

Home to the Herd

I blinked. There they were, again. The group of humans who appeared to be a— what did they call them? Oh yes, a family— who had come the day before, and the day before that, and the day before that. I trumpeted and paced around my cage. The humans in front of my cage backed away and covered their ears. I went over to the box of peanuts and picked one up with my trunk and stuffed it into my mouth. I sighed and lay down slowly.

There wasn't much to do in my cramped cage in the expansive zoo full of caged, unhappy animals, except eat peanuts, stare at humans, play with my water(although I got in trouble with the head zookeeper when I did that), and stand around and think. I looked up. The humans were still there, in the same place, and they were looking at me. I got up and went over to the front of my cage. I stuck my trunk through the bars of the cage and tickled the shoulder of the closest human in the group. He laughed and said, "Well, hello, Miss Ellie. Still as curious as I remember." I snorted and reached for the carrot I could smell in the pocket of the smaller female, the one the others called 'Haley'. She laughed and said, "Yes, Ellie, you can have your carrot now." She extracted the carrot from her pocket and tossed it through the bars of my cage, and I caught it and nibbled it, still bored. I sighed.

The larger female, called 'Vanessa', leaned closer to me and whispered, "We'll get you out of here. I promise." Just then, my escaped hoopoe friend, Cara, flew into my cage, landed on my massive ear and stared, in the eerie fashion of birds, at Vanessa. Vanessa laughed quietly and added, "Yes, Cara, you too." Cara chirruped gratefully and preened her feathers, showily displaying her crest in the process.

Later that night, when the zoo was closed to visitors, Cara flew back into my cage. "Hi Ellie!" She tweeted quietly. I looked at her happily. "Hello, Cara. I've been wondering... do you really think that the humans will help us escape this horrible place?" I whispered back. Cara sighed and thought about what I had said. "I sure hope so, but how would they? The zoo has, like a million guards." I rolled my eyes and said, "You know, it was just that one night when you escaped that they sent out so many guards, and they weren't even guards, they were just staff looking for you." Cara groaned and admitted I was right, then she also added "But still, how

would they hide and transport an elephant? Not that I mean any offense, but you're not even full grown yet and you're almost as big as the supply trucks." I shrugged. "No offense taken," I replied. "And, Cara?" She replied with a short 'Yes?' "You do realize that we're right by the ocean, and we could just be loaded onto a large boat, right?"

Cara sighed and said, "You're so stubborn, Ellie, you know that?" I smiled, batting my eyelids and saying sweetly, "Me? Stubborn? Where'd you get that idea?" Cara just laughed and said, "Okay, you win. And I'm sleeping now. Goodnight, Elisabeth." I glared at her and said, "You know I don't like it when I'm called by my full name. And goodnight, Caroline." I gave her an evil smile and she said, "Ditto. But seriously, Goodnight. I'll see you tomorrow." She muttered something about manipulative elephants and flew off to a tree nearby. I yawned, feeling sleepy. But when I lay down and tried to sleep, I couldn't take my mind off what Vanessa had said. *We'll get you out of here. I promise.* Finally, as the sun sank below the shoreline, I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke, as I did every morning, to the cawing of seagulls fighting over a hotdog end, or a blob of cotton candy, or whatever other morsels of food they could find at the little zoo in Sayville, New York. As I listened, I realized I could also hear the manager yelling at one of his staff. *Uh oh*, I thought. *Sounds like Connor forgot to clean one of the cages again.* Connor, one of the newer staff, kept forgetting to clean one cage or another. The manager, who had a fiery temper, frequently threatened to fire Connor. However, he never did, because Connor was a diligent worker, he just didn't have the best memory.

That day, the family that had been there the last few days, did not come. They didn't come the next day or the day after that. Finally, on the fourth day, they came back. They looked like they were a mix of nervous and excited. Nervouscited, I decided. They were headed directly towards my cage, not stopping to look at any of the other animals like they usually did. Charlie was bouncing around ahead of the others. When they reached my cage, Charlie pushed an apricot between the bars. I took it gratefully and munched on it while he said exuberantly, "Hi Ellie! We have news for you!"

His voice dropped to a quieter tone. “We’ve managed to make some arrangements, and guess what? We’re getting you out of Sayville Zoo! We’re going most of the way with you to... drumroll please... your old home, Kruger National Park, South Africa! Oh yeah, and another detail,” His voice dropped to a whisper. “We’re smuggling you out.” For a moment the world dimmed. I was finally going home after such a long time! Jonathan spoke now. “We leave in a week. See you then, Ellie.”

A week felt like such a short amount of time, but it went slowly. Everything blurred together. Hordes of people on Christmas break were coming to the zoo. Tiny gloved hands grabbed through the bars separating me from the rest of the world. Puffs of breath floated into my cage. My only thoughts were of how glad I would be to get out of this horrible, dirty, smelly, place.

Finally it was the evening at the end of the week. I spotted Vanessa walking towards my cage. She was the only human in sight. Cara whispered to me, “How did she get here? It’s past open hours.” I whispered back, “I don’t know— oh wait, it looks like she’s wearing one of those tags employees wear. She must have gotten a job here.” Cara nodded. Vanessa finished making her way over to us and said, “The security cameras have been taken care of. I have the key to your cage. Hurry now, we can’t let anyone see us.” There was a clank of keys, and the door to my cage creaked open. I nudged it open wider and stepped out of my cage for the first time since I had come to the Sayville Zoo.

Vanessa told me to be still and draped a dark tarp over me. Then she motioned for us to follow her and we made our way to the dock at the end of the zoo where the supply boats come in. When we stepped onto the dock, it creaked. It squeaked with every step I took. In one heart-stopping moment a board even snapped! Vanessa kept going until she reached a large boat at the end of the dock. Waiting there was Haley, who picked up a wooden ramp and placed it for me to walk on. The boat rocked slightly as I got on, but stopped once I was firmly in a stable cabin at the back of the boat. Someone had set down some soft straw, and Haley set down a large bowl of strawberries and a bowl full of water for me. The boat lurched, and as it left the dock Cara and I

each took a few strawberries and munched on them contentedly. Soon an unnatural sleepiness came over us and my conscience slipped away.

The next few weeks were drab. Wake up every few days, take a long drink, wait for one of the humans to bring me some fruit, fall back into the unnatural sleep. But one morning, I was woken up by Jonathan and led into the back of a truck. Jonathan placed my water in the truck and gave me a peach. Within seconds I was asleep. I awoke a few days later on a vast plain. I heaved myself onto my feet and looked around, enjoying the familiar sights and smells. I turned to discover a herd of elephants approaching. My mother, the matriarch, was leading the way. We entwined our trunks and greeted each other with great joy. “Welcome home, Elisabeth,” She said. And I was.

The End