

# Out of the Circus

*Should circuses stop using animals for entertainment?*

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## Some friendships start in strange places

*The narrator works in a circus. He arrives in Chicago in the 1930s.*

The train approaches Chicago in the late afternoon. Despite my pounding head and aching body<sup>1</sup>, I stand in the open door of the stock car<sup>2</sup> craning my neck to get a good look. After all, this is the city of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, of jazz, gangsters, and speakeasies.

5 I can see a handful of tall buildings in the distance, and just as I'm trying to make out which one of them is the fabled Allerton we reach the stockyards<sup>3</sup>. There are miles of them, and we slow to a crawl as we pass. The buildings are flat and ugly, and the pens<sup>4</sup>, crammed<sup>5</sup> with panicked, lowing cattle<sup>6</sup> and filthy, snuffing pigs, butt right up against the tracks. But that is nothing compared to the noises and smells coming from the buildings: within minutes the bloody stench<sup>7</sup> and piercing shrieks send me flying back to the goat  
10 room to press my nose against the mildewed horse blanket — anything to replace the smell of death.

My stomach is fragile enough that even though the lot is well beyond the stockyards, I stay inside the stock car until everything's been set up. Afterward, seeking the company of animals, I enter the menagerie and tour the perimeter.

15 It's impossible to describe how tenderly I suddenly feel toward them — hyenas, camels, and all. Even the polar bear, who sits on his backside chewing his four-inch claws<sup>8</sup> with his four-inch teeth. A love for these animals wells up in me suddenly, a flash flood, and there it is, solid as an obelisk and viscous as water.

20 My father felt it his duty to continue to treat animals long after he stopped getting paid. He couldn't stand by and watch a horse colic or a cow labor with a breech calf even though it meant personal ruin. The parallel is undeniable. There is no question that I am the only thing standing between these animals and the business practices of August and Uncle Al, and what my father would do — what my father would want *me* to do — is look after them, and I am filled with that absolute and unwavering conviction. No matter what I did last night, I cannot leave these animals. I am their shepherd<sup>9</sup>, their protector. And it's more than a duty. It's a covenant<sup>10</sup> with my father.

One of the chimps needs a cuddle, so I let him ride on my hip as I make my way around the tent. I reach a wide empty spot, and realize it's for the elephant. August must be having trouble getting her out of her car. If I were feeling at all kindly toward him, I'd see if I could help. But I'm not.

"Hey, Doc," says Pete. "Otis thinks one of the giraffes has a cold. You wanna take a look?"

5 "Sure," I say.

"Come on, Bobo," says Pete, reaching for the chimp. The chimp's hairy arms and legs tighten around me.

"Come on now," I say, trying to pluck his arms free. "I'll come back."

Bobo moves not a muscle.

"Come on now," I say.

10 Nothing.

"All right. One last hug and that's it," I say, pressing my face against his dark fur.

The chimp flashes a toothy smile and kisses me on the cheek. Then he climbs down, slips his hand inside Pete's, and ambles off on bowed legs.

*Water for Elephants*, Sara Gruen, 2006

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<sup>1</sup> **aching** — *douloureux/euse*

<sup>2</sup> **a stock car** — *un wagon à bestiaux*

<sup>3</sup> **a stockyard** — *a place where cattle, sheep etc are kept before being taken to a market and sold*

<sup>4</sup> **a pen** — *un enclos*

<sup>5</sup> **crammed** — *plein(e) à craquer*

<sup>6</sup> **cattle** — *le bétail*

<sup>7</sup> **a stench** — a bad smell

<sup>8</sup> **a claw** — an animal's nail

<sup>9</sup> **a shepherd** — *un berger*

<sup>10</sup> **a covenant** — a moral agreement