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The Elephant's Bath

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Steve was a circus elephant with a problem: he needed a bath. Not a backstage washdown — a real one, in a real river, the way he used to before his circus years. Five years of performing and he still remembered exactly what a proper river felt like.

He thought it through carefully while waiting in the wings. His act wasn't for another hour at least. And he was fairly certain he had seen a river at the far end of the long street the circus had marched down.

"I'll be back in time," he told himself. "And if not — well, then I'll simply be having a holiday. Animals deserve holidays too."

The stage door didn't open quickly enough, so Steve pushed it off its hinges and stepped out onto the street.

It happened to be the hour when school let out. Children came streaming along the pavement and then stopped, eyes going wide and very bright.

"Hello, children!" Steve called, waving his trunk in a cheerful arc.

The children had peanuts and pennies. They threw treats to him and gathered close, saying what a fine enormous elephant he was.

But then the mothers arrived. Windows flew open. Front doors burst out. "Come inside!" the mothers called. "Come inside at once!"

"He's nice!" the children protested.

"You can't be sure," said their mothers.

Steve found this deeply puzzling. He was being as friendly as he possibly knew how. "I don't want to go into houses," he thought, walking on down the street. "They needn't bang their doors. I've just left a building myself, and I certainly don't want to go back into one."

And then — there it was. The river, sparkling at the end of the next few blocks.

Steve hurried. He waded in. He plunged his great body under the cool water and rolled and splashed and soaked until every inch of him was thoroughly, gloriously clean.

By the time he climbed out, his keepers had caught up with him. He didn't mind at all. He'd had his bath in a real river, and going back to do his tricks felt entirely reasonable now.



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