

Abraham

Abraham, a 12-year-old, 22,000-pound elephant, swam in the Ganges River for five hours before the giant pads of his feet finally touched land. His trainers with the Al-Sindhu All Saints Circus and Touring Exposition would have been amazed and angry at the sight, but they were miles away at the time. During his years with the circus Abraham had learned a total of seven tricks, which included walking on a rubber ball, juggling dull machetes with his trunk, and using his tusks to toss a tiny acrobat 20 feet in the air.

But Abraham refused to swim. This caused the elephant's trainers and owners no small amount of consternation. Da'ud "Sammy" Shabazz, whose great grandfather started the circus with three monkeys and a black Russian bear in 1926, had spent more than 3 million rupees to build, maintain and fill a translucent, 700,000-gallon water tank, which he transported at additional expense to every town and village along the Ganges. Abraham was gentle and a show-off, a rare combination for an elephant, which made him the perennial crowd favorite of the show. It had been Sammy's plan to capitalize on Abraham's popularity by training him to become the first elephant in any circus in India that could juggle while swimming.

The issue was Abraham's pride. Juggling machetes was fine. But there were some things Abraham refused to do for applause or salted treats, and swimming was one of them.

Shabazz did not know his animal was capable of such thoughts, so he assumed the problem was stupidity on the part of the animal, the trainer or both. The fact that his biggest, most popular and most-expensive-to-feed animal refused to go near any tank of water made Shabazz angry.

"Enough!" the Shabazz said to Pawan Mehra, his lead animal trainer, as the two men boarded the river barge that carried the circus up and down the Ganges. "If you cannot get that animal into the tank by the time we dock in Mumbai, you can go back to where I found you—performing on the street with your little monkey!"

Later that night, as the barge pattered down the river, Abraham reached his trunk through the bars of his cage searching for a clutch of hay. To his surprise, the gate opened wide. Never in his dozen years of captivity had any of his cages or pens been left unlocked. As always, Abraham was hungry, so he pushed forward, expecting to step onto the barge's wide wooden deck.

Most nights, his cage faced toward the center of the barge. But tonight the door was aimed not inward toward the boat, but outward, toward the river. When Abraham stepped outside, his right foot touched only air and then water. Abraham trumpeted loudly when he fell, but his head was already below water, muffling the sound.

By the time he rose to the surface, the barge was already floating away down the river. He paddled after it, but the red and yellow heap got smaller and smaller. Abraham stopped

kicking, looked around, and saw a low rise of land far off to his left. He switched directions. Keeping his head underwater, he breathed through his trunk like a snorkel and paddled with his enormous legs.

It took five hours. His legs were tired and his lungs burned when the pad of his foot finally brushed a rock along the bottom. Soon he could walk. He hurried up the bank and over a small hill. In the yellow sunrise light he found before him a broad rice paddy with green bristles poking from the water. Abraham sunk his snout into the water and started sucking up all the rice he could eat.

He grazed for almost an hour before a man appeared on a nearby berm. The man carried a long stick like the ones Abraham's circus trainers used to discipline him. By force of habit, training and fear, the elephant froze. The man was shouting, but he didn't use any commands Abraham could recognize.

The man came closer and raised his stick to his shoulder. From the stick came a flash of light and a booming sound that scared Abraham. The elephant felt something hot hit his shoulder. The man took a few steps forward, raised the stick again, and Abraham felt another hot jolt, this time on his ribs.

Abraham's hind legs jolted to life. He ran through the paddy, away from the man and his strange powerful stick. Abraham ran and ran. He felt slow, his belly sloshing with a heavy load of rice and water. Eventually he came to a clump of trees surrounded by tall grass. Abraham fell asleep before his body even touched the ground.

It was morning again when Abraham woke. He heard the grass around him swishing, felt the ground beneath him quiver. Then he heard an elephant's trumpet. It was loud and close. He heaved himself to his feet and found himself face-to-face with a big male elephant. It stood a foot taller than Abraham.

Abraham walked backwards, taking in the sight of this tall male. He had always been the only male elephant in the circus and had never been challenged like this before. He had to look up at the wizened wild elephant's eyes, but as Abraham looked his challenger up and down, he was surprised by what he saw. The taller elephant looked ancient but, in fact, the old bull was just 10 years old. Repeated stretches of starvation had left his skin wrinkled and loose on his ribs. His left trunk was broken from so many fights for dominance.

Abraham, fed grain every day of his life and strong from all the balancing tricks, noticed all of this instinctively. His fear turned to anger, and he stopped stepping backwards. He flared his ears and stomped the ground, making his strong leg muscles ripple. Finally he raised his head and trumpeted. It was the loudest sound he had ever made in his life.

The old-looking alpha male stood his ground, but he did not charge. Instantly, Abraham knew he'd won. The wild one stomped and brayed and huffed. Eventually he looked away, and walked off toward the river. Two young females stepped toward Abraham and sniffed.

Abraham's first few months as a lower alpha male in the herd's complex leadership structure were patchy. Whenever he saw a human, he would freeze in place. This annoyed the other elephants, who mostly ignored the humans and bumped into their big new friend every time he stopped suddenly.

But Abraham understood humans in ways the herd did not, and this became a major advantage. One day, a few dozen elephants tried slurping up the last stalks of rice from a paddy that had already been harvested. Some were growing testy from hunger. The dry season had been especially hot and long, and many of the grasslands the herd traditionally grazed were yellow and barren by the time they arrived.

As the others scrounged for whatever rice they could find, Abraham noticed a few huts rising along the berm. He walked to the closest hut, which smelled of grease and cooked lentils. He reared up on his hind legs and brought his front feet crashing down onto the hut's mud walls, which crumbled. Lifting the corrugated metal roof off with his trunk, he found fat woven sacks of beans, lentils and salt.

Abraham ate for a few minutes, then stepped aside to make room for some babies. One baby ate so quickly she made loud snorts. The mother elephant swung her trunk around and patted Abraham on the head.

The wet season came and then the dry. Abraham never became one of the herd's lead alpha males—he was too strange and his behavior around humans made the other elephants nervous.

Even though he was relatively short, Abraham was strong, fast, and he retained the graceful movements of a practiced dancer. The female elephants liked this, and during confrontations with humans or other herds, the different groups of males all competed to recruit Abraham to their team.

His biggest contribution, however, was his understanding of humans. Abraham was able to find food in places none of the other elephants had ever thought to look. Soon Abraham had a mate and baby elephants of his own.

One morning the herd was standing on the banks of the Ganges. Abraham watched his youngest offspring use his trunk to shoot his sister with water when he noticed a red and yellow barge motoring slowly upriver. There were humans on the deck of the barge and they looked at the herd, but did not point. They did not seem to recognize any of the elephants standing there.

Abraham felt the urge to stop grazing and stand motionless. He felt some fear, too, but he could not remember why. Sensing a fresh patch of grass beside him, Abraham turned his back to the barge and ate.

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. Who is Abraham?

- A a trainer
- B an elephant
- C a rice farmer
- D a circus ringmaster

2. How does Abraham change in the story?

- A He was afraid of performing, then overcomes his anxiety.
- B He was afraid to swim, then decides to go into the circus tank.
- C He was unfamiliar with humans, but later learns their ways.
- D He was trained as a performer, then escapes into the wild.

3. Abraham's life in captivity was very different from that of his wild peers, as he learns when he meets the wild elephant male. What evidence supports this?

- A Abraham's fear turns to anger when he meets the wild elephant male.
- B The wild elephant male looked ancient but was just 10 years old.
- C Abraham was healthy and strong, while the wild elephant was starved and injured.
- D Abraham raised his head and trumpeted whereas the wild elephant stood his ground but did not charge.

4. Based on the story, how did Abraham adjust to life in the wild?

- A Abraham adjusted to life in the wild very easily.
- B Abraham found it very difficult to adjust to life in the wild.
- C Abraham was unable to adjust to life in the wild.
- D Abraham adjusted to life in the wild with some difficulty.

5. What is this passage mainly about?

- A The life of an Indian villager.
- B The story of an escaped elephant.
- C The life of an Indian animal trainer.
- D The history of the Al-Sindhu All Saints Circus.

6. Read the following paragraph, written from Abraham's point of view.

"The man came closer and raised his **stick** to his shoulder. From the **stick** came a flash of light and a booming sound that scared Abraham. The elephant felt something hot hit his shoulder. The man took a few steps forward, raised the **stick** again, and Abraham felt another hot jolt, this time on his ribs."

Based on the description above, what kind of "**stick**" was the man really holding?

- A a club
- B a sword
- C a spear
- D a gun

7. Choose the answer that best completes the sentences below.

Abraham never became one of the herd's lead alpha males—he was too strange and his behavior around humans made the other elephants nervous. _____, the different groups of males all competed to recruit Abraham to their team because he understood humans.

- A Consequently
- B However
- C In summary
- D Moreover

8. The wild elephant herd eventually came to accept Abraham as one of their own. What evidence from the text supports this conclusion?

9. Describe how Abraham's experience as a circus elephant helped him to survive in the wild.

10. How do you think Abraham feels about his new life with the wild elephants at the end of the story? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
