

## *Endangered*

**By Eliot Schrefer**

Concrete can rot. It turns green and black before crumbling away.

Maybe only people from the Congo know that.

There was a time when I didn't notice that sort of thing. When I was a little girl living here, it was a country of year-round greenery, of birds streaming color across clear skies. Then, when I was eight, I left to live with my dad in America; ever since then, coming back to spend summers with my mom meant descending into the muggy dangerous back of nowhere. The fountain in downtown Kinshasa, which I'd once thought of as the height of glamour, now looked like a bowl of broth. Bullet holes had appeared up and down it, and no one I asked could remember who had put them there. When I looked closely, the pockmarks overlapped. The Democratic Republic of Congo: Where Even the Bullet Holes Have Bullet Holes.

Kinshasa has ten million people but only two paved roads and no traffic lights, so the routes are too crowded to get anywhere fast. Almost as soon as the driver left the house to take me to my mom's workplace, we were stuck in traffic, inching by a barricade. A police roadblock wasn't common, but not all that unusual, either. Some of the Kinshasa police were for real and some were random guys in stolen uniforms, looking for bribes. There was no way to tell the difference, and it didn't much change the way you dealt with them: Show your ID through the windshield. Do not stop the car. Do not roll down the window. Do not follow if they try to lead you anywhere.

A man was approaching each car as it slowed. At first I thought he was a simple beggar, but then I saw he was dragging a small creature by its arms. I crawled over the gearshift and into the front seat to see better.

It was a baby ape. As the man neared each car, he yanked upward so that it opened its mouth into a wide grin, feet pinwheeling as it tried to find the ground.

It appeared that the ape was having the time of his life, grinning ear to ear. But when I looked closer, I saw bald patches and sores. He'd been restrained by a rope at some point; it was still tied around his waist and trailed in the dirt.

“Clement, that’s a bonobo,” I said stupidly.

“Yes it is,” he said, his gaze flickering nervously between me and the man.

“So stop the car!” I said. Irritation – at being stuck in this car, at being stuck in this country- fired way.

“*Te*, Sophie, I cannot,” he said.

“This is precisely what my mom fights against. She would insist that you stop, and you work for her, so you have to,” I said, waving my hand at him.

“No, Sophie,” Clement said. “She would want me to contact her and have the Ministry of Environment deal with it. Not her daughter.”

“Well, I insist, then.”

In response, Clement locked the doors.

It was a pretty weak move, though, since there weren’t any child locks in the front seat. The car was barely rolling because of the roadblock traffic, so I smiley opened the door, jumped out, and sped back to the trader. He swung the baby bonobo up into his arms and greeted me in Lingala, not the French that Congo’s educated classes use.

“Mbote! You would like to meet my friend here, *mundele*?” he asked me.

“He’s do cute. Where did you get him? I asked in Lingala. I spoke French and English with my parents, but was still fluent in the language of my childhood friends.

The man released the bonobo. The little ape sat down tiredly in the dirt and lowered his arms, wincing as his sore muscles relaxed. I kneeled and reached out to him. The bonobo glanced at his master before working up the energy to stand and toddle over to me. He leaned against my shin for a moment, then extended his arms to be picked up. I lifted him easily and he hugged himself to me, his fragile arms as light as a necklace. I could make out his individual ribs under my fingers, could feel his heart flutter against my throat. He pressed his lips against my cheek. I guess to get as else as possible to my skin, and only then did I hear his faint cries; he’d been making them for so long that his voice was gone.

“Do you like him?” the man asked. “You want a playmate?”

“My mom runs the bonobo sanctuary up the road,” I said. “I’m sure she’d love to care for him.”

Worry passed over the man’s face. He smiled nervously. “He is my friend. I have not harmed him. Look. He likes you. He wants to live with you. He wants to braid your hair!”

He knew the way to a Congolese girl’s heart.

The man began to plead. “Please, la blanche, I have traveled six weeks down the river to bring this monkey here. There was a storm and I lost all of my other goods. If you do not buy the bonobo, my family will starve.”

By now Clement had parked and huffed up the street to join us. Undoubtedly he had already called my mom. “Sophie,” he said. “We need to leave. This is not the way.”

“The sanctuary doesn’t buy bonobos,” Clement said, stepping between us.

Reluctantly, the trader reached out. I could feel the weak legs wrapped around my belly tense and tremble. I’d seen it at my mom’s sanctuary- young bonobos spend years hanging on to their mothers. Without that constant affection, they die. The baby had spent weeks with this man, but he already preferred to be with me. What did that say about how he’d been treated? He had probably been in that cage the whole time, with nothing warm to touch. If I let him be pulled off me, the cage was right back where he’d go.

Supporting the scrawny bonobo bum with one hand, I pulled the cash out of my pocket and handed it to the man. It was less than he’d asked for, but the trafficker took the thick wad without counting and backed toward his bike.

I stroked the bonobo’s belly, and for a few moments he half closed his eyes. His breathing slowed as if he might fall asleep, but then Clement hit a bump and the bonobo startled. Suddenly panicked, he sat up and stared about.

“Shh,” I whispered. “You can relax. No one’s going to hurt you now.”

Even then I knew it was a dangerous promise.