

Leo Rising

“My name’s Leo, and I’ll buy you a drink.”

I said, “No thanks on the drink, but I’m glad to meet you. My name is Jason.” I offered my hand, but he turned to signal the waitress. When she started toward us, he turned to face me again. Gold hair. Craggy face, shaggy brows, golden beard growing high on his cheeks.

“No drink, Jason?”

“No. Thanks for the offer, but I just came in for the music.”

“Don’t you drink?”

“No.”

“Huh. What about that? Do you give lessons? No, no, I’m not making fun of you. I’m about half drunk and more than a little serious. I’m trying to get a control on it, get a little buzz going okay, but don’t get drunk. Getting drunk really lays the boom on me.”

He ordered another drink. “It’s harder and harder to pull back up out of hangovers. They nearly destroy me. I’m set up here. The barmaid and I have a deal, four drinks and out the door. That helps. But if I run into a friend who invites me over, if he offers me something to drink, I’ll keep drinking as long as he keeps offering.”

He drank and choked on his drink. He coughed and coughed again, a sound that started deep in his chest and reverberated into the room and startled several of us. A man with grey hair, in a grey suit, peered at us and then spoke loudly, “Ladies and gentlemen. Leo is going to roar for us. Come Leo, out with a good, full-bodied roar.”

A woman stepped forward. “Harold, shut up. You’re drunk.”

“Well, you heard him. He’s getting ready to roar. He was just getting ready, sort of clearing his throat. It’s just like the old days. This young man is new here, and he hasn’t met Leo before, and Leo was going to give him an old-time demonstration. Weren’t you Leo? Wasn’t he, young man?”

Leo said, “Harold, the old days are gone. I didn’t mean to do that. I choked on my drink, and I couldn’t help coughing.”

The strange shape of the pupils of Leo's eyes made sense to me then.

Harold rocked on his feet, looked at Leo and then at me. "Oh, I see. Oh dear. I blew your cover. This young man just met you, and he didn't know, and you were just sitting here having a man-to-man conversation. So now he's beginning to realize, to look at you again, more sharply."

I said, "It doesn't matter, except it probably has something to do with what we were talking about."

"And what was that? What were you and Leo talking about?"

Leo said, "Drinking too much. We were talking about people who drink too much."

"People? Just people? Don't you drink a little much yourself, Leo?"

"Harold, go sit down."

"Yes, Harold, come back and sit down and leave them alone. They don't need you, and you're quite drunk, you know."

"Well, if they're talking about drinking too much, then they do need me, because I know a lot about it." Over all protests, Harold came forward, pulled out a chair and started to sit down.

Then Leo did roar and shook the building. Harold tipped his chair over backward and rolled out of it away from us. People screamed and tried to see what was happening. Harold crawled away into the crowd. "He did roar. I'd forgotten just how powerful that roar is. My goodness and holy shit. He did roar. I believe he's quite sobered me up. He did roar after all this time."

Leo said, "I'm sorry, Jason. I just couldn't take Harold anymore. Listen Jason, I got to go. People are going to settle out of being startled. Then they're going to get mad. They're going to come down on me. It's a nice night out. If you'd like to go along with me, we could talk."

We walked out into the night and walked together down the concrete hill. Leo said, "A place where people get together to drink is a bad place for me to be, because sometime in the evening, someone will focus on me and start talking about what they see. These days, I go early, have my drinks, and leave. I was about to leave when you came over and sat down."

“When I first started drinking, I didn’t know what it would do to me until I was stretched out on the floor. Then people thought it was funny to get me drunk. I didn’t know anything about turning down a drink.

“Then I got to where I thought it was funny to get drunk. I’d get drunk and take off my clothes and leap around and roar. All the other drunks would go ‘Ohh, and oooohh,’ and ‘Leo, oh my.’

“Makes me ashamed to think of it now, trying for that kind of glory. So I read, if you want to stop drinking, don’t associate with people who drink. But that would be hard. All my friends drink. Except Ernie. You’re the first person I’ve met in a long time who doesn’t drink.”

“You aren’t likely to meet non-drinkers in a bar.”

“I know. Habit’s got me there. I don’t know of anyplace to go to meet people.”

“You could try some Christian organizations. Not many drinkers there.”

“What? Sarcasm from you, Jason? The Christians and the lion?”

“I didn’t think of it that way. You don’t have to think of it that way. Only lions held captive by the Romans ate Christians. Most Christians will probably know that.”

“That would take some thought. But that’s what I need to do. I need to think my way out of what I’ve been trying to drink my way out of.”

“What are you trying to drink your way out of?”

He had been walking rapidly, so I was hard put to keep up without running, but now he drooped and slowed down. “Right now, I’m having trouble paying my own way, that’s part of it. I haven’t worked for five months, only a few penny-ante jobs in the past year and a half.”

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m a lion. That’s what I’ve always done for money. I was captured in Africa when I was a cub. I think my mother and father and my brothers and sisters-- well, the men grabbed me, and there was a lot of shooting. I’m the only lion they took.”

We walked in silence to the corner and stood under the street lamp. He pointed at the street sign. “Six years ago, I came by here

in a parade. I hired on with a circus for a while in the lion act. Two dollars a day and board and room. But I didn't stay long. The whole show was too primitive.

"When I first got over here, I went to a wild animal act. I was young and smart and cooperative. I didn't hold what other men had done against the people I worked with. I wanted to learn the language. People helped me."

"Sounds good."

"It was good. It worked out okay for a while. Well, from here, I don't know where to go. What are you doing tonight? We could head down the hill, have coffee downtown. Or we could head up this way and go to my place. Ernie'll be there. He rarely goes out. He'd join in this conversation."

"Let's go to your place then. I don't care about coffee."

"Good. This way." We walked up the hill. Most of the people in the city were settling for the night.

"What happened to the wild animal act?"

"Went broke. The trainer's wife cheated on him, and she went at it as a big spender. There wasn't enough money to keep her going and the act going. Claude shot himself in an alley behind a bar in Klamath Falls, Oregon six months after the act folded. I read about it in the papers.

"I got work in children's stories for a while. That was good living. I was working. Ernie was working. The rent was paid, cupboards full, and both of us had money in the bank. I liked the work, too. Some of the clothes, they felt funny, shorts with suspenders and patent pumps, but if a good fitter put them together right, so I could move, they were okay. That's good work, cause the work's clean. I've been offered violent work and dirty work, and I wanted money, but I'd sit in the gutter and starve before I'd do that.

"I had about two dozen good jobs in about eight years, plenty to go on, enough time off. The last job I had, I really liked that job. I didn't have to dress up in clothes. I was the tawny scrawny lion. I'd eat a giraffe one day and a zebra the next.

"I didn't really eat them, you know, but we said I did. I chased them through the book and yelled at them. I said if they didn't run so hard, maybe I wouldn't need to eat so many of them, and

maybe I wouldn't be so skinny. I had to chase them so much I kept getting skinnier. That role, I really got into it. Skin and bones. I dropped a hundred pounds getting ready. I really roared. Hair standing out all over, and I really screamed at the other animals.

"One day I went home from work, and I was still caught up in the hungry, wild animal role, pacing around and kind of jumpy. Ernie was reading the paper, and he looked over it at me and said, 'What'd you do today, Leo?'

"I roared, 'Today's Saturday. I eat elephants on Saturdays,' without really thinking about it, because that's the way the book goes. Saturdays, the tawny scrawny lion eats elephants. Ernie folded his paper and put it down. Then he took his glasses off and laid them on the coffee table. No way he could go but walk right by me to leave of the room.

"I watched him trying and trying not to do it, but he shuddered as he went by. Then he bolted out of the room and shut and locked the door. I heard him moving furniture up against the door. I almost ruined my stomach muscles trying to keep the insane laughter that was pouring out quiet enough that he wouldn't hear it, but after he moved the stuff, it was quiet, and I couldn't stop giggling, and Ernie said, 'Leo. I hear you laughing. I don't think it's funny, Leo.'

"I said, 'Ernie, I'm sorry. Honest. That's just the way the story goes. I didn't even think of you being an elephant until after I said it. It's only funny because I'm laughing about how deep I get into the role. The elephant on the set isn't afraid of me. He gets a kick out of the roaring and the yelling and all the chasing around, but he knows I'm gentle. We have tea together in the cafeteria. Ernie, how long have you known me?'

"'Four years.'

"'You're my closest friend in the world. We could be brothers. I didn't mean to upset you. All I'm laughing about is me liking the work I'm doing so much I live it and forget where I really am.'

"He didn't come out until Sunday morning. I took to wearing business suits and doing paper work when I came home on Saturdays. He settled back down.

"I did live that role. Beyond the book. In the book, all the big animals set it up so this apparently dumb rabbit hops right up to me

and invites me to his place for dinner. I'm going to chow down right then, but he tells me about his brothers and sisters, so I wait, and we head for his place.

"We stop on the way, and he catches fish and picks flowers, and I get hungrier and hungrier. I think about just going ahead and eating him up, but I hold off for a bigger meal. We get there. Rabbit, he cooks the fish. One of the little rabbits brings me a bowl of carrot soup. Carrot soup? A lion? Well, why not? Might be a good appetizer.

"All these little rabbits argue about who gets to sit on my lap first. It'll be the fattest one there, right? But the carrot soup tastes good. Really good. And hearty. Sure, another bowl would be good. And umm, boy, rabbit, you sure know how to cook fish.

"So that's the story. I settle down and get fat. I bring in fish and bouquets, and I get soup and cooked fish, and it works great. All the big animals come around to see what's up, and there's a big celebration. End of the story. Fold the set. Everybody goes on to other jobs.

"But no more job offers came in. I liked it there. Rabbit, he never was a professional. He was just handy to the location, and he said sure, he wouldn't mind earning a few bucks acting in a children's book.

"After everyone left, Rabbit said 'Just stay here. No need to go anywhere.' We could have gone on forever eating fish and carrot soup, me doing some babysitting and storytelling so the older folks could get out some. I really didn't care that much about creativity, acting, making a name for myself. Get up in the morning, go fishing, come back, have a couple of bowls of carrot soup.

"Rabbit, he smoked a pipe, and I took it up for a while. We'd sit out in front of the hollow tree, a dozen bunnies running here and there. We'd polish off a last bowl of cold carrot soup and light our pipes and watch dusk settle."

We walked more than a block. I said, "What happened?"

"Development. One housing project. Then another. Some of the kids went to hunter's tables. Some went to the dogs. A bulldozer shoved the hollow tree down and piled it with brush, and they burned it.

“I wanted to kill people. I really did. Rabbit, he looked old and weary, but he wasn’t broken. He said, ‘No Leo. We can’t do that. We can only be gentle and trust in the Life Force.’” Leo cleared his throat and then cleared it again. Some people passing us on the sidewalk were startled by the deep sound echoing in a concrete city and stared. Leo turned his back to them, and we kept walking.

“Here we are. Four flights, no elevator.” I tried to keep up, but I had to stop on the second landing. Leo came back down and sat on a step while I rested a minute. “Since then, it’s been small jobs now and then. I don’t get jobs as well as I used to. I see people’s greed for money and power. I think of Rabbit’s family and subdivisions spreading. It’s more than I can do to be polite and remain professional. The interviewer sees my anger, and I don’t get the job.

“Here it is. Come in. Ernie, this is Jason. Ernie’s been getting jobs, and he has a better head for business than I do. He still gets royalties on work he did years ago. He’s carrying me financially, sad to say.”

“No Leo. Not sad to say at all. You’ve carried me through some rough times, and I’m honored to be able to help and very comfortable with the situation, and I want you to be comfortable with it.”

“Ernie’s been getting some pretty good jobs.”

“Well, some of them are a little silly, but they do pay well. And I suppose I’ll get some silliness because it seems to be on the rise, along with sex and violence, which I won’t do. I had an offer to play an elephant who stampedes through a crowd to assassinate a political figure, and I would not do it. They said, ‘The people you trample will only be models.’ I said, ‘Do you expect children to know that?’ They offered me a lot of money for half a day’s work, but I didn’t want it. Did you tell him about the *Penthouse* offer, Leo?”

Leo growled and threw his hat on the couch. “No. Jason, you want a cup of tea, something to eat? I’m going to have some crackers and cheese and an apple.”

“Crackers and cheese and tea sounds good.”

“Ernie?”

“Tea, please.”

Leo busied himself in the kitchen. Once, he called out, “I didn’t name myself Leo, you know. I wouldn’t have done that. But I’m used to it.”

Ernie said, “Leo’s going through some difficult times. In fact, he’s had quite his share.”

“Yes. He’s been telling me a little about it.”

“It’s good that he’s talking to you about it. He doesn’t usually talk about it. He bottles it up. Or drowns it.”

Leo brought the tray in and put it down, and we ate and drank tea for a while.

Leo said, “I met a girl who was always on the make. I thought she was joking at first, and I didn’t like her sense of humor. Then she cornered me at a party and made me an offer. We’d do a set of pictures for *Penthouse*. She had a contract already drawn up for it. I’d maul her and gnaw on her and tear her clothes off little by little, picture by picture.

“The scratches and wounds would be simulated, but she wanted a few real ones out of it, too. And, well, you probably know the magazine, so you can figure how the pictures would go.

“She offered me three thousand dollars. She called it the lion’s share of the contract. She also had a movie contract. She kept bidding until she offered me ten thousand dollars for a few days’ work. All I wanted to do was slap her ugly. Fortunately, Ernie was there. He doesn’t go to many parties, but he was there.”

“I got in between them and just kept moving around. Leo couldn’t get at her to slap her, and she couldn’t get at him to keep bidding. Finally, she left.”

Leo poured more tea into his cup. “I was down and out flat-broke, and she knew it. That’s half the reason I wanted to slap her a couple of good ones.”

Ernie stood up and gathered the empty cups onto the tray. “That’s enough of that. It isn’t good to dwell on that kind of memory.”

We drank tea and talked quite late. I said, “Leo, maybe you should try something besides acting.”

“What could I do? I’m good at being a lion. What else do I know?”



“You tell an interesting story.”

“Story teller, huh?”

Ernie had been slumped on the couch, apparently asleep, but he sat up and said, “Leo, why don’t you become a speaker? Tell people what it’s like to be a lion in the western world, when jobs were good, when they weren’t. The good times, the rough times. Some people make their living going around giving talks. You could do it.”

And they did it.

I received a post card in January. “They’re eating it up. I love it. I just don’t talk anyplace they’re serving drinks. All the jobs I can handle. I love it. Ernie’s starting into it. Leo.”

I read about them. Leo and Ernie ran for political office and received the vote, but they were disqualified from serving. Leo was interviewed on television. By then, he wasn’t giving biography and trying to be entertaining anymore.

He was saying, “Quit it. Leave us alone. We never invited you in. We never gave you any land. We never agreed to anything. Open your eyes. Every other form of life is as important as you are. Broaden your narrow perspective. Slow down.”

A popular television preacher said animals don’t have souls.

Ernie said, “God bless you sir. Do you speak for man or God?”

The preacher stumbled in his speaking and didn’t know what to say. The show ran out of time before he got started again, and Ernie and Leo weren’t invited back.

Ernie phoned in July. “Jason, could we come out and see you for a few days?”

“Sure Ernie, come on. The garden’s doing really well. We’ll make carrot soup.”

We sat in the garden in the evening. Leo said, “I’m going back to Africa. I can’t be here anymore. I’ve become too aware about how man’s world works. I’m in it without meaning to be. Do you know what I mean?”

“I take a jet to New York to speak. I’m supporting the airline. I speak on animals’ rights to a group in Florida. Part of the money they pay me goes for air fare, part for taxes, some to restaurants, some for clothes, taxis. None of that’s environmentally

conservative. No animal ever voted for a 747 or a Ford taxi, or a Howard Johnson restaurant or the weapons my tax money buys. People nod their heads and shake their heads. They know about the problems in the world. They say they want to help, but they don't change."

Ernie said, "It takes people time to change, Leo. They want to change, but it takes time."

"There isn't any more time. The only thing I can think of to do is go back to Africa. Maybe I can forget for a while that mankind is eating the earth and just be a lion in the time we have left."

Ernie said, "Tell Jason what you've been thinking about, Leo. Maybe he can think of something."

"Well, uh, I don't know what to think. I don't know if I can be a lion, an African lion. I started thinking about it when we were in New York. We went upstate, and I, I went hunting. The woods were beautiful. I loved being out. I felt really good, but I didn't catch anything at all."

"Tell him why, Leo."

"I couldn't. I saw deer, and I knew I could catch them, but I couldn't kill them and eat them. They're beautiful animals, and the life force is as strong in them as it is in me, and I just couldn't do it.

"I thought, try something that isn't so beautiful. We went back to the city. I wandered one night until I found an old, crippled-up, half-blind stray dog raiding garbage cans in an alley. I thought, this is it, I can do it. This old black and white, scruffy-looking dog isn't far from death anyway.

"He smelled me and turned away from the garbage can. He backed into a corner, faced me, and growled and growled. That dumb, half-crippled, twenty-five pound wasn't even afraid. Just mad. He told me to get out of his alley and leave his garbage cans and him alone. When I didn't move, he charged me. I rolled him back into the corner, but I didn't hurt him. Ugly old, diseased, stinking, garbage-eating dog, I came here to kill you and eat you, and all you have is courage and the Life Force strong in you.

"I left him there. He went back to his garbage cans, and I started thinking there was no place in the world for me anymore, nothing I could be or do."

“There still is something to be, something to do.” I read aloud, “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder’s den.

“They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the seas.”

We were quiet for a long time. Then Leo said, “The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea. The Life Force in harmony, covering the earth, as the waters cover the sea. I know that. I’ve known that before, but not so clearly enough to say it, think it, be at peace in the knowledge.”

They stayed a few days more. Quiet days.

Leo read a lot.

Melons ripened four and five a day for a while, and we all browsed through the garden. We cooked a lot of carrot soup, just grind them and cook them enough to be hot.

Leo said, “Jason, would you help make the arrangements to get us to Africa? We have the money. We just need a temporary owner to make all the arrangements.”

“Sure. I’d be glad to help.”

Making all the arrangements and getting them there was more complex than we wanted it to be. We had to have cages.

We flew in and then hired a truck to get us farther from civilization. We sent the cages back with the truck.

I camped there for a while, but I never talked to them again. After two weeks in the area, I decided to pack up and go. I headed up the ridge for a last look around. Late morning, I spotted them from the top of the ridge.

Four elephants, six lions, three anteaters, a group of springboc, a group of baboons and chimpanzees and many birds travel together across grasslands drying yellow in intense sunlight. Around the group, traveling along, but at varying distances, are

many other animals. Some come in closer and begin to merge with the group. Others observe from a cautious distance.

I made no effort to contact them. When they went out of my sight, I headed down the ridge in the opposite direction. I had miles to walk in the hot sunshine to meet my transportation, and I strode out and put some African ground behind me.