

A Hunger Artist

By Franz Kafka; adapted for the stage by Cat Hearth

Characters:

Hunger Artist
Circus Overseer
2 Assistants to the Overseer
Impresario
2 Young Ladies
2 Doctors
Spectators
Musicians
3 Watchers (Butchers)
A Mother
Her Child
A Man
Train Conductor
Circus Manager
Circus Attendees
A Father with His Son
A Man at the Circus
Panther

Scenes:

1. A Circus.
2. Flashback: Prague, 40th day of fast.
3. Another city, another fast, night.
4. Same, day.
5. A train compartment.
6. Circus Manager's office.
7. Circus.
8. Circus, continue from scene 1.

Scene 1: [*Hunger Artist in large cage lying down, covered by straw, not visible. Sign over cage, partly torn and obscured by a rag: "GER ARTIST". Smaller sign on front of cage: "Now fasted for 52 days." In the background circus music, sounds of wild animals: tigers, lions, wolves, etc. Overseer and 2 Assistants enter. One Assistant has a clipboard.*]

Overseer: [*While walking, to assistants*] ...and we have to order more meat for the tigers in the morning [*etc*]... [*notices the cage*] Why should this perfectly good cage be left standing here unused with dirty straw in it?

Assistants: I don't know, don't ask me [*etc.*]...

1st Assistant [seeing the sign]: Wait, now I remember: there was this guy fasting. You know, that crazy guy who said he could go without food for longer than anyone in the world? Yeah, he was in this cage.

2nd Assistant [pokes into the straw with a broom handle. Hunger Artist sits up with a groan]: It's the Hunger Artist!

Hunger Artist: I am nothing now, stuck in a forgotten corner of the circus on the way to the animal cages. Times have changed; nobody is interested in professional fasting anymore. But you should have seen me in my prime - everybody came to see the great Hunger Artist...

[Actors freeze, lights fade.]

Scene 2: *[Flashback: The cage with Hunger Artist, Spectators, a Band, the Impresario, the 2 Young Ladies, 2 Doctors. Sign over the cage: "The Hunger Artist"; sign on or by the cage: "Now fasted for 40 days." A musical flourish.]*

Impresario: Ladies and gentlemen, the Hunger Artist has fasted for forty days. I will now open the cage and, after the doctors have checked him, he will break his fast. *[Applause. He ceremoniously opens the door.]* And now, Dr. Hachek and Dr. Hlad, if you please. *[Doctors enter the cage.]*

Hunger Artist: Why stop fasting at this particular moment, after 40 days of it? Why stop now, when I am in my best fasting form, or rather, not yet quite in my best fasting form? Why should I be cheated of the fame I would get for fasting longer, for being not only the record hunger artist of all time, but for beating my own record by a performance beyond human imagination? The public pretends to admire me so much, why should they have so little patience with me? Besides, I'm tired, I'm comfortable sitting in the straw. And now I'm supposed to stand up and go down to a meal the very thought of which makes me sick. *[Doctors exit the cage.]*

Impresario: Thank you, doctors. And now these lovely young ladies will have the honor of helping the artist to the table for his first meal in 40 days. Ladies? *[The Ladies enter the cage to help the Artist.]*

Song: "Forty Days"

Hunger Artist: I have now fasted forty days, why can't I go on longer,
They say I'm looking weak as hell, but I keep feeling stronger.
Why should I be so limited just by this greedy man.
I won't stop now, I'll show them how to fast as no one can.

Chorus [sung by the Doctors and Spectators]:

He's an artist, he eats no dinner
We love to watch him getting thinner
He eats no food, he never cheats,
Until the fast is done, he never eats.

Impresario: [entering the cage]

You have now fasted forty days, and this is what I'm saying
The public's losing interest, they will not go on paying.
It's time to get out of the cage and have something to eat,
You've done your best, now take a rest and taste this little treat.

Chorus

Young Ladies: He has now fasted forty days, he is out of his head,
It's scary just to think of it, he must be almost dead.
So we will buy a photograph to show that it's no lie,
We've had our fun, but now it's done, and we must say goodbye.

Chorus

[At the end of the last chorus each actor in turn sings "He never eats" (HA: "I never eat") to a grand finale of all together: "He never eats!" At the last word the Impresario manages to get a bite of food into the Artist's mouth. Applause. Musical flourish.]

Impresario: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for being here. The Hunger Artist wants you to know that he appreciates the kindness and generosity of the people of this fine city and will surely return here someday to partake of your hospitality once more. The doctors tell me that he is healthy though weak and needs to rest and recuperate for a while. And now - oh, what's that? [he puts his ear to the HA's mouth] You want to drink a toast to the people of this great city? Ladies and gentlemen, a toast: to the wonderful people of Prague!

[Applause. Music. The people leave.]

Scene 3: [The cage with Hunger Artist. Night. Dim lights. Impresario, 3 Watchers in bloody butcher's aprons.]

Impresario: Franz, it's been a good day. These 3 butchers will be your watchers for tonight. [to the Watchers] We professionals know, of course, that the Hunger Artist would never swallow even the smallest morsel of food during a fast. The honor of his profession forbids it. But the people don't know this and so we allow them to nominate watchers. Thank you for volunteering your time. In the morning the Hunger Artist invites you to enjoy a good breakfast; a small consideration for your help. [He leaves. The Watchers sit down and start to play cards.]

1st Watcher: Say, why is a woman like a frying pan? You got to get her hot before you throw in the meat! [laughs]

2nd Watcher: You know, I wanted to marry your wife.

1st Watcher: You can have her. I'll throw in 50 pounds of ground round.

2nd Watcher: It's not enough. Did she get the sausage I sent her?

1st Watcher: Yeah, I chopped it into about 15 pieces.

Hunger Artist: No one can possibly watch me day and night, so no one can produce first-hand evidence that my fast was really rigorous and continuous. Only I can know that; therefore, I'm the sole completely satisfied spectator of my own fast.

Song: "Hunger is my Art"

Hunger Artist: People wonder why I do this, why I fast.
I'm an artist, first and last.
It's easy to fast, the easiest thing there is.
But for me it's more than show biz
Hunger is my art and I'm a master;
There never has been a greater faster.
I want the whole wide world to see,
I want to go down in history.

[speaking] I alone know, what no other initiate knows, how easy it is to fast. I make no secret of this, but people don't believe me. Some think I'm modest but most think I'm out for publicity or else that I'm a cheat - that I discovered a trick which makes fasting easy and now I'm bragging about it.

Watchers:

Let's leave him alone, we know the score.
Let him eat from his secret store.
No one could really fast as he pretends to do,
He's just a trickster through and through.
We all want to find some way,
To sit at ease and make it pay.
Hunger Artist, shmunger shmartist,
To us he's nothing but a fartist. *[Watchers laugh.]*

Hunger Artist: Hey, come over here, shine your light on me.
I'm really fasting, I want you to see.

Watchers [going to cage and shining their lights on HA]:

Tell us, Artist, why you do this show.
You can't be in it just for the dough.

Hunger Artist: I want to show the human race,
There's more to life than stuffing your face.

Watchers: There's more to life than sitting in a cage;
I wouldn't do that for any wage.

[Hunger Artist and Watchers sing the following at the same time:]

Hunger Artist: Hunger is my art and I'm a master;
There never has been a greater faster.
I want the whole wide world to see,
I want to go down in history.

Watchers: We all want to find some way,
To sit at ease and make it pay.
Hunger Artist, shmunger shmartist,
To us he's nothing but a fartist.

Impresario [entering with food]: It's breakfast time! *[The Watchers sit down to eat.]*

2nd Watcher: So how's business?

1st Watcher: I sold 500 pounds by Wednesday, and that was just pig. A lot of blood to get rid of.
I sold it to a farmer for fertilizer. My wife makes the best blood sausage.

2nd Watcher: My wife gives me good head cheese. *[They laugh.]*

3rd Watcher: Well, time to get to work!

Scene 4: [Daytime, the cage, Hunger Artist, Impresario, Spectators, Mother and Child.]

Child: Mother, why is he so skinny? I'm scared!

Mother: It's alright, don't cry. Come closer. Feel his arm. [*The Artist puts his arm through the bars.*] Now you should always eat all your dinner or you'll become like him.

Man: Mister Artist, can I have your autograph? You know, you're probably just melancholy because you fast too much. You need a vacation.

Hunger Artist: [*jumps up and shakes the bars of the cage.*] That's just like them, to say it's because I fast too much. I tell you, if you would let me fast as long as I wanted I would never be melancholy. There's no limit to my capacity for fasting!

Impresario: [*coming forward to stand by the cage*] Calm down, calm down. Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to apologize for this unpleasant behavior. It is the irritability caused by fasting which makes it hard for the Artist to control his temper. This condition can never be understood by well fed people. He claims he could fast even for much longer than he does. Think of his high ambition. Such good will. Such great self denial that almost nobody could ever aspire to. However, allow me to show these pictures of the Artist on the fortieth day of the fast. You can see that he is almost dead from exhaustion. [*The Spectators ooh and aah.*] These pictures may be purchased for a modest fee at the ticket counter. [*Spectators and Impresario exit.*]

Hunger Artist: What a perversion of the truth! It's impossible to fight against a whole world of non-understanding. [*He sinks back down onto the straw.*]

Scene 5: [Hunger Artist and the Impresario on a train. Sounds, movement, etc. Perhaps they are drinking wine. During the following speech, the conductor comes in and asks for tickets.]

Impresario: Franz, how many years have we been partners? Twenty years, thirty years? All the countries we've seen, I don't even remember the names. It's been a good time, Franz. The places we've been, the faces we've seen, the things we've done! The business has been good to you, and to me too. But what can we do? We've tried London, Paris, Berlin, Prague, Barcelona, Milano, Copenhagen. People just aren't interested anymore. They don't come to see you, Franz. They don't buy tickets. We can't pay the costs.

Hunger Artist: Let's try a few more places, Max. Maybe it's just the season.

Impresario: No, Franz. I have a family to support. I can't go on losing money.

Hunger Artist: But what can I do? I'm too old to start a new profession.

Song: "Hunger Artistry is Through" with dance:

Hunger Artist: It's my life, my only life,
I have no children, I have no wife.
I've been a great star, I've been a hero.
Now no one wants me, I'm just a zero.

Impresario: Be a man, Franz, and face the facts:
You can't go on living in the past.
Fasting's finished, your career is done,

You no longer have a place in the sun.

Together: What can we do, do, bedoobedeboo
Hunger artistry is through. What can we do?
We don't have left a single fan.
No one loves a hungry man.

Hunger Artist: It's my life, my only life,
I have no children, I have no wife.
I've been a great star, I've been a hero.
Now no one wants me, I'm just a zero.

Together: What can we do, do, bedoobedeboo
Hunger artistry is through. What can we do?
We don't have left a single fan.
No one loves a hungry man.
What can we do, do, bedoobedeboo
What can we do, do, bedoobedeboo
What can we do?

Hunger Artist: [*Holds up a newspaper*] Look, here's an ad for the Blaster and Blooey circus. They're looking for talent. Listen: "Looking for anyone who can juggle, dance, blow bubbles, do magic tricks or has any special performing talent." At least it will be a steady job. [*The train stops.*]

Announcement: We are arriving at Berlin Hauptbahnhof. Please check that you didn't leave anything behind in the compartments. [*They look at each other for a few beats.*] All aboard, destination: Prague. [*Train whistle*]

Hunger Artist: Goodbye Max.

Impresario: Goodbye Franz. Good luck.

Scene 6: [*Circus, a desk, the Manager. Sounds of a circus. Circus music.*]

Manager: Well Mr. Kafka, I must tell you that a large circus such as ours with its enormous traffic in replacing and recruiting men, animals, and apparatus can always find a use for people at any time, provided they do not ask too much. But I don't know, we've never had a hunger artist before.

Hunger Artist: But Mr. Samsa, it's not only me; my name is quite famous and that would lend prestige to your circus. After all, it's not as if I'm past my prime and seeking a refuge in some quiet corner of a circus. On the contrary, I can fast as well as ever. And if you allow me to fast as I like I could astound the world by setting a record never yet achieved.

Manager: This is a contract we have prepared. As to your salary...

Hunger Artist: That's alright. Just give me the contract.

Manager: Very well, Mr. Kafka, just sign here. [*He signs it without reading it.*]

Scene 7: [*Cage with Hunger Artist. A sign at stage left: "This way to the Menagerie", with arrow pointing to stage right. Sounds of animals. From off, circus music, then applause.*]

Voice of an announcer: Ladies and gentlemen, thank you very much. There will be an intermission before the second half. Through this door, you may go to see the animals.

[*Circus Attendees enter SL and cross in front of cage.*]

Circus Attendees: What's this? This isn't an animal! It's just a skinny guy sitting in a cage! Who wants to see that? A Hunger Artist! I didn't pay money to look at a hungry man. I can see hungry men any day I want. The streets are filled with them. It's depressing.

Hunger Artist: I'm not just a hungry man, I'm a Hunger Artist.

Circus Attendees: What makes it an art? You're not a painter, or a sculptor, or an actor or dancer. You just sit there. Let's go see the animals. (*They exit.*)

Hunger Artist: (calling after them) I'm unique! I'm doing something no one else can do! You've heard about people, about Jesus Christ and Muhammed doing it, but here you can see with your own eyes. Oh, what's the use?

[*Music*]

Just try to explain the art of fasting,
You can't get it unless you feel it
I wanted fame everlasting,
But I won't have it, I can't steal it.
People stop to look at me
But they can't see, they just can't see.

Perhaps if I wasn't so near the animals. People rush past me in their haste to get to the animals. And the ones that do stop don't really want to see me, they just stop to hold up the ones behind them. And it's horrible to hear their roars at feeding time and to see the attendants going past with lumps of raw meat. But I don't dare complain, they might put me even farther away where no one would ever see me.

Song: People Pass Me By

Once upon a time, once upon a time I was great.
I fasted all the time, all the time, it must be my fate.
It's my way of life, it's my prayer, it's my devotion.
Fasting connected me to the cosmic ocean.
I'm so alive, and at the same time I'm dead.
I feel I could travel a million miles just in my head.

A Father with a Son: [Entering] Now in my time I watched similar performances to this, of course much more thrilling. (*They exit.*)

Hunger Artist: Did you see that kid? The shiny look in his eyes.
Shows that better times are coming, again our fame will rise
Oh, what am I saying? It's no good at all.
I'm a miserable failure. I can't get past, I can't get through, I can't get over this wall.

Hunger Artist: They don't even bother to change the sign anymore. I can fast forever, but no one, not even I, knows what records I am breaking.

A Man: (Looking at the day board) It says here he's fasted for 52 days. What a swindle! Who could fast for that long?

Hunger Artist: Actually, it's much longer than that.

Circus Attendees [re-enter and surround cage, holding onto bars, chanting as rhythmic background]:
Skinny man, skinny man. [Repeat]

Hunger Artist: The verdict has gone out against me, anyhow.
I can fast as long as I can, nothing can save me now.
People pass me by, pass me by.
They don't even stop to say "hi."
I'm just a skinny man in a dirty cage.
A skinny old man in a dirty cage.
Once I was all the rage, now I'm just a man in a cage, in a cage.
People pass me by, pass me by.
They don't even stop to say "hi."
They pass me by.

[The Hunger Artist sinks down into the straw as Circus Attendees exit and lights fade]

Scene 8: [End of flashback, continue from scene 1. Overseer, Assistants, signs as in scene 1.]

Overseer: Are you still fasting? When on earth do you mean to stop?

Hunger Artist: Forgive me, everybody.

Overseer: Of course, we forgive you.

Hunger Artist: I always wanted you to admire my fasting.

Overseer: We do admire it.

Hunger Artist: But you shouldn't admire it.

Overseer: Well, then we don't admire it. But why shouldn't we admire it?

Hunger Artist: Because I have to fast, I can't help it.

Overseer: What a fellow you are! And why can't you help it?

Hunger Artist: Because I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I should have made no fuss and stuffed myself like you or anyone else. [he dies]

Overseer: Well, clear this out now! [Attendants bring in wheelbarrow and carry the HA offstage.]
Hmm. Nice cage, good location. I know, we'll put that new panther in here.

[They return with the Panther, put it in the cage, and close the door. They throw him a bloody hunk of meat. Overseer and Assistants exit; Circus Attendees enter.]

Circus Attendees: Look at the beautiful panther, so noble.
He seems to carry freedom around with him. It's somewhere in his jaws.
Such joy of life! Such ardent passion! I can hardly stand it!
I could stay here forever.

[The panther roars.]

The end.

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