

Jon Fain
Big Top

For a time, when he was six or so, he liked to imagine himself in a cage with big cats. He had seen such a man as he would like to become at the circus earlier that summer, and begged his parents, his mother especially, to take him again.

The second time (it was just him and her) he waited impatiently through the ringmaster leading the parade of jugglers and horses, elephants with the trapeze girls riding them, clowns climbing out of their tiny car and honking ah-ooga horns. Up above, a woman spun from a wire, holding on with her teeth. A man in a jumpsuit and helmet got shot out of a cannon and flew spread-eagled into a net. The clowns returned, this time with excitable dogs in hats and spangled sweaters, who went leap-frogging over each other, back and forth, as if erasing where they'd been.

When finally the moment arrived, he focused until his head hurt on the faint deep voice, the charged but calm sounds that drifted up to where he and his mother sat and watched the simple, yet commanding gestures that the man in the cage made. Around him it was all lions perched on their round stools until they let the intruder in—an albino tiger, a lean, powerful, pawed villain, white with black stripes. The lions roared as the long-haired man walked back and forth among them, spoke to them, cracked his whip. A hush fell over the audience as the tiger paced and twitched his tail. The man turned his back.

Watching from his seat, holding his mother's hand, his anxiety grew in spite of the fact he'd seen it before and knew what was going to happen next. As before, the biggest male lion with the largest mane jumped down to the ground and though he clearly didn't like it, slinked away, and let the tiger take his place. When the man in the cage got all the cats up on their hindquarters, pedaling the air with their fore paws, it was the audience that roared.

Chills ran through him. But seeing it again this time the boy wondered—blinking against the bright lights, smelling sawdust and popcorn and cotton candy and animal, hearing the excited human voices—when exactly, which performance had it been, that the lion realized he'd been fooled.