

FORTIFYING FABLES: BORIS THE BEAR

(Based on an old African fable)

On considering the source of your criticism and praise.

"That wasn't too bad," young Boris, a big, black Russian bear said to himself, as he swayed on his hind paws in front of the large mirror. "I'll try it again."

He pressed a button on the music player and strains from Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite* resumed. Clumsily lifting a hind paw, Boris attempted a turn and fell, rolling on his back. He stood up and after a few further attempts, managed the initial steps required to dance a waltz.

"Excellent," he muttered. "I think I am ready to show what I can do for Garibaldi, my wise little monkey friend. His rehearsal with the organ grinder should be over by now."

With a smug grin, Boris lumbered out of the tent, carrying his music player.

After making his way between bustling circus members, trailers, and brightly colored tents, Boris came to an open grassy area alongside a farm where he found Garibaldi, wearing his customary red and gold embroidered pillbox hat and matching waistcoat. He was sitting on a fence enjoying a banana.

"Beautiful sunset, don't you think?" said Garibaldi.

"Yah," said Boris. "How were rehearsals?"

"So-so. Giacomo said I was a little slow on the uptake. Well, he was pumping out a new piece of music today with which I was totally unfamiliar."

"Hmmp," said Boris. "Sounds unfair."

"Maybe, but I can't entirely blame my master," said Garibaldi. "I must admit I have been goofing off lately, and need to practice more. It makes perfect, you know. Want a banana?"

Boris shook his head.

"So what's up?"

"I'm practicing for the dancing bear audition," said Boris.

"Really? Think Nikita will accept you?"

"Yah. She'll be bowled over. I can even see myself going on to join the Moscow State Circus."

"Whoa. Ambitious idea."

Boris grinned. "I've got my dreams. I mean, this Olga Kazakov two-bit traveling road show is hardly what you call a real cool circus."

"I don't know about that," said Garibaldi. "We may be small, but we pack the tent in every village, and most of all, the children love us. Anyway, I gather you brought your music player to give me a demonstration?"

"So I did! Tell me what you think."

With a graceful movement of *The Nutcracker Suite* wafting on the evening breeze, Boris—despite a couple of tumbles—clumsily, but proudly, performed his beginner's waltz steps.

"There," he panted at last, "what do you think?"

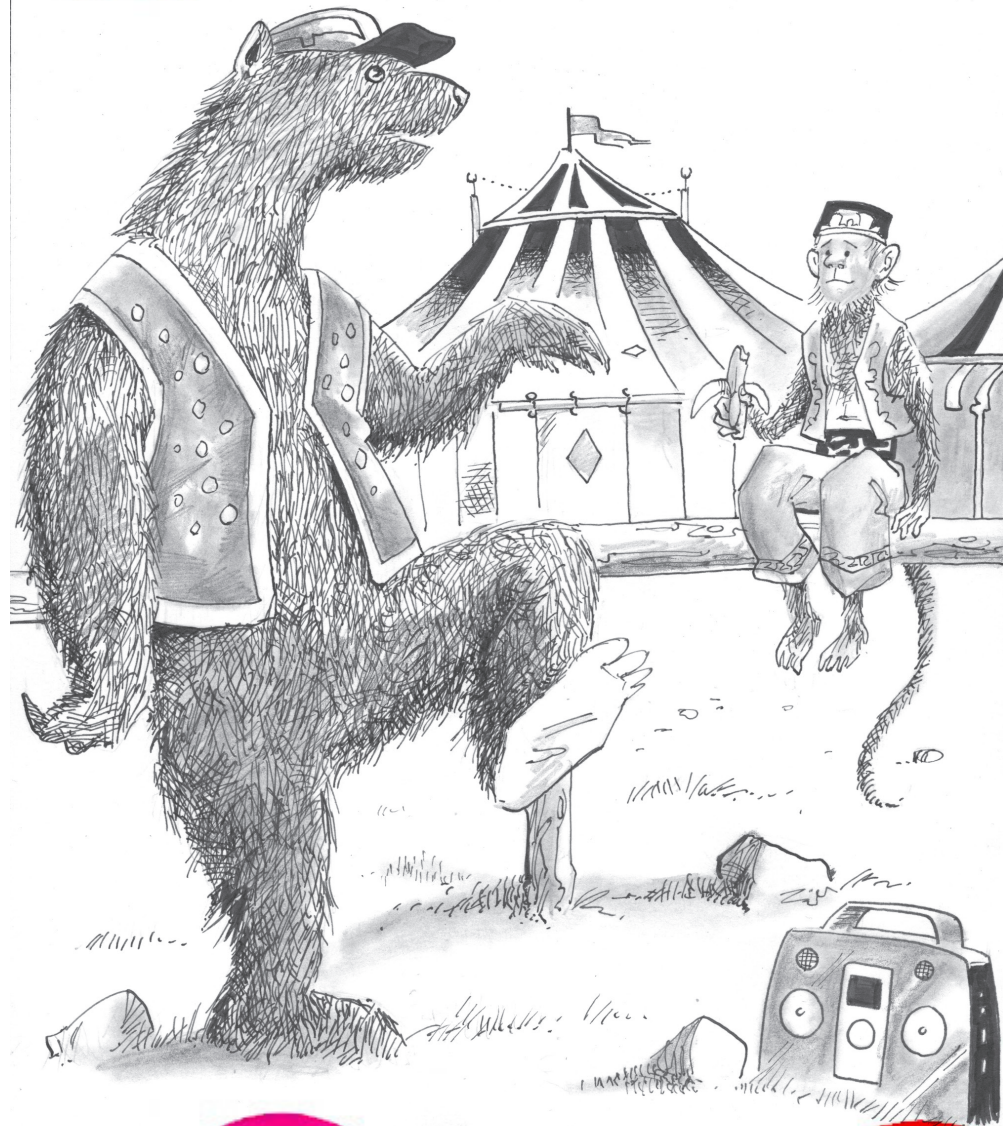
Garibaldi winced, drew his breath and smiled apologetically. "Honestly?"


"Of course, Gari. You're my friend. Your opinion counts."

Garibaldi's brow furrowed and he tugged at his tiny forked beard. "Well ... it's a very good start."

"What do you mean, 'a very good start'?"

"Exactly that. You have potential, but I think you need a little more practice. Or maybe I should say, to be perfectly honest ... a *lot* more practice."





Boris' eyes blazed. "You don't know what you're talking about. Unlike you, my friend, I'm working on serious choreography. After all, what do you do but do a few stupid antics to oom-pah-pah ditties?"

"Granted," Garibaldi said patiently as he peeled another banana. "But it gives the kids a giggle, and I must admit I am pretty good at what I do."

"Pah," said Boris, and stormed off across the pasture.

"Nikita's an expert bear trainer," he shouted over his shoulder. "She will love it!"

"She most schertainly will, kid." Boris heard a slurping, guttural voice pipe up from behind the farm fence. He peered over. There, wallowing in a pen amidst a foul-smelling mire of manure and swill was a huge, filth-bedecked pig chomping on a rotten apple core.

"What did you say?" Boris asked, holding his nose.

"I said that Nikita will love it," the pig replied through

smacking tusks. "I watched your little performance just then, and I wanna tell ya that ya monkey friend was talkin' through his fancy li'l hat."

"You mean I don't need to practice?"

The pig sniggered. "Nah. Nah. Take it easy and don't worry about it. You and me are doin' great."

Still holding his nose, Boris stared in revulsion at the pig for a few moments, then mumbled a thank you and slowly walked off.

By now, the sun had fully set as Boris, having pondered on the sight, sound, and smell of the pig, reconsidered Garibaldi's advice as he made his way toward the lights of the circus camp.

"My friend is right. Practice makes perfect," he muttered, and resolved to practice diligently for at least three months before humbly auditioning as a dancing bear for Olga Kazakov's Traveling Circus.