

The lion looked up and saw the monkey and the chimp leaning forward on their branches, waiting for his answer.

He licked his chops and took a deep breath and said simply:

"The panther lives."

For a moment, the primates searched his face, probing with their eyes, gauging his sincerity and confidence. Then they relaxed satisfied, apparently with his answer.

"The panther lives!" the monkey screeched.

The lion rose to his feet and sniffed at the air for any hint of his next meal.

"Say, lion," the chimp called out. "You remember that Siberian tiger? The one that almost took a bite out of the Ringmaster?"

"Yeah," the lion answered. "They moved him right after I got there, didn't they? Shipped him off to another circus or something?"

"Right," the chimp confirmed. "What do you think ever became of him? Do you think he ever got away from the World of Cages?"

The lion pondered that for a moment, and then shook his head.

"I don't know," he said sadly. "I really don't know."

Thousands of miles away, the early morning sunlight fell upon a tent of red and yellow and blue stripes, a small flag fluttering in the breeze from its center post. Its stands were empty, the arena dark. In the metal, rectangular building abutting the tent, two slope-shouldered men in gray uniforms and black boots stalked between two rows of cages, the captive animals illuminated by the dimly-glowing track lighting hung from the ceiling. With each cage they passed, they grabbed the bars of the doors with one calloused hand and gave them a good tug, the metal rattle echoing off the windowless walls.

Having counted and secured all the cages, they walked from the building letting the door slam shut behind them.

As they awakened the animals began their daily routine, their ritual. They ate from the food dishes in their cages, the food provided to them by their captors in exchange for their performances.

Unenthralled by the morning ritual, a Siberian tiger, intimidatingly large, paced continually in his cage, quickly, angrily. His muscles rippled with each step, his eyes aglow with a kind of silent rage, a ferocity, an intensity. A welter of long scars crisscrossed his back and flanks, a map where his thick fur did not grow.

Again and again he reached the bars, turned and stalked to the other corner of the cage, turning, pacing, turning...

Across from him, a young elephant lazily chewed some leaves while he considered the tiger. Rumors had circulated about this cat ever since he'd arrived. The story had it that he had been a trouble maker somewhere, or maybe a head case. He didn't talk, didn't socialize. He never relaxed. He paced and paced—he was always pacing.

Curiosity got the better of the young elephant, so he swallowed the mouthful of leaves and called across the aisle:

“Hey tiger!”

The tiger raised his angry eyes and met the elephant's.

He kept pacing.

“Why is it you're always pacing that cage?” the elephant asked.

The tiger stopped in his tracks, his shadow pooled under him. With a voice heavy as a bag of gravel and dirty rocks, he answered:

“Because I remember...”

Writers' Note

We have to clear up a few things. Knowing that our readers will probably use their heads for something other than hat racks, we know you have come to one or two forks in the road during the course of reading this story where something maybe didn't seem fully explained; that maybe we passed over something here or there; that we engaged in a bit of shady razzle-dazzle to get beyond a glitch in the writing of this story.

If it seems like that, it's because, well, we did.

We intended that this story would serve as an analogy on several levels. Of course, we have the surface level of things, a general criticism of a culture in which anthropocentric human being believe that everything but humankind is expendable, that the world was put here primarily for us—to use and abuse the way we see fit—and that it's perfectly all right to yank creatures from the wild and get them to behave contrary to their nature just for our entertainment. So, on this level, the animals represent animals.

But consciously, we wanted the circus animals' liberation struggle to parallel that of prisoners against the despotic State and also that of workers against the oppressive system of global capital.

In the metaphor of animals-as-prisoners, the Keepers are symbolic of the guards and other low-level security personnel; the Trainers fit the role of teachers and administrators who maintain the system of so-called “programming” and “schooling” and “rehabilitation”; the Ringmaster represents the wardens and prison directors who exercise authority under the illusion that they hold power;

and, the Spectators are the political constituency whipped into a frenzy by the Ringmaster—the State and its politicians who then opportunistically react to that fabricated frenzy by placating the people with their tough-on-crime scams. Crime control as entertainment.

A symbiotic relationship exists between the people, tricked and deluded, and the State, corrupt and inept.

With the animals-as-exploited worker, the Keepers parallel those reactionary forces within the proletariat who serve their own oppressor (the Ringmaster), to maintain control over the oppressed. They are the Keepers of State-imposed law and order, the protectors of the status quo— from low-level security forces all the way up to the military.

The Trainers fill the role of those who mis-educate and mold the minds of the masses—the teachers, the preachers, the media, and so on. They perpetuate the pathological, anthropocentric ideas upon which rest capitalism, the State, and the Circus.

Ringmaster Dick Head clearly personifies the ruling elite, the bourgeoisie, those who most benefit from the exploitation of the workers.

Finally, the Spectators are the consumers, a crosssection of all the players in society, the engine of the capitalist paradigm, without which capitalism and the State would not exist. In this way, what the panther says about the Ringmaster being a victim of this order of things truly applies to us all, so long as we accept the legitimacy of any of the components of hierarchy or exploitation that are at the basis of our cultural worldview.

In both of our intended metaphors, the representation of different levels of hierarchy are fairly self-evident. The Ringmaster is both the State, the warden, the prison director, as well as the capitalist, the bourgeoisie, the global corporate sweatshop manager. Also in both, the division among the animals—best exemplified by the status of the chimps above the other animals—is an artificial one manufactured by the Ringmaster in order to divide and conquer the animals as a class.

The prisoner can identify with the circus animals, as can the worker who must punch the clock and sell labor to make a living, performing tricks for food. The story is universal in this way.

However, to maintain this universality, we had to limit the animals' resistance to only methods that would be effective *both* in a labor setting *and* in a prison setting. It is for this reason alone, that the animals have confined themselves to strictly *nonviolent* tactics in their effort to get to the World of the Free.

Early on in our planning of this story, we came to a dilemma. We recognized that while violent means would certainly prove effective in settings *outside* of prison, the intensity of repressive potential, the availability of manpower and technologies on the part of the State to suppress violence, and (most importantly) the State's ability to cut off communication of resisting prisoners to outside sympathizers (and thus vilify prisoner resistance), are three factors that doom a violent resistance movement *within* prison. So, in order for our story to remain true to both scenarios—inside and outside prison—we had to confine the animals' resistance to the tactics universal to both situations—nonviolence.

We recognize that the methods of nonviolence appeal to adherents who practice nonviolence exclusively and strictly, as a matter of principle of morality or spirituality—those like Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some proponents of nonviolent direct action, such as Dr. Gene Sharp, author of *The Politics of Nonviolent Action, Volumes 1-3* argue rather persuasively that creative and unconventional tactics of nonviolence pose the most effective and efficient methods for waging war, particularly against an oppressive State. Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall's *A Force More Powerful*, detailing the multitude of successful nonviolent revolutions of the twentieth century seems to buttress that position.

In our case, we are avid supporters of nonviolent direct action when and so long as such methods are practical and effective. However, we also recognize that violent revolutionary activities has certainly lead to success in many, many situations and we are not personally nor politically adverse to the tactics of political violence. While there are great and inspirational souls who believe in the path of exclusive nonviolence on moral grounds, we ain't them.

Objectively, we recognize the effectiveness of modern guerrilla warfare and the *foco* strategy as a primary and essential component to a successful liberation struggle against the forces of global capital and its economic and political organs everywhere. To this end, Mao Tse Tung's *Military Writings*, Robert Taber's *The War of the Flea*, Ernesto "Che" Guevara's *Guerrilla Warfare*, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, and George Jackson's *Blood in my Eye* serve as instruction in politics through the bullet and the bomb. Groups such as the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Weathermen and Weather Underground, and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion de Nacional (EZLN—the Zapatistas) provide historical lessons to this end.

So our exclusion of violent resistance from *Last Act* should not be construed as a rejection, on our part, of violent direct action. We only exclude reference to it, again, for better or worse, for the maintenance of a more universally applicable message.

Beyond the question of the means of struggle, anthropomorphism, attributing human characteristics to animals (and, in this case, using animals to represent a class of people), posed problems for us as well. In many ways the circus animals in their cages, viewed by their captors as commodities to be used, served our analogies quite well. But two glitches arose.

The first, and probably the least obvious to the casual reader, is the difference between *interspecies* and *intraspecies* competition and the implications that this difference has on our story. In simple terms, the problem is this: The animals represent people. People are of the same species. The animals in this story are not.

In the Free World, one group of liberated humans would not be the natural predator of another group of humans and eat them. Yet, some of the animals in this story, particularly the cats, would not have any qualms about eating some of the others.

Considering this, when the animals in the story set aside all differences and work together to defeat a common enemy, they do so behaving as if they are human—as if they are engaged in *intraspecies* cooperation. This is, admittedly, a glitch in the story's continuity, one for which there is no easy solution. Our response, for the sake of maintaining the analogy of the animals to humans, was to ambiguously take a wide berth around this glitch.

We bring up this point for the intellectual and academic purists so that everyone will know we are more hypocrites than idiots. We recognize that, in the World of the Free, humans who have cooperated to destroy oppressive systems would continue cooperation as the method for defending their new state of freedom, whereas some of the animals of various species in our story would see the animals of other species not as allies but as lunch.

In our own defense, we hope the reader will note that while we portray a friendly conversation between a lion and primates in the World of the Free, the primates still have the good sense not to climb down out of the tree.

Further, for clarification, it should be noted that the animal groupings used in this story should not be interpreted to represent our endorsement of ethnic separations, or any concept of racial superiority/inferiority of one segment of human population over/under another. However, we do recognize that racism has played and continues to play an integral role in this oppressive and stratified culture.

Therefore, we felt it important to symbolize the particular and specific circumstances under which many of the descendants of slavery still exist in the U.S. today.

Through the character of the orangutan, his position on the range (occupying the smallest of all cages—all the way at the back of the range) reflects somewhat the status of the majority of African Americans in the U.S. Moreover, his inability to remember the World of the Free due to his mother being snatched from the Free World and him subsequently being born into the circus is analogous to Africans being uprooted from the Motherland, sold into slavery, and forcibly severed from their cultures and roots, as well as the effects that this cultural genocide has wreaked upon their descendants here in Amerika. And, for further clarification, the way in which the orangutan has been portrayed in this story (naive, sheltered, and possibly even timid) is not reflective of African Americans but more reflects the effects that cultural genocide and the repression of slavery have upon any population, and has been more than adequately offset, we think, by the character of the Black Panther.

Far more relevant to a proper understanding of the characters in this story are their experiences of economic class and their assigned role in stratified society. These experiences define,

more than anything, an individual's (and population's) relationship to power and authority and to the processes of oppression, repression, and control.

In the U.S., as the result of the capitalist oppressor's use of slavery for accumulation of mega-profit, the concepts of class and race have been inextricably intertwined in many ways. For the descendants of slavery, it becomes difficult to tell, at times, where class warfare ends and racism begins, and vice versa. We are of the view that if the oppressed unite and topple the fascist system of capital and its hierarchic structures, the elimination of class and authority would also, as an indirect result, eliminate racism as well (or at least kick a fat dent in its active implementation).

In light of our views, we certainly want to dispel any possible interpretation that our story is an analogy in support of an agenda to keep the black man down, or, alternately, to kill whitey. We do not want to kill the Ringmaster because he's white. We want to kill him because he hoards the wealth and abuses the power.

So, in this regard, we are all equally culpable in keeping the Circus going, maintaining the system of inequity upon which the Ringmasters of the world thrive, and we do so because we do not know that we have an alternative. We do not even question whether slavery to an unsustainable system of misery and suffering should require an alternative since we have all bought into the incredible lie that being a circus animal and performing tricks for food is freedom.

As a general maxim, you're only as free as your food.

A second difficulty posed by our use of anthropomorphism revolves around our liberated class getting to the World of the Free. This caused another glitch.

If prisoners resist the warden and refuse to work as slaves and they defeat the system, they have no problem getting to the World of the Free. The World of the Free is all around them, right where they are. When the oppressive system crumbles, they are *in* the World of the Free. The same goes for the workers struggling against the fascist system of global capital. When we all refuse to flip the burgers or pump the gas or pick the cotton, the whole rotten deal goes to hell in a proverbial hand basket. Everyone is free. The World of the Free is made manifest in the here and now. No one needs to get a plane or ticket to Portugal or Bombay in order to reach the World of the Free.

In the words of Abbie Hoffman, "The ground you're standing on is liberated territory. Defend it."

But it isn't so easy for the animals in our story. Once they collapse the circus and effectively subvert the authority of their nemesis, Ringmaster Dick Head, we cannot permit elephants and tigers and chimpanzees to go strolling down the side of the freeway. Because we used circus animals to represent the revolutionary class, we had to have a *place* for them to go—The World of the Free. And that meant creating a mechanism for transporting them there. In the story, that mechanism is Safari Joe, the nefarious trafficker in beasts captured from the wild. Safari Joe is a convenient device for the transition of our characters from the World of Cages to the World of the Free.

In real life, with *people* engaged in resisting, a liberated people are their own Safari Joes and we do not need to go anywhere. In real life, it is the oppressors, like President Fulgencio Batistas, who head out of town, quickly packing suitcases full of cash and hitching flights to Miami to escape the Fidel Castros rushing into Havana with their guerrilla forces.

In practical terms, then, the fascists would need a Safari Joe to assist them in getting the hell out of Dodge. We, the liberating forces, the guerrillas, the people, wouldn't go anywhere.

We hope this explanation remedies any misinterpretations. We have written this afterword to clarify these points, not to advocate the overthrow of governments or the system of international capital through any means necessary, nor have we attempted to direct the reader to those resources that would benefit them in such an endeavor. Advocating the violent overthrow of the government is explicitly illegal and we are, if nothing else (as indicated by our current residence in prison), clearly respectful to law and authority.

All power to the people. Anything else is theft.

Freedom,

Sean Swain and Travis Washington Toledo Correctional Institution

March 1, 2007

About the Writers

Sean Swain has been held captive since 1991 for the self-defense killing of a court official's nephew who broke into Sean's home and threatened to kill him. He was subjected to a trial and re-trial in Erie County, Ohio in which the polygraph he passed was never admitted into evidence.

He has renounced his high school diploma, college degree, and his honorable discharge from the U.S. military. His writings include *Maldoon*; *Kicking the Darkness: The Collected Prison Writings of Sean Swain* (soon available from the Cincinnati Books 4 Prisoners Crew); *Bomb Threat: The Revolutionary Politics of Liberation*; *Shotgun to Your Face: The People in Control are Your Enemies*, and *The Sean Swain Sampler*, all available from the South Chicago ABC Zine Distro.

If he survives captivity, Sean intends to seek asylum in Brazil, Argentina, Cuba Venezuela, Bolivia or the Zapatista-controlled areas of Southern Mexico where he can write freely and continue the struggle against oppressive forces of international capital. His next eligible release date from the fascist police state's control complex is November 2011. Direct correspondence to: Sean Swain A243-205 P.O. Box 80033 Toledo, Ohio 43608

Travis Washington has survived 17 years in Ohio concentration camps for various political acts rejecting the legitimacy of the State—what they call crimes. Three of those years Travis struggled to maintain his sanity at a Supermax facility, allegedly reserved for the most dangerous prisoners, where he saw all too clearly the true face of the oppressive State. He is a self-educated revolutionary writer. Although *Last Act* is his first full-length novel, he has written several short stories and is currently compiling a collection of parables.

He is scheduled for release in June, 2007. His address is to be determined and will be listed when available.

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tions/P.O. Box 4362/Allentown, PA 18105 SOUTH CHICAGO ABC ZINE DISTRO/P.O. BOX 721/
HOMEWOOD, IL 60430

Recommended Reading:

Ishmael, Daniel Quinn

My Ishmael, Daniel Quinn

The ABC of Anarchism, Alexander Berkman

Steal this Book, Abbie Hoffman

Revolutionary Suicide, Huey P. Newton

On Civil Disobedience, Henry David Thoreau

Animal Farm, George Orwell

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Finally, I would also like to thank Mr. Daniel Quinn whose *Ishmael* truly changed my view on the world we live in and inspired me to write this book. Ulery, Cathy L. Bennett, Treeva L. Frames, Marvin Wade, Bruce Sharp, Gary L. Knauer, James N. Peterson, Karen A. Bork, Eleanor S. Yung-hans, Ronald L. Rickenbaugh, Adele M. Hoffman, and Nora J. Caruso for being lackeys of the fascist police state's machine; Judge Ann B. Maschari and Prosecutor Kevin J. Baxter, the Sixth District Court, and federal Judge John W. Potter for the lessons in injustice; the Department of Corrections for the lessons in injustice; the Department of Corrections for the lessons in violence; the Corrections Institution Inspection Committee for lessons in apathy; and the U.S. Army for all of its extensive training.

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