



THE LION KING

a short story

"Life's Little Circles"

By: Richard G. Russo

"Ingonyama nengw' enambala!"

The voice was so loud it ruffled the leaves, even in the outer branches, of a lowly baobab tree on a stretch of plains known as the Pridelands. But this was no ordinary Baobab tree, and the voice did not belong to any ordinary creature.

Settled within the cavity of this particular tree sat the red-nosed, brown-buttred shaman known throughout the land simply as Rafiki, and he was excitedly dawdling over one of his more recent works of art.

"Would you cut that out?" came another, higher pitched voice.

"Can't cut it out Zazu," said Rafiki, chuckling and painting with all of his appendages. "It'll grow right back!"

"Insufferable..."

A smile cracked upon his face as he looked beyond the drab comment by the blue hornbill. Rafiki, like those who came before him, was blessed with an artistic eye, and he spent every waking moment within the confines of his home drawing and painting on its many barren walls. Over time, a myriad of images snaked their way around the walls of his home, but none were as important as the one he attended to now.

"How can you stay focused? Oh, I'm a shaky mess..."

Rafiki looked up and caught a ray of sunlight bouncing off the leaves above; gleaming in the ray of sun as the image washed over him. He seemed to work with electricity about him not seen since ages past. There was something in the air this morn, something that was infectious to the monkey - a feeling of rebirth, renewal, and completeness.

"Do you think he'll signal soon?" The hornbill asked impatiently.

"When he is ready Zazu," said Rafiki, putting down a turtle shell with his left foot that held the crimson paint he had just been using to add color to his creation. "Dese tings take time." He grabbed another shell filled with a yellowish pigment and promptly began to apply it to his drawing.

Another of Rafiki's talents was his knowledge of the spirits of the land. Many a time that knowledge was put to use serving the king of a pride of lions that also called the Pridelands their home. Even now, down within the confines of his Baobab tree, he was serving that king. Like he and his ancestors had done for ages past.

"Yes well," said the bird, folding up his wings. "I have a morning schedule to keep, you know. I can't hang around here all day waiting for the presentation."

A toothily grin spread across the baboon's face as he continued to stroke his thumb and forefinger delicately across the developing image of line and color. "Ahhh... almost." It was *almost* finished.

"Are you going to just sit there and paint or are you going to get ready?"

"Ready?" Rafiki grunted up at the bird. "I *am* ready. I've been ready for this day a long time. This is a very important day for all of us."

Rafiki had no need to rehearse the ceremony from the confines of his home; he performed it countless times throughout his long life. It was a tradition that was passed down from generation to generation, just like painting the mark that would become the namesake for the young cub, as he was doing now.

"Too right," Zazu agreed. "Though I say, having a young Prince around again will make for a nice change of pace. Don't you agree?"

"Hmm," he said. "Et continues the Circle. What else mattahs?"

Zazu nodded, "Indeed. And that is of the most importance."

The baboon grunted.

"On second thought," he let on deadpan. "I just realized that my workload is about to double. So much for my--"

Rafiki let out a hearty shrill of delight.

"Go ahead -- laugh. You wouldn't be if you went through what I did when the infamous trio was cubs. Why, Mufasa, Scar and Sarabi had me flying around in circles! Talk about misfits, scandalous even. How I worked my wings to the meager bones that were in them... all for Ahadi, and for what? What I say! To do it all over again? No sir... not this bird."

"And what will you tell Mufasa when he asks why you weren't at the ceremony?" the baboon interjected as he continued to paint the outline of what would become the new prince's namesake.

Zazu opened his beak to sharply retort the baboon only to close it again. "You know, I hadn't thought of that," he said. "Suppose it'll be hard to break it to him," Zazu finished with a chuckle.

Rafiki rolled his eyes and laughed.

"He always takes great pride in pulling my tail feathers. It would do me good to return the favor. Ha!" Zazu hopped from limb to limb with glee. "Couldn't you see it? Picture this... Mufasa and I sitting on top of his kingdom going over the news of the day; The baboons are going ape, lets say, or the leopards being in a bit of a spot over something. And then... I let him have it."

"Yeah?"

"Oh his mighty jaws would drop and-- did you hear that?"

Rafiki stopped for a moment and took in a breath.

Zazu held his beak open while his left wing was held up to his small ear, straining to hear the call of the wild.

Could it be? Could it be the moment they've been waiting for?

Yes! There it was again -- a mighty rumble across the lands, a monstrous roar that could only belong to one king of beasts: Mufasa.

The roar reverberated a sense of pride and joy, and a signal for all to take place and share in that bliss.

For both Rafiki and Zazu, it echoed a sense of relief. The signal the pair had been waiting for had finally been unleashed - it was time to kick start a celebration!

Zazu hopped up to a higher branch and looked out across the land after the thunderous roar from his master. He turned back a moment later and picked up the eye of his companion. "I guess we better get moving?"

The baboon lurched hardly unnoticed from his trance and nodded. He replied by grabbing up his fallen staff, upholstering a piece of fruit from it, and climbing up out of his tree. Zazu fluttered off leaving the baboon with his thoughts trained upon the swinging fruit on his staff and what they would come to represent shortly - life.

Life was the greatest aspect of a cycle that all creatures, great and small, heeded. Whether friend or foe, hunted or hunters, they were all bound together in a concept known as the Circle of Life. This model, in which every creature was aware, as their children and their children's children were taught, interconnected the hunter with the hunted and its wisdom, above all other aspects of life, became the most accepted and respected way of life in plains existence, no matter how young or old.

The Lions, crown of that cycle, were the protective, nurturing force that kept all animals, no matter how great and small, on the endless rounds. When Mufasa roared, they came. They came to pay homage to the ruler that protected them.

But there was one who heeded that call who perhaps had more of a connection to Mufasa than he would have liked -- Khulo, a cheetah from the outskirts of the Pridelands.

To him, Mufasa was a nemesis better left avoided. After he and a clan of his kind attacked and then took over the lands that belong to the Lion King, he was quite sure the likes of him were not welcome at the ceremony.

Khulo walked away from the massive lion thankful that he was still alive, then. He may not have been - Mufasa certainly could have ended his life if the lion so chose. But, Khulo sensed an enlightened mood within him; a new wisdom and he knew that his life would be spared, allowing him to walk away unscathed -- the Circle of Life prevailed.

He was the lucky one; he survived.

Unfortunately the members of his clan were not as lucky. Its leader, Mng'ariza died a quick death at the fangs of Mufasa's brother, Scar, and a takeover by his niece Kichasi, left Khulo powerless. His friends, who followed Kichasi into battle, met their fates undeservingly within the jaws of lionesses, as the rightful owners of Pride Rock fought to reclaim their lands. And even though they did side with Kichasi in her action, Khulo found room in his heart to forgive Tshatsi, Bhutai, Tambulo and also Chal, whom did not deserve the death that was bestowed upon them - they deserved much, much more for what they believed.

Kichasi, however, the despicable back stabbing female that thwarted his authority, did deserve every bit of pain and sorrow she received. Khulo would not mourn her passing. Not now, or ever. Just thinking about the name Kichasi sent venom running through his veins. He hated that name. Hated it. But like a dark shadow, he could not rid himself of the past. The Circle of Life would not allow it.

"Uncle?" a young, feminine voice called. "Uncle?"

"Oh, I'm sorry dear?" an older, masculine one, replied. "I must have wandered off there for a moment."

"Why are we to go to Pride Rock?"

"Because," Khulo began, "we must pay homage to the young lion prince. The thunderous roar you heard was to announce his coming. Now, we are all beckoned to see; to come and bask in the new life brought to the lion pride."

"A young lion prince?" the younger one inquired, her face contorted with disgust. "What do we care about a lion cub anyway?"

It was an honest question. Why would cheetah's care about lions? They did them no great service, so what had a lion done for cheetah kind in the past? Khulo knew though. The lions, like all creatures, were connected to the Great Circle that governed life. He understood its meaning, its wisdom and its purpose.

But at one time he had forgotten that purpose and he, like Kichasi, lost faith in that cycle. The outcome of that loss in faith was devastating and it was a lesson learned he would never forget for as long as he remained on these plains.

"I expected your response, Seko" Khulo chuckled. "You are young and unwise and I sense you do not yet comprehend how complex life and its cycles really are. Today, you have the chance to learn what our contributions are and what we take in return by accompanying me to Pride Rock. We may not have a great love for lions but they, like us, have a respect for life and it is that respect that binds us all. "

The young cheetah wrinkled up her little brown nose at her uncle, no doubt in confusion. "We are bonded to the Lions? How can lions hunt everyone and then have them all go for some kind of party?"

"Not bonded as in niece and uncle," said Khulo, "but let me just say that all the creatures that live here play by the same set of rules. Do you understand that?"

"I fink so, Unk," she replied, uneasily.

Khulo hated that name - *Unk*. He hated it more due to the fact that it wasn't a true association. Another reminder of times past he would just assume forget.

"The Circle of Life is that set of rules we all play by. It guides and governs over all of the creatures that inhabit the plains," he said effortlessly. "At Pride Rock you will be able to see the Circle of Life in action, and all the creatures that believe in it too."

"There will be others there too?"

"Yes Seko," said Khulo, a little more sternly than he would have liked. It was obvious to him, but he had to remember that not all comprehended the significance of the day. After all the cycles of the moon that had passed since Kichasi's passing, he still hadn't gotten used to the fact he was raising a young one again.

"How will all the creatures get along?"

The elder sighed, knowing the confusion that was gripping Seko's existence. Khulo remembered when he first learned of the Circle of Life and how it governed them all. He had the same reservations of his parents, as Seko had of him now, but had been that naive?

He questioned everything, but as he grew older Khulo became wiser in the ways of the plains and the wisdom of what he was taught became clear - one doesn't question the existence of the Circle, nor does one ignore what must be.

The Circle of Life did present paradoxes from time to time, as a law of nature, but it was for the greater good that everyone understood the concept or be doomed to a quick death. Death too was the way of the Circle, and Khulo knew death well.

"I don't wanna go," the young one protested, watching her uncle think.

"Why not?"

"I just don't wanna! I don't care about lions, or any of the others... unless," she paused, and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Are we gonna go to eat them?"

Khulo's eyes flashed angrily. "No!" he exclaimed, falling over his paws unable to believe the nonsense that just filled his ears.

"I can't believe you said that," said he.

But she did not care for lions or any other species of animal - other than the ones she could eat. And she certainly wouldn't pay respects to them. She was a cheetah and she hunted accordingly - spite the Circle of Life. This was quite apparent to Khulo and an unfortunate result of the upbringing she had.

"Your mother has unwisely taught you -- it is time you learned," he said quickly. "This is precisely why you're going to Pride Rock with me. Now, let's go."

"But, but..."

"Nonsense!" Khulo bellowed in anger. "You're going and that is final. Hurry up or we're going to be late!"

Why hadn't Kichasi taught her this? Was Kichasi that far gone to discredit the Circle of Life? And what values would the younger generation have if not blessed with the knowledge that the Great Circle housed?

Khulo had wanted to know but Kichasi, Seko's mother, had passed on cycles ago.

"I've not been witness to something like this before, and I'm not going to miss this opportunity on your account! Now get along!"

The warmth of the now brilliant sun washed across the plains, calling for life to ebb and flow across them. With this new day a new beginning dawned, a new existence, bringing with it all walks of life, which made the trek to Pride Rock with great delight and trepidation. For some the journey would be made to celebrate the greatest gift to all within the kingdom; to others the experience would be a chance to learn about life and all that governs it. For Khulo, it was just a long, long walk. Longer still with a nagging young one nipping at his heels. Still, it was an exhilarating experience for Khulo, his furred face lit up with awe and childish delight at the various forms of life coming together at the base of Pride Rock for one significant purpose.

The ground trembled with every step as a stampede of elephants swept by.

Melodies from a variety of fowl gushed, singing the praises of the newborn king.

Forests of moving trees towered over the scene, as the giraffes too joined the celebration.

Rhinos, gazelle, birds of all shapes and sizes, wildebeest, warthog, and hippos were also amongst those to celebrate this coming and it was an amazing sight to behold.

There was so much to take in that he was beside himself.

"How's it going Khulo," said one of the travelers, a spotted leopard.

The leopard's call interrupted his thoughts, but Khulo looked up with a smile anyway. "Good day," said he.

"Yeah, braving the storm?" said another, a rather large rhinoceros.

But Khulo continued to smile. "I've come to pay my respects to the Lion King as well. Besides," he continued, "I've never been to one; thought I'd try it."

"Not afraid of Mufasa, are you?" the leopard wanted to know.

"Of course not," he said. But he knew enough to be cautious. "It was unfortunate the way things ended, or began for that matter. We should have never attempted to take control of the Pridelands. The Circle became unbalanced... I think he understands that."

"You better hope so!"

Khulo let out a chuckle, "I think I know so." But, his attention was briefly turned to his young niece, who had sat down beside the trio looking in the opposite direction of Pride Rock. The cheetah shook his head and bent down to her. "Wow, isn't this great? Look-look over there!"

His outstretched paw pointed to a herd of ostriches.

"So..." Seko seeded.

"You don't find this exciting?" he said as if he couldn't understand how his niece could not be enjoying herself.

"No," said Seko sparingly. "Not really."

"Look around you. There and over there," he pointed, with his left paw. "All around us are countless races of birds, giraffes, meerkats, elephants, zebra, hippo, monkeys, leopards, warthogs, and of course cheetahs. What do you see?"

She looked up with big eyes, "Lunch?"

The young one shook its battered head a moment later because a paw rushed by and smacked into the back it.

"No, Seko. Not lunch," he sighed. "I had hoped you'd see co-existing because that's what is happening here. All those who are at this place are at peace. They, like me, are not worried about hunting or becoming the hunted. At this moment under the promontory of Pride Rock they are bound by something greater -- the Circle of Life. Take another look now. Go on..."

Seko's eyes turned wide as she looked at the various animals around her. "I--I don't know," she said, hesitantly. "How can this be? How can so many species gather in a place without fear -- doesn't this go against our instincts?"

"Yes it does young one," said Khulo. "But the power of the Circle of Life and its fulfillment is a higher cause, which suppresses our natural instinct."

"You're not afraid?" Seko asked of the group.

"No, young'un," entered a voice from behind, "Because I know how the Circle works. And when I stand here before King Mufasa, I feel no fear; I sense no danger."

It belonged to the rhinoceros.

"Yes, but you're so large," Seko expounded animatedly.

Khulo was taken aback and immediately began to apologize to the rather sizable rhino, but it would not accept an apology.

Instead, the rhino smiled. "My dear cheetah, Lions and creatures like you are no great ally to us rhinos either. We sometimes fall prey to their whims, but the fact remains that we are all connected in a chain, a cycle that governs our lives. It goes back to the

concept of the prey and hunter. Some of us are prey and some of us are hunters but at some point in our lives the hunters become the prey. And thus the Circle of Life continues."

"Besides," the rhino continued with a snort. "If you want to get fresh I'm sure my rather enormous size and this point-tipped horn will have something to say about it. They may be small but they can pack quite a wallop!"

Both Seko and Khulo let out a laugh.

"You see Seko," the elder cheetah began. "We will not attack those here today, nor will we be attacked because each of us has a respect for a higher cause. We've all played the great game of life - some have lost while others have won - but the point is we respect the game. Today, high above the promontory of what the lions call Pride Rock is yet another example of the Circle of Life being fulfilled."

"How so?"

"The lions are the reigning king of the plains my child," the rhino answered. "They are as much a part of what makes the Circle work as they are governed by it."

Seko, for her part though, looked even more confused.

"Child, the Circle of Life is the oldest, most understood and respected aspect of living on the Pridelands. One must respect the system and how it works in everyday life. Take your father here--"

"Uncle," Khulo corrected quickly.

"All right, Uncle," the rhino finished, but not before narrowing its eyes at the cheetah. "Each day we contribute to the circle in some fashion. Each day you as hunt and kill a gazelle, or some other bit of prey, you are contributing to it. And when you die, you will continue to contribute to the Circle, as your body becomes the nourishment that helps grow the grass. Countless others eat that grass and the cycle begins again. That is what the Circle is about -- Life, death and rebirth. It's the natural cycle."

"Its existence is all around us here," said Khulo in addition. "It must be accepted. Open your clouded vision and see the forces at work."

But then he gasped.

"W-what is it?"

"Look," he said to Seko, "the presentation is about to begin."

Khulo caught the hobbling form of Rafiki padding closer and closer to where he and his niece stood. He couldn't help himself now as a smile as big as the gorge protruded across his features. Even to him the old mandrill still held a sort of mysticism that no one could explain, or had understood. And so, he watched as the baboon parted the creatures, left and right, as they attempted to crowd around to pay their respects.

"It's Rafiki," Khulo breathed out, as Rafiki's staff pounded inward about the dirt below coming to a rest before him.

"Shh, Mamela," chided the rhino.

"Listen now!" exclaimed the leopard, quietly.

Khulo held a brief eye on the stationary baboon before turning his head downward in a humble bow of respect. Respects, he thought, must be paid no matter how bad the blood was between Cheetah and Lion kind and if anyone knew how sour relations were between the two, it had to be Rafiki. But Khulo was startled to receive one of the baboon's elongated hands set upon his right shoulder.

"Good day, Khulo... my friend."

The sun cast a long shadow of the monkey and his staff, and while he made no attempt to look back up at the great one, he watched the shadows pay the same greeting to his niece to his left. Rafiki retracted and continued upon his way, the cheetah held his head low in admiration watching as the monkey's staff recanted, uprooting a bit of loose soil in the process.

And then he was gone.

"He... he," the young one stammered, as she looked up at her uncle. "He knew you!"

Khulo could only nod.

"Awesome," Seko let out, now taking in everything she could.

Khulo watched his young niece as she followed Rafiki meandering his way through the crowd, to the cliff base of Pride Rock. All along the way creatures both great and small bowed before him.

"I've never seen..."

Was there a spark of light in her? Did she finally comprehend all of what he had told her? Did she finally understand the Circle of Life?

"And you'll probably never see such a sight again," said Khulo, now able to speak. "Unless you understand what is happening here? Do you?"

But the answer did not come.

Khulo's attention was brought to a fix as those around him, like every creature on the plains, became unbearably silent. His niece had muttered something, but her voice was immediately extinguished as she too caught the action from above.

"Why did everyone become so silent?"

"Because," the leopard answered, "They too are awaiting the celebration, to catch their first glimpse of the lion cub."

Rafiki had made it to the precipice and was tending to the young cub now.

How exciting and electrifying it had become; all the creatures great and small were waiting to be shown the young lion prince and Seko could be counted among them. Not that they were very patient animals. She had been nudged half a dozen times, but she paid it no never mind. The experience had been a memorable one thus far, she thought. Having taken witness to the animals line up and fumble in, one by one. Each was different in their own right but were all obligated to one ideal - that of the Circle of Life.

A moment later those who were restless were still no more as the plains erupted in coos and cheers as Rafiki held up the young cub.

As she watched, a heavenly light illuminated the lion cub, and one-by-one, those around her began to bow in reverence. A smile crept upon her then, finally coming to an understanding about the great wisdom of the Circle of Life.

Amongst the Elephants, Giraffes, Leopards, Meerkats, Zebra and all other walks of life - all were predators, or prey. But there was one thing that kept them together.

"Life's Little Circles are the ties that bind us," said Khulo taking to his niece. "And them."

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