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The Last Act of the Circus Animals



A story for children of all ages

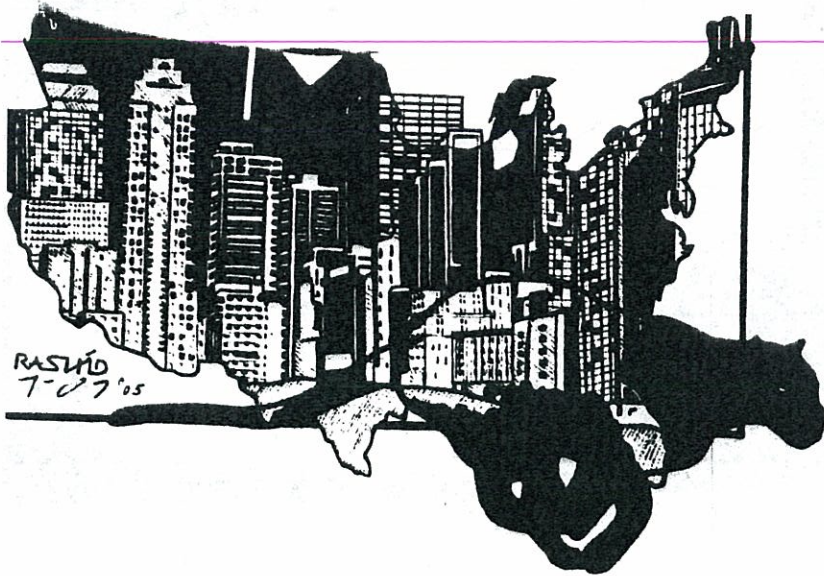
Book 3

By Travis Washington and Sean Swain

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

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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 Davis Thoreau

Animal Farm, George Orwell

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 of 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 in 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.

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Travis Washington has survived 17 years in Ohio concentration camps for various political acts of 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.

"...Welcome to the Greatest Traveling Show in the World!"

Hours later, the Ringmaster trotted out to center ring in his unpolished boots, his best cheesy grin spread across his face. The pipe organ blared and spotlights danced across the ring floor. He held his cane in one dingy glove, his battered top hat in the other. He bowed low to the cheering crowd, his straightened, proud and confident, his arms spread wide above the stained velvet of his jacket. He saw more empty seats than he remembered seeing at any of his previous shows. The Goddamned newspapers were killing him. The papers, these spoiled, stubborn animals. But that was all about to change.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, children of all ages, welcome to the Greatest Traveling Show in the World!" he announced with bravado, the crowd responding by showering him with adulation.

He turned and lifted his arms, a signal for the Keepers. Out came the elephants all in a 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, yellow tassels bouncing with each of the elephants' plodding steps. An 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 be performing back flips on the backs of the elephants, smiling, waving to the crowd. Instead, they sat somber and business-like, stoic-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 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 spread contagiously throughout the entire crowd. The Ringmaster did not 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 and mortified.

The elephants were standing upon their hind legs and relieving themselves tandem, large clumps of elephant dung falling to the canvas in smelly, steaming piles.

Each of the Trainers, standing in a circle about the animals, 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 pill-box 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 their 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 upon the Ringmaster who swung his cane wildly, and attempted to duck the barrage of animal poop. With 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, that is, until 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.

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 first topple the fascist system of capital and its hierarchic structures, the elimination of class and of authority would also, as an indirect result, eliminate racism as well (or at least kick a fatal 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 President Fulgencio Batistas, the oppressors, quickly packing suitcases full of cash and hitching flights to Miami to escape the Fidel Castros rushing into Havana with their guerilla 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 guerillas, the people, wouldn't go anywhere.

We have this mechanism...

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 (naïve, sheltered, and possibly even timid) is not reflective of African Americans but reflects, *moreso*, 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,

The elephants slowly turned toward the exit and plodded over to the tapestry. 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 golds and reds.

The incensed audience responded with boos and obscenities and fists waved as the elephants sauntered away, nose to tail, back the way they had come, 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 the spotlight staring at the elephant dung in heaps and the clothing discarded trash.

It was impossible. He had separated them from that damned panther. He divided them. He had turned off the air and had taken their food and water straw. He had deprived them of sleep. He had beaten them at random. He tortured them with the food in front of their cages—had employed just at 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 last remaining smile that he could muster and he announced to the crowd that the remainder of the show was cancelled.

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 of 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 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 onto the front bars of his cage. "Tell 'em how you kicked it into the crowd and they 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 the crowd to the 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 it should be.

He looked around now and saw all the animals cackling and howling, looking at 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 impotence in kicking the bars 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, and only issued the 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

sweatshop manager. Also in both, the division among the animals—best exemplified by the status of the chimps above the "lower" 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 the prisoner resistance), would pose as 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 or morality or spirituality—those like Mohandas Ghandi 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 would seem 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 certainly lead to success in many, many situations and we are not personally nor politically averse 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 aim them.

Objectively, we recognize the effectiveness of modern guerilla 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 *Guerilla 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.

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 as characters)

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 we live where anthropocentric human beings believe 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 instance of animals representing prisoners, the Keepers are symbolic of the guards and the 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 respect to the animals representing the exploited worker, the Keepers parallel those reactionary forces within the Proletariat who serve their own oppressor (the Ringmaster) in maintaining control over the oppressed. They are the Keepers of the 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 capitalism, the State, and the Circus rest.

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 cross-section 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 at the basis of our cultural worldview.

In both of our intended analogies, the representations 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

the range, and all over the Ringmaster.

Bewildered, the Ringmaster took a step back from the cages, brushing debris from his clothes. The animals erupted in howls and screeching, and two cats joined the chorus.

"They got to these two," the Ringmaster muttered. "They all gotta go! All 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 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, sooner the 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 track. Bright sunlight poured into the building, blinding Sam and Carl for a moment as 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 amidst 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 and unbroken. Free.

He was about to lower his head again when he caught the scent of 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 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

"Say, lion," the chimp called out. "You remember that big 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 down between two rows of cages, the captive animals illuminated by the dimly-glowing track lighting that 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.

The animals, as they awakened, began their daily routine, their ritual. They ate from the food dishes in their cages, consuming the food provided to them by their captors in exchange for their performances.

A Siberian tiger, intimidatingly large, paced diagonally across his cage, quickly, angrily. His muscles rippled with each step, his eyes aglow with a kind of silent rage, a ferocity, an intensity. Long, weltering scars criss-crossed his back and flanks, a map of roads where the thick fur that covered him everywhere else did not grow.

He was not enthralled in the morning ritual.

As he would reach the bars, he would turn and stalk to the other corner of the cage, turning again, pacing, turning....

Across from him, a young elephant lazily chewed some leaves as 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.

But, curiosity getting the better of the young elephant, 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..."



"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 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 wild beast 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 hole 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.

pumps from landing upon the multitude of litter and dried elephant dung.

"We've gotten some calls that the animals here at your circus have been behaving...*oddy*," she said.

The Ringmaster nodded, his face still frozen with the same smile.

"Yes, well, nothing we can't handle," the Ringmaster responded as warmly 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. "We've received several reports of abuse, Mr. Head. People calling over the 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 promptly thumbing 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."

"Certainly," he answered with a chuckle. "And please, call me Dick."

"I'll take you back there now. But is the camera really necessary?"

Dave shrugged.

"Just procedure," he answered with a grin.

The Ringmaster grinned back in an effort to hide 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 gets bad," the Ringmaster offered.

Neither of the ASPCA representatives responded.

Howls and screeches and trumpeting punctuated with the rattle of reverberated into the hallway. The Ringmaster wiped the sweat from his forehead onto the forearm of his jacket, 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 the animals howled and screeched, the primates rattling the cage doors. A monkey grinned at the Ringmaster while urinating, the stream of liquid 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 bodies if he let them walk into a full-scale riot situation with primates piss over the place. He could imagine the conclusions they'd draw.

He quickly slammed the door shut and turned to face the two animals looking in.

"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.

82 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." 10

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.

The two ASPCA representatives jumped back away from them, startled. 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 up 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 an empty tire, abutting the loading dock, its shadow pooled directly underneath it. Its back doors were latched.

91 He took another bite. 19

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 noticed something move below him in the underbrush.

The chimp discarded the banana and clambered quickly up further into the tree. Suddenly, from the underbrush below 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 that 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 back flips, 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 he 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."

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. "We'll 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, white in the moonlight where it meandered across the open expanses, large swaths of sun-baked earth where nothing grew. In the grassy areas, the mist moved around the bases of the weeds and stalks 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 triple-canopy refuge that shut out even the moonlight.

As the sun rose on the horizon and the rays of light stretched long shadows across the surface of things, a light breeze caressed the long grasses, emerald and yellow, swaying gently, and the light and the breeze melted away much of the mist from the night before. All the world inhaled deeply, vibrant with life at the first birth-pangs 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 his 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, and 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 roof of the canopy below until they found a place to glide in and come to rest for a moment.

Below them, perched in the branches of one of the taller trees, a chimpanzee chewed a mouthful of banana, silently watching and contemplating how the jungle floor lightened, slowly, with the rising of the sun, and eventually to a light gray.

The chimps, monkeys, and elephants who had been moved to the other ra quickly reacquainted themselves with the others and the animals shared sto of their resistance. Some of the animals paced nervously in their cages des the withering heat, pacing to allay fears over their unknown future.

A gentle, refreshing breeze moved across the parking lot. As it blew, t elephant, lion, and tiger, their cages lined up next to one another, each clos their eyes and tilted their faces toward the sunlight.

The monkey, surveying the world around him, pointed out into the parking l the stretch of asphalt with shimmering heat rays 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 like—it's...it's...soft." He grunted, frustrated. "It's soft like the straw that 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 pie of the world and stretch out."

He closed his eyes for a brief moment and remembered his world, his mate, l 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 t panther?"

"I hope they haven't sent him off to another Circus or something," the elepha 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 ca "Fuck the Circus!"

That sparked the other monkeys who joined in the chorus, screeching a rattling the bars of their cages. The chimps and orangutan joined them.

"Free the panther! Free the panther!..."

At the mention of the panther, the tiger tilted his nose to the air in an effort pick up the panther's scent and again relay to the others a report on the status the panther. But as soon as his nostrils began working at the air, he opened l eyes with a start and turned to face the lion in the next cage.

The lion, in response to the bewildered look on the tiger's face, shook his he sadly, his shaggy mane blowing in the breeze.

The tiger rose to his feet and quickly closed the ground between himself a the lion's cage. He leaned up against the bars that separated the two of them. l 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 c both 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 her 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 interceded, confidently. "Very close. His scent is rong."

The monkeys, excited at the good news, erupted again:



New Black Panther Party - Prison Chapter

"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.

"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.

The group of them walked past him and his eyes followed 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

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 men 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, out 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 of 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 gave the Ringmaster a gentle shove and sent him tumbling from the running board, 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 clothing. He waved and angry fist at the departing trucks.

"Fuck!" he screamed.

His top hat rolled crookedly on its side across the pavement and he gave it a good kick, sending it flying into the air. 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 cameraman 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.

The Ringmaster paced slowly, his hands behind the velvet of his jacket. One scuffed, dirty boot kicked a popcorn box. The next kicked a soda cup rolled over on its side. 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, turned on a smooth pivot, and slowly strolled back into 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 always known from the beginning that something like this could happen. Like all Ringmasters, he had taken the 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, snarling, 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 bastard flung it on me."

He looked down at his shit-stained clothes and clenched his jaw.

How is it I could have authority and control one day but not the next?

He stopped in his tracks.

How is it?

He shook his head. He had not done anything different than he had always done it, so he could only conclude that his 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 prevented it, all the measures that seemed to work, that kept the Circu

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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 up 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 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?"

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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, 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 to arrive.

"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 faced and wide-eyed, all nodded, turned, and hurried away toward in the direction of 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.