ERNIE

Judith Hampson
London, England

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Ernie played all day long in his concrete pen. He played alone. He played for the goggling eyes of the visitors; to bored, impassive faces and the curious gaze of innocent children. Ernie liked the children. Babes like himself, victims of circumstance; not knowing why they were brought here to this dark prison, nestling incongruously among the pine trees, an affront to the fragile beauty of an English summer afternoon.

He couldn't remember Africa; its hot dry winds, red dust across the Savannah, the silky coolness of the mud his mother would spread over him with her lolling trunk. Languid afternoons at the waterhole, heavy buzzing of insects and the soft scratching of

FICTION

tick-bird claws against his wooly back.

He didn't remember his mother, or the day they shot her, the river running thick with her fresh blood. But nights sometimes he would wake thrashing in the straw of his cold little cell, haunted by a deep moaning cry and the image of a flickering eye in a tear-stained leathery face.

Ernie did not know what it was that he missed so much, what he longed for even in his dreams. He knew only his loneliness; that straw is wet and cold to sleep on, that smooth white tiles are no solace to rub your itching back against, that clean, clear water does not cool your skin for long.

It seemed that he lived only for the children. They understood. Pushing their fat little fingers, ripe with sticky buns, through the bars of his enclosure. They offered him consolation. They knew what it was to be taken where you didn't want to go, kept where you didn't want to be, the joy and spontaneity of your very life - breath crushed slowly out of you.

The children expected nothing of Ernie, judged him not, didn't want him to play silly tricks or squirt water at them. They just gave him sticky buns and patted his great ears as he waved them gently in the heat.

But children grow up. And often they grow like their parents, and soon they would forget Ernie and go away to tend to more important matters in the world. And one day they would come back and bring their children here. And they would ogle and pry into the fettered lives of animals. They would marvel and gawp at the travesties of nobility and freedom they found incarcerated here. Just for a day, or for as long as it pleased them on a lazy summer afternoon when there was nothing better to do.

Then they would pile into their cars and

sit for hours in the angry hot snakes of traffic jams winding their way back to the city. But before they left, they might buy their child a bag of sticky buns to feed to some sad, lonely little elephant.

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