

The Washington Post

Lie of the Jungle

He had the chance to write the biography of Cheeta, known as the world's oldest and most famous chimp. But his research led him into serious monkey business.

By R.D. Rosen
Sunday, December 7, 2008; W14

In the fall of 2007, I had been working for several months on a proposal for the authorized biography of Cheeta, Johnny Weissmuller's sidekick in MGM's Tarzan movies of the 1930s and '40s. Against all odds, Cheeta was still alive at the age of 75, 20 years older than a captive chimp's normal life span. When the agent for Cheeta and his owner, Dan Westfall, had first approached me about writing the biography, I was astonished that a fixture of not just my own childhood, but my parents', as well, one of the most celebrated animals in movie history, was retired in Palm Springs, Calif., selling his paintings for \$135 donations to thousands of far-flung admirers. His birthday parties were now covered by national, and even international, media. At Cheeta's 75th birthday party, his owner, who runs a non-profit primate sanctuary, had played a video of Jane Goodall attempting to sing "Happy Birthday" to him in the pant-hooting language of the wild chimps she had first observed in Tanzania in the early 1960s. Could there be higher tribute to a chimp than that?

I was too absorbed in the many fascinating aspects of my research -- the history of men and their captive chimps, the early days of Hollywood animal training, the evolution of the Tarzan franchise, newspaper clips about Cheeta, not to mention a meeting with the fading star himself -- to indulge any incipient doubts about Cheeta's true identity. To be honest, I was also too enchanted with what I had been told was the project's potential lucrativeness to question its premise; the agent's casual claim that she "never gets out of bed for less than a quarter of a million dollars" had worked its magic on me.

But one oft-repeated fact about the chimp's life nagged at me. It was one of the standard stories in Cheeta's biography -- repeated in Newsweek and other magazines, recited by Cheeta's current owner and many Cheeta admirers -- that the first of his two owners, animal trainer Tony Gentry, had gotten him in Liberia as a baby and smuggled him under his overcoat aboard a Pan Am flight home in 1932. During the long flight, the diapered Cheeta escaped from under Gentry's coat, mischievously scampered up and down the aisle, and had to be subdued by hysterical stewardesses with a bottle of warm milk.

After four months of research and writing, I decided to ask a question that, in retrospect, was so obvious that it was curious that no journalist before me had bothered to ask it: In 1932, were there any transatlantic flights for Gentry to smuggle Cheeta onto? The answer, I wasn't surprised to learn, was no. Transatlantic commercial airline service wasn't inaugurated until 1939.

Early on, I had raised the issue of documenting Cheeta's age. Obviously, I had to be protected against the possibility that, if I published a biography of the world's oldest chimpanzee, someone would make a fool out of me, my reputation, my publisher, Cheeta, his owner, and the agent by proving he was not 75. But at that early stage, it seemed a mere formality, and I had no idea even what such documentation would consist of. It was unclear if Tony Gentry, who had given Cheeta to his distant cousin Dan Westfall two years before his death in 1993, had left any papers. I'd questioned both Westfall, and his agent about the



file of documents that persuaded Guinness World Records in 2001 to award Cheeta a certificate for being "the world's oldest living primate, aged 69 years and one month." But it didn't seem urgent, and it certainly wasn't desirable, to question the entire premise of the book I had just agreed to write.

The falsehood about 1932 gave me pause, but I reasoned that anyone can get a memory wrong. In the first of what were to be several acts of denial, I simply ignored my discovery and proceeded with my research. But my subconscious, already on notice, soon prompted me to verify another routine biographical "fact" about Cheeta's life. Westfall had mentioned that Cheeta had come out of retirement in 1966 at the age of 34 to play the role of Chee-Chee the chimp in 1967's "Doctor Dolittle" with Rex Harrison. Even People magazine (Cheeta's "last film hurrah was 1967's 'Doctor Dolittle' ") and Newsweek ("You laughed at him in 'Doctor Doolittle' ") said so. Numerous Web sites concurred. So I watched a DVD of "Dr. Doolittle," a movie in which Chee-Chee is played by a juvenile chimp no older than 7 or possibly 8; after that age, a chimp's physical appearance changes dramatically. That was it. Cheeta was not in that film. Whatever Cheeta was doing in 1966, he wasn't making a movie with Rex Harrison.

The same Newsweek also reported, "Only once did Cheeta walk off the set -- reportedly when Ronald Reagan kept forgetting his lines in 'Bedtime for Bonzo.' " "Bedtime for Bonzo!" If Cheeta had actually been Reagan's as well as Tarzan's sidekick, that would make him the Zelig of primates, turning up wherever entertainment history was being made. I sent 1951's "Bedtime for Bonzo" to the head of my Netflix queue and wasn't shocked to discover that Cheeta, by then a full-grown 19-year-old, is not in that movie, either. Bonzo was played by another, infant or juvenile chimp.

As Cheeta's claims to fame were springing leaks, I began spending hours in front of my television, freeze-framing on close-ups of various Cheetas in MGM Tarzan movies I had rented. I would take an 8-by-10 glossy of Westfall's Palm Springs Cheeta, approach the television and compare the two images. Chimpanzees' faces change quite a bit as they age, not unlike most human ones, but the contours and configuration of an ear change very little. I would freeze on a frame of Cheeta in three-quarters or full profile and try to find a match. In each Tarzan movie, the Cheeta role had been played by more than one chimp, depending on what talents the scene called for. (In fact, there was another, less well publicized Cheeta in Palm Harbor, Fla., who was also said to be in his 70s and a veteran of Weissmuller movies. But that's another story.) The trick was to look at all the scenes and positively identify Westfall's Cheeta in at least one. But none of the movie chimps' ears was an adequate match for the Palm Springs Cheeta's.

Things appeared to be falling apart. I was now in the awkward, if not ridiculous, position of having to verify a claim -- that Cheeta was 75 -- whose accuracy was of limited interest to anyone outside the community of Cheeta and Tarzan fanatics. How fanatical? On one end of the spectrum were the tour buses and the casual fans who occasionally stopped in front of Westfall's house, which had by the front door a cast-metal sculpture of a young chimp and a discreet sign that said "Casa de Cheeta." If Westfall happened to be outside, the middle-age driver might stick his head out the window and ask, "Is this where Cheeta lives?" and, "Is it really true he's still alive?" On the other end of the spectrum, though, were true believers, for whom getting Cheeta the elusive star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame had been, and still was, a high priority. In 1985, two brothers named David and Dan Linck, intrigued by a Los Angeles Times feature article, befriended Cheeta and his frail first owner, Gentry. On their first of several visits to Gentry's modest home in Thousand Oaks, Calif., Cheeta sat at the picnic table with them, wearing a leash and consuming eggs, toast and a Budweiser before smoking a cigar also provided by his owner. Gentry told the brothers how badly he wanted a star for Cheeta on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. After all, Lassie and Rin Tin Tin had theirs. Sympathetic, the Lincks that summer organized a "Cheetathon" at the Park Plaza Hotel to raise money for the cause. Unfortunately, the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, which decides these matters, rejected Cheeta's application.

In 2002, after Cheeta had been rejected for a star several more times -- the deliberations are famously secretive and sometimes baffling -- a middle-age independent film producer named Matthew Devlen was working on a still-unreleased documentary about Johnny Weissmuller when he learned that Cheeta was still alive. Although he didn't consider himself a rabid Tarzan or Cheeta fan, the news of Cheeta's improbable retirement had jarred loose a profound and forgotten affection. When Devlen met Westfall

and Cheeta in 2004, he was shocked to discover that Cheeta did not have a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Devlen launched a serious campaign on his behalf in 2007 and established a Web site, www.gocheeta.com, which needled the committee by featuring photos of many non-human celebrities -- among them Winnie the Pooh, Donald Duck, Woody Woodpecker, Kermit the Frog, Big Bird, the Rugrats and Godzilla -- who already had their stars. Devlen claimed to be in discussions with Guinness World Records Museum near Grauman's Chinese Theatre in Hollywood for a wax figure of Cheeta. But perhaps his most ambitious and optimistic project was recruiting a Nascar Craftsman Truck Team owner from Dallas to draft plans for a Chimpmobile, described as a cross between the Popemobile and a safari vehicle, to transport Cheeta from Palm Springs to Hollywood Boulevard when the time came. (When Cheeta was denied his star again this past June, the celebrity Web site TMZ.com used the headline: "It's Hard Out Here For A Chimp.")

Was it out of sensitivity to the feelings of people such as the Lincks and Devlen, to say nothing of the feelings of Westfall and his agent, that I still withheld the extent of my doubts about Cheeta's age? Not really. In fact, I called Westfall to ask if he had seen "Doctor Dolittle." When he said he hadn't, I told him that Cheeta wasn't in it, to which he replied amiably, "Well, that's what Tony told me." He had nothing further to say on the matter. With the agent, I had a couple of conversations in which I reported the Pan Am Clipper and "Doctor Dolittle" discoveries and Tony Gentry's obvious muddling of chimps. She didn't respond with any alarm, and, allowing myself to be momentarily consoled, I stopped well short of arguing that the emerging pattern of inconsistencies demanded that we sit down and revisit the premise of the book. It was as if I had fulfilled my obligation to the truth merely by reporting my doubts to them.

In the mid-1950s, the social psychologist Leon Festinger devised the term "cognitive dissonance" for a psychological phenomenon that is so universal and commonplace that it's remarkable no suitably scientific-sounding term had been invented before then. Cognitive dissonance applies to the conflict between what a person believes and what he knows or learns is true. Strangely, Festinger discovered, the believer usually resolves the conflict by intensifying his discredited belief. Festinger cited five conditions that need to be met for someone to become even more committed to a belief after it is discredited. One of them definitely applied to me: "The person holding the belief must have committed himself to it; that is, for the sake of his belief, he must have taken some important action that is difficult to undo." Indeed, I had committed myself to a project that, considering the elusiveness of good book ideas and my substantial investment of time and effort, I was not in the least eager to give up. Besides which, I had already flown 3,000 miles to meet Cheeta in Palm Springs, and it was not the kind of experience that I wanted to waste.

When Dan Westfall was a teenager growing up poor in Chillicothe, Ohio, in the 1950s, his mother let him order a spider monkey (mail-order exotic animals remained legal in America until the mid-1970s). The baby monkey arrived from Florida, cowering in an 18-square-inch box that contained neither food nor water. Westfall, who named the pet Beulah, was soon in heaven. Beulah pretty much had the run of the house and the yard during the day -- Dan could still conjure the sound of her footsteps overhead as she scampered across the roof. At night Dan smuggled Beulah into bed with him, under the covers, until the monkey's ecstatic chattering alerted his parents to the crime.

Within a year, however, Dan's parents divorced, and his mother decided to take Dan to California. A few weeks before Dan's departure, his hard-drinking father found a new home for Beulah in the country. Shortly before he left for the West Coast, Dan paid a last visit to her. He found her in the back yard of a rural beer joint, emaciated, alone, and leashed to a clothesline. Beulah greeted him loudly and took a few steps toward him with her hands outstretched, like a tiny beggar, but fell to the ground, too weak to stand. Afraid to confront his father's friends with their abusive neglect, he briefly cradled her, then fled home to tell his mother, who called Chillicothe Animal Control. But it was too late. By the time officers arrived the next day to investigate, Beulah was dead. Dan was devastated. It is, in a sense, all you need to know about Dan Westfall to understand his deep feeling for animals.

On a hot, dry July afternoon -- there is really no other kind in Palm Springs -- I sat quietly on the living room couch in Westfall's white single-story cinderblock-and-wood house on the fringes of town. Westfall, a Sonny Bono look-alike in his 60s wearing a polo shirt, shorts and cross-trainers, had instructed me to sit

and wait for him to retrieve the subject of my biography from his large enclosure in the backyard sanctuary where he resides with several other primates.

"Are you sure I'll be okay over here on the couch?" I had asked Westfall twice before he went to get Cheeta. (No one gets very far in basic chimp research before learning that adult chimpanzees are five or six times more powerful than humans and can make -- and have made -- pretty short work of putting people in the hospital.) The couch was about eight feet away from the famous ape's eventual destination, a Formica table on which a midafternoon snack was waiting. When journalists and others come to visit, Westfall likes to get Cheeta from his cage in back -- "cage" being a misleadingly pejorative word for an enclosure far larger than most New York City studio apartments, and with better views -- and bring him into the house to "meet" his guests.

Westfall assured me that I was safe because he could read every nuance of Cheeta's facial expression and body language for the slightest evidence of discontent. "You'll be fine," he said. "The only sure way to antagonize Cheeta is to threaten or attack me. Since he's completely devoted to me, he'll go after you."

The screen door slammed shut, and I heard Westfall's footsteps. Westfall's eight other animals -- three hyperactive Pomeranians, one Chihuahua, and four parrots living in a stack of cages by the kitchen table -- suddenly fell very quiet. They apparently knew from experience that, in regard to Cheeta's occasional entrances into the house, a respectful immobility, combined with an absence of barking or avian backtalk, was the best policy. Then, turning the corner from the front hall into the living room, hand in hand, were Westfall and America's hairiest has-been. Imagine a nursing home attendant escorting a very hirsute, very old George Burns into the solarium, and you're halfway to picturing the scene. The sinewy, solemn, 4-foot-tall Cheeta, somewhat grizzled and a bit threadbare, stared straight ahead. It wasn't easy reconciling this character with the lovable scamp who had made a career out of getting Tarzan out of serious trouble.

Cheeta wore only a light plastic string looped loosely around his neck as he shuffled in at Westfall's side. To my great dismay, Westfall didn't even bother to hold his end of the string. It was one of those moments in life -- like severe airplane turbulence, for instance -- when the thought crosses your mind that you're in terrible danger, but you don't want to make a fuss since no one else seems to be all that concerned. The mere presence of the plastic string around Cheeta's neck was evidently a sufficient reminder for him to be on his best behavior. By temperament, Westfall had earlier made clear, Cheeta had always been on the docile end of the chimp spectrum, and age had rendered him even mellower. Still, Cheeta had had his moments. Several years before, Cheeta's first owner, Gentry, was waiting backstage before a television appearance with the chimp, on whose head he had balanced a banana as part of the act. Jerry Lewis, another guest, was standing nearby and, being Jerry Lewis, snatched the banana. Had Tony not quickly jumped between Cheeta and the Nutty Professor -- who had no idea that he had just done the single nuttiest thing in his life -- millions of Jerry Lewis detractors would have been spared decades of his shameless antics.

Suffice it to say that Jay Leno had twice invited Westfall and Cheeta on "The Tonight Show," but the producers wouldn't agree to Westfall's one condition -- that Westfall sit between Jay and Cheeta . . . just in case.

"Say hello to our visitor," Westfall said as they passed before me.

Cheeta clearly understood the request and glanced briefly at me with disturbingly indifferent eyes. (Forget George Burns; now he seemed more like a convict being walked from solitary to the exercise yard.) He then looked at what awaited him on the small round Formica kitchen table next to the parrots: an afternoon snack consisting of a diet soda in a tall plastic cup, an apple, a plastic bowl of tortilla chips and an Italian hero donated by a local sandwich shop.

Cheeta's proximity had a couple of effects on me. The more observable one was to make me sit very still in a state of petrified wonder. (One of many disservices show business has done to chimps is to ossify them in the public imagination as eternally lovable rascals.) My other reaction was to become self-conscious about the trappings of civilization. Westfall's sparkling white tile floors, the leather

furniture, the plastic plants, the walls covered with paintings of and by chimps suddenly all seemed all so . . . human. The guest bathroom I had recently visited seemed so silly, with its chimpanzee-embroidered towels, plastic chimp trapped inside a bar of translucent soap, and color-coordinated brown-and-gray painting by Cheeta hanging over the toilet.

Cheeta climbed onto the molded plastic chair at the kitchen table and squatted there. When Westfall immediately reminded him to "Stop monkeying around," Cheeta sat properly, letting his withered-looking feet with their black scraggly toes dangle over the edge of the seat.

Then it looked like all hell was going to break loose. Cheeta immediately plunged his face into the bowl of tortilla chips, selected one with his rubbery lips, and chewed. I thought, "Oh, my God -- here it comes!" I had visions of a one-chimp food fight, if not chaos on a grander scale. But Cheeta quickly dispelled my fears by proceeding to gingerly pick up the Diet Coke, his thumb and long forefinger encircling the Carl's Jr.'s plastic tumbler while his other three fingers remained daintily outstretched. He took a sip of the soda with the finesse of a society matron at a charity tea. He was no less careful with the apple, grasping it with human precision and taking a lusty bite -- Cheeta has all his original teeth, one of the benefits of life with loving bipeds -- before putting it back on the place mat exactly where it was. He was more interested in the contents of the Italian sub sandwich than its bread and pushed the whole thing against his face so that the two halves of the roll separated, giving him access to the mortadella and provolone. He chewed with his mouth closed. Furthermore, in the next few minutes, Cheeta revealed a habit I had thought belonged exclusively to humans -- and then only to a compulsive subset of humans that happened to include me: Cheeta consumed mouthfuls of his three foods in strict rotation, so that by the end only a bite of each was left.

Throughout, Westfall kept fussing, dabbing Cheeta's chin with a paper napkin, patting him on the back and delivering vaudeville asides, such as, "Now, don't go ape" and, "See, he has more class than I do!" Cheeta reciprocated by grooming Westfall's forearm and lower leg, removing imaginary bugs, tidbits of salt or flakes of dead skin. Westfall asked him for kisses, which Cheeta provided, complete with appropriate sound effects. I've known marriages that included these corny, tender intimacies -- well, perhaps not the eating of dead skin -- but, if anything, Westfall and Cheeta's life together suggested a higher union than mere marriage. Their duet was a reminder of the two coexisting, conflicting ideas that seem to underlie our fascination with primates: how bizarrely similar we are to our closest genetic cousins, and how frighteningly different.

Westfall now instructed Cheeta "to make a funny face" for me. Before I could protest that this was absolutely unnecessary, Cheeta again turned slightly in my direction and inverted his lips, transforming his face into a rictus of smooth pink gums and stained teeth. Three seconds later, the grin vanished. By now, Cheeta looked ready to return to his backyard habitat, but Westfall asked him to play a song on the piano, a request that seemed -- or was it my imagination? -- to fill him with ennui. Westfall led him to the piano seat, and Cheeta banged out a tuneless dirge. It was a desultory performance that Westfall tried to salvage by telling him to make the same gummy face again. When Westfall finally told him to wave goodbye, Cheeta scooted off the bench and, with his long arm hanging at his side, waggled a backhand farewell with his black fingers, as impersonal as a king's wave from his passing carriage.

On Cheeta's way out of the house, he passed two huge photos hanging on the wall near the front door. Of all the chimpanalia in his house, these two photographs were perhaps the most important, the ones meant to instantly establish his credibility as the prince of primate performers. They were MGM publicity photos, blown up to 2-by-3 feet and dry mounted. The first showed Johnny Weissmuller in his loincloth sitting next to his mother on the set of the 1934 movie "Tarzan and His Mate." Between them, and holding Mrs. Weissmuller's hand, is a 2- or 3-year-old chimp. In the other photo, Weissmuller, still in his loincloth, stands on a big branch, holding a vine in one hand and Cheeta's hand in the other. In Cheeta's grinning face, the placement of the ears, the arrangement of the features, you could almost make out the earlier incarnation of the face of the elder primate now walking slowly back to his quarters.

How could I suggest to Westfall a few months later that his beloved Cheeta was, in many respects, a

figment of his imagination? Or, more precisely, of Tony Gentry's imagination, since it was becoming clear that Westfall was the innocent victim of Cheeta's first owner's casual relationship to the facts.

I went back through my papers to find the 1985 L.A. Times feature story -- "A Chimp Off the Old Block in Many a Tarzan Movie." In the piece, Gentry "ticked off" his favorite chimps among those he trained for the movies, ending with his current Cheeta:

"I bought him from a dealer when they closed down the old Santa Monica Pier. Lemme see, when was that? Late '30s sometime. Mebbe 1938. Anyway, he was about 2 or 3 years old . . . so this Cheeta did one [movie] with Lex Barker. Or was it two with Weissmuller and one with Barker? Which ones? I dunno . . ."

There was further evidence of Gentry's confusion -- or perhaps deliberate obfuscation of his Cheeta's résumé. In 1985, a few months after the L.A. Times feature, People magazine published a feature on Gentry and Cheeta titled "Tarzan's Co-Star Cheetah Aims for Hollywood Immortality but Finds It's a Jungle Out There," beneath a heartwarming photo of Cheeta, beer can in hand, kissing Gentry on the nose.

The story is not a paragraph old before Gentry is described as having "fed, pampered and trained the 4-foot, 158-pound star for 38 years." Since we know Gentry got Cheeta when he was a baby, that would mean Cheeta was born in 1947 (1985 minus 38 years), or 15 years after the year in which he usually claimed he got him. It would mean that, at a time when Gentry was telling Westfall and many other people that Cheeta was 53, he was only in his late 30s.

Around this same time, I also spent a confusing few hours in the Special Collections Room of the Thousand Oaks public library, which possesses the world's largest assemblage of newspaper clips about the now defunct Jungleland, a tourist attraction and winter home for circus people, where so many movie animals were trained from the 1920s through the 1960s. In a local newspaper article from March 29, 1985, about Gentry's wish for a Walk of Fame star for Cheeta, the following sentence leapt out at me. "Then came Cheeta. Gentry bought him for \$300 on the old Santa Monica Pier in the late 1940s." In another folder was an article from the same period in the Los Angeles Daily News -- "Tarzan's famed chimp is alive and well at 53" -- which states that Gentry "found him in a Belgian Congo jungle more than half a century ago."

Let us recap for a moment. In the space of six months in 1985, Gentry had told reporters that he had acquired Cheeta in 1932 in the Belgian Congo, that he had obtained Cheeta in Santa Monica "mebbe" in 1938 and that he bought him in Santa Monica in the late 1940s. This meant that, in 2007, when Westfall's agent approached me with the idea of writing Cheeta's biography, Cheeta was either 75, 72, 60, or possibly 59.

By now, I was turning into the Inspector Javert of simian mysteries, obsessed with my small cause. In mid-November I found myself driving unknowingly and literally down a path toward the truth -- a dusky serpentine road in the foothills south of Thousand Oaks that led to the animal compound and home of retired animal trainer Hubert Wells, who, I had been told, used to know Gentry. Wells had begun as a young falconer in his native Hungary, fled to the United States after Russia crushed the Hungarian revolt of 1956 and ended up at Jungleland before starting his own business. (His film credits include "Babe: A Pig in the City" and "Out of Africa.") I was at this point clinging desperately to the hope that Cheeta had even once, even for one brief scene, shared the silver screen with Johnny Weissmuller. I expected Wells only to provide some background.

When I arrived, Wells introduced me to two other people sitting patiently at his kitchen table: his friend Stewart Raffill, a former animal trainer and now film director, and Cheryl Shawver, who had been a young trainer at Jungleland in the 1960s, and who had bought Wells's company, Animal Actors of Hollywood, a few years before. They not only had something to say about Cheeta, but they all had known Gentry. When I began by describing the book I was writing, the three of them shook their heads ruefully.

"It's not true," Wells said. "Tony got that chimp from Wally Ross. Wally was a premier chimp and elephant trainer. He was one of the managers of Pacific Ocean Park on the pier in Santa Monica. When

Pacific Ocean Park closed [in 1967], he had a chimp he owned and trained, about 6 or 7, the turning point for a chimp. He said, 'Here, Tony, do you want this chimp?' Tony said, 'I'll take it,' and he took it."

If Cheeta was 6 or 7 when Pacific Ocean park closed, he was born in 1960 or 61.

"You're sure about this?" I asked Wells. "That chimp was Dan Westfall's Cheeta?"

"Absolutely, no doubt, not for a one minute. Absolutely. I'd known Wally since '66, and used him on God knows how many pictures. And that chimp was never in any picture, much less a Johnny Weissmuller picture. The big lie is that he was never in the Tarzan movies, never in 'Doctor Dolittle,' never in any movie."

Although Stewart Raffill speculated that Gentry may have had a previous chimp who was in some Tarzan movies, Wells said, "He never talked about his adventures on Tarzan movies. He never -- ever -- mentioned being on a Tarzan picture. Never. Ever."

When Gentry told stories, Shawver added, "Wally and everybody there, in private, would roll their eyes . . . He just took credit for things he didn't do. He just embellished his stories."

I have to admit I was shaken. We are never prepared for the death of loved ones -- or for the demise of lucrative premises.

"Unfortunately, it's Hollywood, and people do exaggerate," said Raffill.

"Why do you think he did it?" I asked.

"Because it made him feel good!" said Shawver. "You tell stories, people talk to you, you get visitors, you get company. People want to hear that story. Whether it's true or not, they like it."

As I wound my way back to the main road, I thought of what Westfall had told me with pride a few months earlier -- that, on meeting Cheeta in the flesh, Jane Goodall had said, "Why, he doesn't look any older than 45."

That night, I paced my hotel room in Hollywood as I tried to convince Westfall and Cheeta's agent over the phone that, although Cheeta was essentially a fraud and a biography was no longer possible, I had an even better book now. The celebrity biography of a chimp might be commercial, but what I had in mind was far richer. A book that would touch on our curious but all-too-human need to believe in symbols, to keep alive our childhood through the immortality of its cherished icons, to help ensure our own longevity by imputing it to others. A book about a forgotten slice of Hollywood history and the terrible fate of most captive chimps (though not Cheeta, who did live a privileged life for a captive ape). About how, in Hollywood, even the animals lie about their age. All the agent had to do was convince her client -- Westfall was blameless, after all; he had inherited Gentry's lie.

The agent could not have been more complimentary about the thoroughness of my research and my commitment to the truth. "I knew we had chosen the right writer," she said. We agreed to pursue a solution to our predicament when I returned to New York.

Back home, I waited days to hear from her before receiving an e-mail that said in part:

I'm talking to Dan about the bigger issues the possible new direction your proposed book on Cheeta is taking, but you'll need to inform us, in writing, by way of email would be fine, the book you now intend to write and to what extent it might differ from the one you set out to write ...

To what extent it might differ? Had I not made it clear repeatedly on the phone that I no longer believed Cheeta was either 75 or a veteran of Tarzan movies? She went on:

To the extent the book hasn't changed in its direction but somewhat in its suggestion, ok, all the better, as

upon further reflection the book we tapped you to write and the story you exclusively would be authorized to write, is still the book we want I should think and the book I believe I can still successfully sell ... I think a book that's too investigative in its approach to determine Cheeta's "real" age or exact film credits would also be a mistake and undermine the two biggest hooks we have to hang this book on: Cheeta being the world's oldest living chimp and his being the last surviving chimp to play Tarzan. If you believe neither of these are true and the book will reveal as much, I think we need to consider very carefully your sources for this and understand up front how and to what extent you think the book hinges on them being revealed.

The next day, I replied to her:

Because of the research I've done during the last two or three weeks, I've lost my remaining confidence in, as you put it, the "two biggest hooks we have to hang this book on." The evidence makes it impossible for me to be ambiguous about the issues of Cheeta's age and his actual movie appearances. And so it would be impossible for me to satisfy the ambition you and Westfall both have for this project.

I did not hear back from her -- ever again, in fact. A week after her last e-mail, the phone rang. It was Westfall in Palm Springs, sounding cheery.

"Hi, Dan," I said, pausing to carefully consider my next step. "Um, Dan, is it possible that you haven't heard from your agent in the last week?"

"No," he said. "I haven't heard from her in a long time."

"Well, I hate to be the one to give you the news . . ." And I did hate to be the one, since not only had I grown to like Westfall, but I knew that, in a world in which most captive chimps were mistreated and/or abandoned by their "loving" owners and trainers, not to mention their captors in medical laboratories, Westfall cherished Cheeta.

Westfall accepted my verdict with surprising equanimity, and without asking me what evidence I had amassed to bring me to my conclusion. He didn't even ask me how old I thought Cheeta actually was. It was as if Cheeta was not a specific animal living in his back yard, but an icon that existed on another plane, safe from prying empiricists.

He didn't even ask me about the file he had finally given me, the one containing the documentation on which Guinness had based its decision to certify Cheeta's age in 2001. If there were a document anywhere in the world that would make liars out of Hubert Wells, Stuart Raffill, Cheryl Shawver, and now me, this would be it. The most crucial document in the file was a two-page letter from the curator of vertebrate zoology at the World Museum of Natural History at Loma Linda University in Riverside, Calif. Its credibility was immediately damaged by its inclusion of the same old story of how Tony Gentry had brought Cheeta over from Liberia in 1932. Moreover, there was nothing in the report of his examination of Cheeta that proved he was 75, only a statement that his physical condition was consistent with that of "an ancient, aging animal" -- an apt description for most chimps over 45.

There was, however, one document in the file that could not be so easily explained away. It was a signed "statement of authentication" by Jan Giacinto, an old friend of Westfall's and "a licensed dealer and breeder of endangered wildlife for the past 45 years." Giacinto claimed to have known Tony Gentry and Cheeta in the summer of 1939, at which time, she wrote, Cheeta behaved like a typical 7-year-old chimp. Giacinto, too, retailed the story of the 1932 flight from Liberia, but, given that every chimp has a very distinctive physiognomy to the trained eye, it was curious that she could have mistaken Westfall and Gentry's Cheeta, assuming he was really born around 1960, for one she knew so well in 1939. I had to allow for the slim possibility -- I was grateful for it, in fact -- that Jan Giacinto was right, and Cheeta was 75, and everyone and everything else was wrong. But when I called her house to question her, her husband informed me she had just passed away. Rather than grill a widower, I quietly dropped Giacinto into the column of those whose belief simply overpowered both reason and the facts.

In a subsequent phone call from Westfall, he was troubled enough to ask me what he was supposed to do now about his Web site and brochure, which proclaimed Cheeta as 75. He was understandably concerned about being seen as having sold Cheeta's paintings under false pretenses. I made some suggestions, and almost immediately he edited his Web site to read: Very recently, Dan has been working with an author on Cheeta's biography. The author's research has revealed that Cheeta may not be quite as old as we'd thought, although he is clearly old. It has also been difficult to determine which movies our Cheeta may have been in. This will almost certainly remain a Hollywood mystery.

My determination to proceed with a Cheeta book anyway was strengthened by the news that a British writer had sold a humorous Hollywood "autobiography" by "Cheeta" to an American publisher for a substantial amount of money. The project, unrelated to Westfall or his agent, was the talk of the London Book Fair. The author had never bothered to speak to Westfall or visit his Cheeta in Palm Springs. While the autonomous author of "Me Cheeta" was reaping the many benefits of writing a racy humor book based on a falsehood, I, who had yet to see a penny for my project, tried in a series of phone calls to persuade Westfall directly to cooperate with a book that presented him as the conscientious animal lover and chimp parent that he was, but told the truth about Cheeta's identity.

A week later, Westfall e-mailed me to say he didn't want to proceed with the book. The news about Cheeta, he wrote, was too painful.

The story was hardly over for me, however. I wrote an extensive proposal for a book that combined an unauthorized biography of Cheeta, positioning him as an adorable exception to the widespread tragedy of chimps and orangutans in show business. Editors did not exactly flock to it. In the end, I was left holding a bag of truth that no one wanted.

This past June, seven months after I figured out that Cheeta was only in his 40s, I opened the New York Post and found a prominent story titled "TARZAN CHIMP A TOTAL PIMP," with a big color photo of Westfall's chimp in aviator sunglasses and a straw hat, sitting behind the wheel of a red sports car. It read: "Forty-one years after his last movie -- the 76-year-old chimp -- The Guinness Book of World Records says he's the world's oldest living simian -- has signed a record deal. He has also had a part in a new DVD, and 'Me Cheeta,' his memoirs . . . are coming out in February . . ."

The story went on to say, "Cheeta marked his 76th birthday party on April 9 with a big party and a diabetic-friendly cake. April 9 isn't his actual birthday -- the exact date is unknown because he was born in the wilds of Liberia -- but the day in 1932 when he arrived in the United States."

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