

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.

"Yes," 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?"



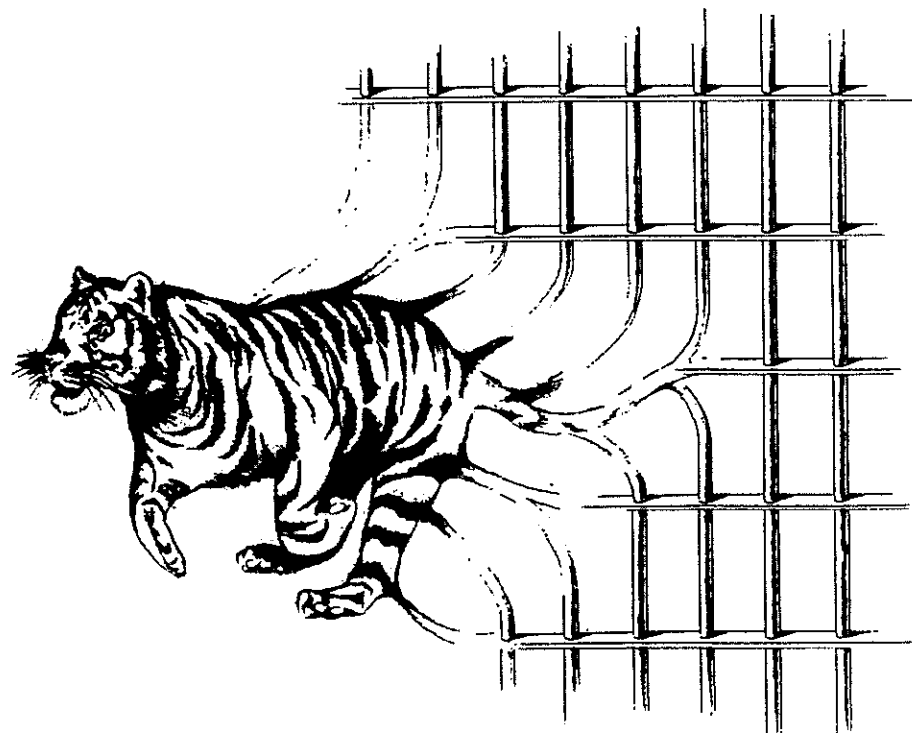
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The Panther looked around at the animals and said:

"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. 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.

## The Last Act of the Circus Animals



A story for children of all ages

Book 1

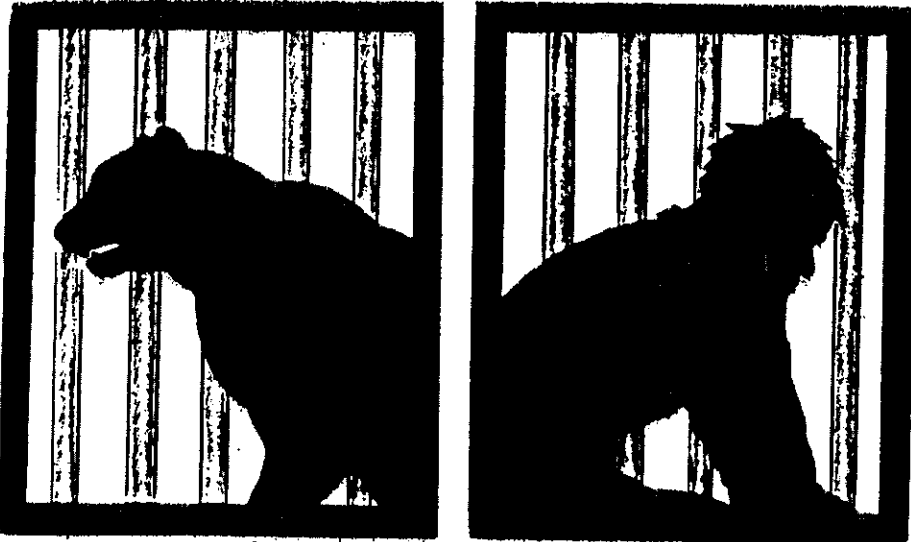
By Travis Washington and Sean Swain

## 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*



Hyuns-Rae 2007

"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

it serve to be physically unencumbered if your mind is still in a cage? 31

"Freedom is a *decision*, one that you as individuals 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."

"Yes 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?"

"Yes! That is exactly what it is, Mr. Orangutan. It's saying *no* to those things you do not want to do and saying *yes* 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 one 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 on 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. Yes, 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.

"Yes, I understand," said the tiger that 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.

"Well, what is it that we have to do?" the monkey asked impatiently. 30

"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.

"Yes! 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 this now. The enemy, however divided and fractionalized 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 start realizing 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 sell us small amounts of the freedom that is our birthright, a walk in a bigger cage, in exchange for just a little more of our souls. That it is he who withholds food, one of our most basic needs, and uses it 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.

"Yes! The first thing we must do in order to have a chance at seeing the Free World is we all must see the Ringmaster for who he is, we must see the Circus for what it is and know that it is not our home; that these cages are not our cages. 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 must 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

## "I Remember..."

3

There was once a young, black panther who had been captured from the wild and brought to the Circus where he was to be trained to perform stunts and tricks. Early on, the Ringmaster noticed that this was a stubborn animal, for 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 had grown 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 that 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 suspending 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?" asked the tiger.

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:

4  
"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."

"Yes, 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 yes, at one time he was a lion," said the panther. "Yes! 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 Masters' 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, and more out of cage time. 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?"

"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?"

29  
"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 that the tiger was dying, 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 to 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 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 gorillas. 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. "So you see, I realized a long time ago that my fate is tied to yours. Yes, my friends. There is one way that all of us have a chance of reaching the World of the Free."

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

28

"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 the animals' 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 would seem 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."

"Yes," 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 the 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, purr bitch!"

"Oh! You want to growl and be big bad tiger now. But you 'Meow' like motherfucka when the Master tells 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 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. "Yes, the Ringmaster killed him. For awhile he was the star attraction. And during that time he enjoyed the relative benefits that came 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 as the Lion in his eyes grew dimmer and dimmer until there was no Lion left there. 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 so the Ringmaster withdrew his favor. He threw him back in that small cage and never let him perform again. Yes! 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 ri

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 Circus Elephant. I have spent my whole life here. This is my home."

"Well, Mr. Elephant, what if I told you that 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.

Perceiving an attack on his memory, 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 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. You, like me, the lion over there, and many of the rest of 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 that 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.

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 that 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."

"Yes," the panther agreed with a nod. "Yes. 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 if I just 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 mention the tiger on occasion, sighing or saying something disparaging about that crazy fool of a tiger. 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.

"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."

26

"Let me guess—you've seen that fail?" the chimp asked, peeling another banana.

"Yes," 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.

"Yes. 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 was 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 laid 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 of reality between the durations when the Long Sleep would overtake me."

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

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

"And Mr. Tiger has there ever been a time when the Ringmaster cracked 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 v Freedom really means!" The panther exclaimed, considering each animal could see from the cage.

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

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

"So, you all ask me why I pace? It is because I do not like this world. It because this is not where I am supposed to be. It is because *I remember wher came from*; because *I remember that I am Panther*, and Panther does not belc here. It is because I remember the lion. And I remember that as long as he v pacing, he too remembered that he was Lion. He remembered the World of Free, and that memory kept him alive."

"You ask why I do not sit down and *relax*? It is because *I do not want forget* that I am Panther. It is because I do not want to die like the lion did ye ago. For the moment he stopped clawing at the bars that held him captive. *I moment he stopped pacing*, was the moment that he forgot that he was Lio 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..."

8

After the Panther had finished speaking silence prevailed, for all the animals had begun contemplating upon 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:

"Yes, 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. Yes, 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."

"Yes! Yes!" 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."

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

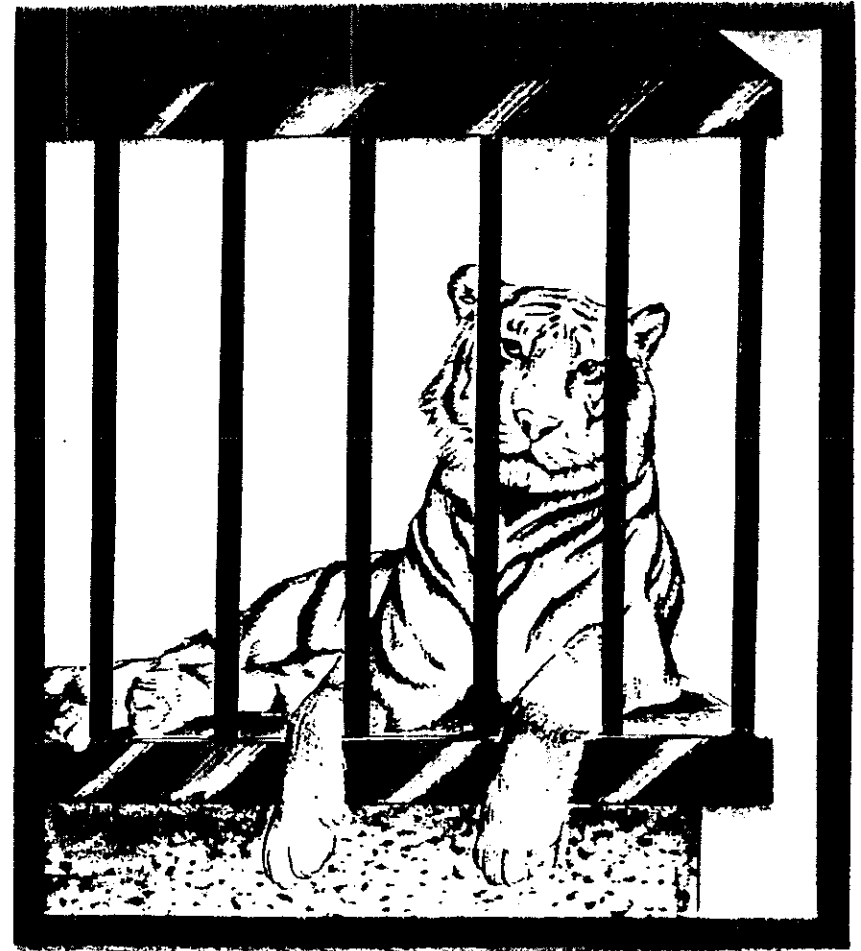
Ever since the panther had spoken about the World of the Free, the chimps had fallen silent. For, although they found many attractive things about this world the Panther had described, they felt that they had lived quite well here at the Circus, compared to the other animals, and weren't that eager to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

"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 aint 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



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!*"

H. R. R. R.

25



"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!" 29

"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 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 pacing 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.

"Yes! Yes!" 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.

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 and 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 like 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, the implication being 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. Yet and still, by setting you apart from the rest of us and showering you with all the comforts of the Circus, he creates conditions for 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

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 out 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 on what the panther had said. Just then, a distinct jingling sound 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 came in and 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 an aggravating 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

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 the elephant's tusks, and he was dying. In one desperate attempt, he charged 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." 23

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?"

"Yes," the panther answered. "But it 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?"

"Yes," 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 dependently, 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"

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. 22

"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 sprung 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 in his powerful clutches 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 then ran and I thought that the Keeper 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 in order 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,

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 way before any of you. So, as far as I'm concerned, this big cage is about as free as 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 won't 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 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—hopefully sooner than later. Because then and only then will you have a chance at becoming free. As I 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."

"Shit—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 the 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 may be afforded 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.

12

"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 was to have any chance of getting out of this madness, I would have to continue to go 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.

"Yes! 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

"One monkey don't stop no show..."

21

"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 yes! 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 that there was no way to escape, I considered violence."

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

"Yes," 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

...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."

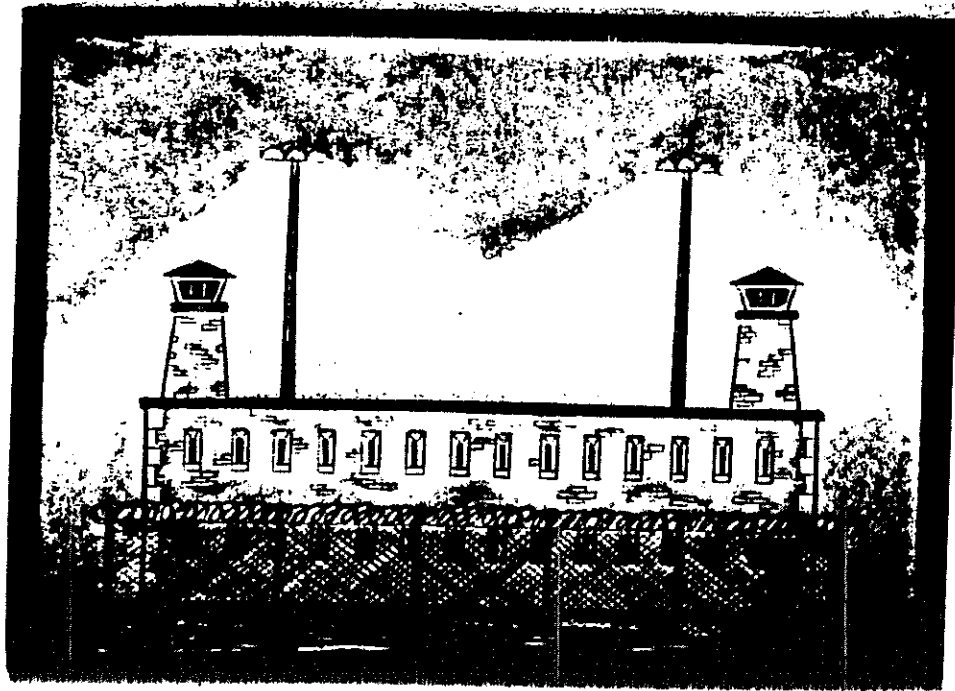
"Yes! We have all been performing tricks for food," the panther pointed out. "The clowns perform for food. The Trainers and Keepers obey the Ringmaster and do as they are told or they do not eat. The Ringmaster pleases the crowd or he does not eat. As I have said, it is a whole system based on working 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.

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

20



Myung-Rae Park

recognized as fear.

"At first I thought that he just might actually be genuinely concerned for me. But it wasn't long before I realized that that was far from the truth. After a while, 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 back 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 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 while these creatures came for us, 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 put 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 would withhold food from me when I didn't obey; how he made 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. I remembered '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 Arena. I recognized this as payment of some kind. Yes! 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—Hunger! 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!"

"Yes! And food was the common denominator. Hunger tied it all together and 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. They were coming to see us, and they were paying the Ringmaster to put or

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!*"

14

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 like these creatures like living in cages and paying for food. They like it so much in fact that they've built a system based 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 findings to the other animals. I would have to warn them of the Ringmaster's intentions. I would have to show them that there was 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. I soon came to realize that I had gravely misjudged this bunch. Moreover, 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.

"But 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

panther's. The panther nodded at the lion in acknowledgment and then looked away. The tiger offered the lion some encouragement.

19

"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 up momentarily, his glassy eyes 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. "Yes," 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 that 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 back flips. 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!"

ADD 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*."

"Yes," 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 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 un-free," 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 and 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

18  
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 and 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, yes," 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 how he uses these and other manipulations to control us. 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 go 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 out to the Arena and submitted to the Trainers so I could find some way to escape. And I told you that while Mr. Lic was seeking his fifteen minutes of fame, I was learning about the nature of the Circus," the panther recounted. "Well, one of the first things 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?"

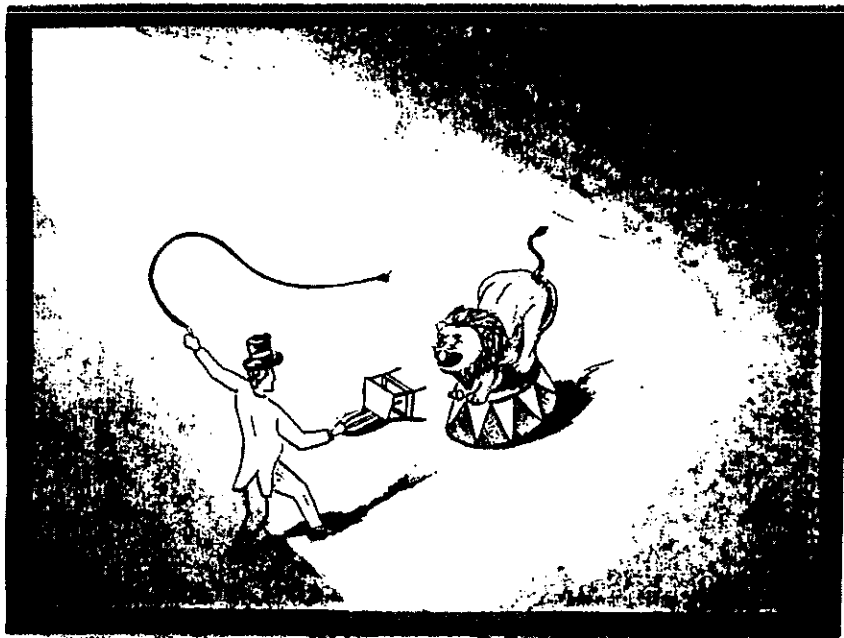
The chimp thought.

"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 fuckin' 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."

"Yes," the panther agreed. "And that is universal. It is 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 back flips! I never would have learned back flips 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 are 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."