

LION TAMER Volume I

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[Sample Chapter]

Real Wood

The rest of the class is writing, but my composition is done, so I draw on the brown paper cover of my Freshman English book a tiny portrait of a man like the one I saw on a bus last year. His forehead meets his nose like a seven at an angle. He was so handsome. The composition work was easy. Paying attention is hard. It's March—I'll be fifteen in a month! But so what? I won't be free.

A tall senior girl walks in with a note for Sister Agatha. Now I could do that—take notes around to classrooms.

"Marie Wells," says Sister Agatha, reading the note.

Why would I be in trouble? "Yes," I say. Maybe someone's accusing me of smoking behind the gym. I went there at lunch, to be alone, but I didn't smoke with the students who turned out to be there.

"Please go to the Principal's office. Take your things."

My heart thumps and I leave the classroom and go down the breezeway to my locker for my other books. I've never been in trouble. I head for the administration building where the Principal's office is. But why's Mom there, next to the administration building, standing in the sun by her blue Country Squire station wagon in the loading zone of the school parking lot?

"Hi, Mom." What will she think? "I have to go to the Principal's office." I'm going to have explaining to do, but I don't know what about. "Why are you here so early?"

"I need you to come with me. The Principal already knows."

"Oh." Mom's why the principal wants me. I'm not in trouble. But something must be wrong. "Why?"

"I'll tell you on our way."

We get in the car and I see a huge pile of picket signs in the back. She guns it out of the parking lot as she puts the cigarette lighter to the cigarette in her mouth.

“What happened?” I say.

“Well, it’s the march today,” she says, like everybody knows that.

“So?”

“Well, I need you to come with me,” she says.

Is she serious? “Why? I’m not going to the march.” I hate to be seen walking across the courtyard at *school*, let alone down the middle of *State Street*. I can’t stand people looking at me. I used to like to be seen, but not since Dad started touching me. They can see who I am and I’m ashamed. I feel so fucking stupid because they’re all so happy and I’m not. But maybe they’re fucking stupid.

“All right, I know you’d rather not go, but it would mean a *lot* if you would.”

I can’t believe she thought of this. “No, Mom. That’s why you came and got me out of class early? To march?”

She doesn’t answer. Good. Yeah she’s probably realizing what a big mistake she made.

“Yes,” she says. “To march.”

“No!”

I didn’t mean it that angry. I just need to be left alone, where no one can see me or touch me, or need me or want me. I hate everything! “I’m not walking down the middle of *State Street*.” Why do I feel like I have to? I watch the curb fly past and I go far away inside myself and feel safer.

We don’t talk.

I’m calmer now. “I can’t.” I hope she understands. But she doesn’t understand that I hate when people look at me. Except boys. When I look sexy. How can I walk down *State Street* feeling so deformed and ugly? I’m not deformed, but I feel that way. Like everyone can see how Dad touches me.

She’s not talking.

She’s plotting.

It won’t work. I know my mind. “You’re driving awful fast.”

“Yah. I need to pick up the others from their school.”

“Jean and Patricia?”

“Yah. And Marietta and Patrick.”

“They’re going to march?”

“Listen, I’m not forcing you. But I hope you’ll come with us, because there’s a lot at stake right now. We have support from some of the university students and professors, one of the Black churches is sending members, and the Gray Panthers will be there. But I think your younger brother and sisters will feel better if you’re there.”

That’s not fair, Mom. “You’re making them go? And what about Martin and Cecilia?” They probably already said no.

“Well, I don’t think they can come. Anyway, we need every *body* we can get. There have been some developments and it’s really important.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a long story. Things are happening in Selma. Will you go? Please?”

“What’s happening in Selma?”

“Well, there’s been some violence. But we don’t think there’ll be any here.” She glances at me.

There won’t be violence, not in Santa Barbara. Unless she knows something I don’t. I sigh. She knows I can’t let my younger siblings go alone, they’re so shy and don’t have any idea what’s going on. And what if Mom gets busy and forgets they’re there? She’s always forgetting to pick us up. I shake my head slowly to let her know something big is wrong with what she’s doing.

We ride. No words. I hear the whoosh of each tree we pass. That’s physics, Dad says, change of air pressure. God thought of everything when He made physics. If I’m kidnapped someday, I’ll count the tree sounds from the car trunk.

Well, at least I get out of school early.

To sit at home while Mom and my siblings march without me? After all she does for me. Gives me rides, cooks. Made all my dresses when I was small.

If only I could be a tree. They get to stand still. But I’d be stuck in one place my *whole* life, never moving, not once. Forget it.

I shake that thought away and glance at her watery eyes. She’s sad because I don’t want to march and she needs me to do it. She means well. Just doing what she thinks is right. Civil rights. Planning it for almost a year. Why can’t I just do it?

But why do *I have to*? I'm only fifteen. Anyway, maybe I would do it if I could, but I'm paralyzed inside. Like I'm underground trapped in matted poisonous tree roots moving all over me like worms and I can't move. And I don't *want to*.

I blur my eyes and the pavement looks just like a river.

So? Sometimes people just do what's right. Do I believe in civil rights? At least I don't have to die like the martyrs. Laying down your life for another isn't just dying, but doing hard things.

Shoot.

I don't have a choice, because it's wrong not to march.

And I'll always know I let Mom down, if I don't.

I groan. Interesting how my groan sounds just like a faraway lion roar, on Wild Kingdom. And how the poisonous matted roots aren't strangling me anymore. Something made them let go.

Anyway, it'll be awful but I can go home when it's over and eat buttered toast.

I can do it. "Fine. What time?"

"Oh, wonderful! We're going right now."

"No! I have to change."

"There's no time."

"I'm not going in this ugly brown hot sticky wool uniform, Mom!"

"There's no time to change. They're lining up right now, waiting on us."

Oh God.

We go to De la Guerra Plaza. Wow. Lots of Black people. I never see any Black people, except two at church.

I count forty-one people total. It sure won't be like marches on TV. It's mostly Black people in nice dresses and suits, old white people in flowy skirts or jeans, and sandals, and young white people with long hair, beards, beads and old tie-dye clothes. The hippies are going to make us look bad.

"Would you like a sign?" a not-too-old hippie asks me, holding out one of Mom's picket signs. He's sort of cute, his long hair sparkles, but I can't carry a sign. I can't even say no. I smile at the ground and shake my head.

“Come on, children, come up here,” Mom says, and we go stand where she says by the curb. Two hippies pass us stepping off the curb, carrying a banner that reads, “CIVIL RIGHTS FOR ALL NOW!” It should say please. They start the march. Five people with gray and white hair follow them, and then Mom nudges us to go.

“Follow those Gray Panthers,” she says.

“What?”

“Them, follow them,” she says, pointing to the old people behind the banner.

I’d rather be with the university students in the back.

State Street seems a lot wider when you’re walking in the middle of it with no cars. Just the sounds of peoples’ shoes and sandals on pavement. It’s very quiet. Luckily most people on the sidewalk aren’t paying any attention. They’re probably too embarrassed to look. Wow. Police at every corner. Just for this little march. That’ll make people mad, wasting tax dollars.

I hate the sun beating down. My siblings and I look funny in a little bunch near the front. They’re in their grade school red, gray and white uniforms, and I’m in my brown one. They look so young. But we’re used to walking without talking, just waiting for things to be over, like Mass and school, so this is sort of like that. Walking slow. Three blocks to go.

People are spread way out, so there’s no way to hide in the middle of a crowd because there is no crowd. I look back to see where everybody is. I can hardly see them--they spread out over two blocks.

“What do we want?” yells a man far behind us.

Oh God no! Please don’t yell again. Then people *will* stare.

“Equal rights!” shouts a small old woman in a shawl on my left.

I didn’t know this was part of the deal. Please, God, let me disappear.

“When do we want it?” the first man hollers.

“Now!” about three old people say not very loud in front of me. That’s probably as loud as they can.

Think of something else. Je m’appelle Marie, je suis. Je suis. Ma vie est breve. Je reve. Je reve. My name is Marie, I am, I am. My life is short, I dream, I dream.

I imagine a giant ocean wave that can’t break no matter how hard it tries. It quivers full of power and falls back. And tries again.

That's me.

That's so stupid.

"What do we want?!" the first man says again, but now his bull horn's working. At least the bull horn's a little more official. Like something real is happening, not just a bunch of weird people wishing things were better. I wish things were better, but I'm not stupid enough to think marching—really, walking—is going to help.

I look at Mom's picket signs ahead and in back of us. Those were in our house. That's pretty good.

Here comes a Black man in a suit walking faster than the rest of us, head down. He's got the right idea. Get it over with. What's that picture on his sign?

A Black man in a suit hanging from a tree.

Oh. I stare.

How could I forget? I'm so stupid! A spoiled brat. The man is real, with a real family. My face gets hot and my eyes fill with water. It feels like he's here, right now.

This is why Mom works so hard. It's not some game, Marie. How could I forget? Because I only think about what I want so of course I forget.

But I don't have to forget anymore, or act like civil rights don't matter.

I make myself picture a wife watching as her husband gets lynched, to make it real. I watch the pavement, crying. The world's so cruel.

Mom says you can lynch people if they don't have the same rights you have, because you can think they're not real people.

I don't care anymore about being hot in this wooly uniform. I don't care who's watching us. Nobody's watching, anyway. I'm just marching up the street. I don't care if it's stupid. I'm doing it. It's something.

"When do we want it?!" the man behind with the bull-horn yells.

"Now," I whisper, too self-conscious to yell, and I don't want my siblings to hear me either. It'll embarrass them. The other marchers, except my siblings, yell.

Everybody finally bunches up a bit as we turn the corner at Anapamu, so the chanting sounds a little better, like a real march. We walk to the courthouse sunken gardens, over the lawn, past a few people sitting on the lawns with their children and dogs. We make a small

gathering around a man at a microphone. It's the Black man who passed me by. His sign stands in the shrubs behind him.

"Thank you all for supporting this great cause today. We are not alone in our fight," he says loud, like a real speaker.

He makes me glad I'm here. I study his sign and see hundreds of years of slavery and cruelty, and warm tears flow.

"That's James Forman!" Mom whispers to me.

"Who?" I wipe my face.

"One of the founders of SNCC! The university organizers got him out here from Chicago."

"Oh."

"And make no mistake," says James Forman, "though we are non-violent, this is a fight! I was arrested and beaten for three days, and my story is not unique."

Cruel.

I clench my teeth but still can't stop crying. I picture Eddie who saved me from boys throwing rocks when I was in first grade. He appeared out of nowhere, stood between me and third grade white boys and told me, "You go home." I was so relieved, I just ran home. What happened to him? What if he was beaten for civil rights? The bigger white kids were cruel always running him off, because he wasn't white or Black.

I thought I couldn't march.

"Are you all right?" Mom says to me.

I just nod, because I'm still crying. I can do this for Eddie.

But pretty soon I'm just tired. Some more people speak and we clap, but now all I can think about is my legs are hurting. I want to go home. Finally we clap again, and there are no more speakers.

"We can go?" I say to Mom.

"We can go."

Except she starts talking to people and introducing me. People smile at me so I try to smile but it's humiliating because my smile feels like a contortion. I don't want them to touch me but they want to hug me and hold on to my hand. I want to jump from my skin. I look and shrug

at Jean, Patricia, Marietta and Patrick who all sit on a stone wall at the edge of the grass. I would go there but I don't want to leave Mom. But finally people start to leave, and we get to go home.

We all help Mom take the picket signs out of the car and stack them in the laundry room. It feels good to help. I go in the kitchen and make a piece of toast, soak it with margarine and eat it in three bites. It's six o'clock. Mom turns on the news in the dining room, and I go watch it with her.

The newscaster looks up from his papers. "Good evening. In the Middle East."

Every single night they start with the Middle East—I don't get it. I can't care about everything.

"The Knesset," he goes on, "refuses a bid to end military rule over Palestinians living in Israel. In the nation's capital, twenty-thousand gathered to protest the police action in Vietnam. In California, a water shortage has brought mayors together in an unprecedented summit. And in local news, a small band of students and their professors march up State Street, but onlookers were—well, not impressed. More on these stories after this message."

"He didn't even say what the march was for," I say, angry.

"No. But they did mention it. That's something," Mom says.

How can she be so positive?

"Oh dear! Your father's home," Mom says in a low voice, as the front door knob turns. Dad comes into the front hall. "Hi Honey," she calls out pleasantly. "I forgot you said you'd be home tonight." She looks at me and says quietly, "Marie, go put the hot dogs on, will you? I'll find something else for him to eat."

I gladly go in the kitchen and listen from there.

"I bet you didn't forget to go to your political meetings," I hear Dad say from the hall closet, sounding irritated.

"No, but today was the march, on State Street. So things got away from me," Mom says, apologetically.

"If I've told you once I've told you a hundred times—the Communists will *never* give Vietnam back to the people and that's why they need to be crushed," Dad says. "People like you impede the war effort."

"It was a civil rights march, Honey."

“Oh! Excuse me for mixing up your causes. Well, I hold up my end of the bargain,” Dad says, “and I think expecting dinner on the table when I get home—I don’t care what it is—it could be scrambled eggs for all I care—isn’t too much to ask!” He ends at a roar.

I want to disappear.

But I marched today. I feel good about myself. Not helpless like before. In a way my world is bigger than him now. I don’t like his anger, but I’m not afraid.

I can even help turn him around.

“Want a glass of wine, Dad?” I say, looking through to the dining room where Mom and Dad stand, silent.

“Make it a whiskey, will you, Marie? Thanks.”

“Well,” Mom says, “we’ll have something ready in a few minutes.” Mom comes in the kitchen and beams at me. “Good thinking. He’s just hungry.”

“He shouldn’t talk to you like that. Even if it’s the woman’s job to have dinner ready, there have to be exceptions.”

“Yah. I agree,” she says, pouring herself a burgundy. “Someday. Maybe when you’re married.”

“I’m never getting married,” I say, like I’m a fortune teller, and leave the kitchen with Dad’s whiskey. In his office, luckily he’s holding the opened newspaper, so he won’t touch me when I kiss him. “Here you go. Hope it’s how you like it.”

“Thanks, Honey. I’m sure it’s fine.”

We kiss and I fly back to the kitchen and cut open two packages of hot dogs and drop them in the bottom of the double boiler. I actually marched today.

“Patricia! Marietta! You need to set the table!” I say. I feel good, different inside--like I was a flimsy reed that couldn’t stand up in the wind, and now I am actually a small tree, with real *wood*. I’m somebody real. Well, I always was, but not like this.

It was so hard to march, and no one will ever understand that, but I did it, and now I have something inside me that I never had before, and no one can take it away. I don’t know what it is, but it’s something I need.

And I’m not even fifteen.

