

## ***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1994**

"DON'T DIE SOFT"  
(Sister Bruno)

In 1926 I was six years old. My father had, for many years, been in command of passenger ships belonging to the New Zealand Union Steam Ship Company, travelling between Australia and New Zealand. My home, with my New Zealand mother and my elder sister Geraldine, was in Dunedin. But that year my father's work took us to Melbourne to live. He was now a pilot in the Port Phillip Sea Pilot Service, and able to spend more time with his family.

The first thing he asked of my mother when we moved was that we all now attend the Church of England, please. He said his father, a distinguished Anglican priest in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, would be heartbroken if his grandchildren were not brought up as Anglicans. My mother, then a Scots Presbyterian, agreed.

This had its ironical side. Many Scots Presbyterians in Otago and Southland in those days were strongly anti-Catholic, including my mother's family. It was bad enough for her that the Anglican parish priests in the two places near Melbourne where we were to live were both "high church". But at the fishing village and fashionable summer seaside resort of Queenscliffe where we spent our first year in Australia, there were only two primary schools, the State school and a Catholic convent school. My parents' friends strongly recommended that Geraldine and I be sent to the Convent. It was thought that there two nicely brought-up young girls would be more protected from the wild sons and daughters of the rough local fishermen. My mother dutifully overcame her prejudices, took us both by the hand and we walked round the corner and up the hill to be enrolled at the Convent.

There were other Protestant children at the school, and as a group we were excused from the daily Religious Instruction classes, and no effort was ever made to coerce us into participating in other religious rites. But for some reason Geraldine, nearly six years older than me, resented certain things she labelled as "Catholic". When a trusted senior pupil was to be sent into the Presbytery next door with a message from Sister Bruno for the priest, it was often Geraldine.

She did not mind that. But once Sister Bruno sent her across with a warning that should she happen to meet the Archbishop of Melbourne, who was then staying with the Queenscliffe parish priest, she must kneel down and kiss his ring.

No way was my sister Geraldine going to obey such a Papist command. Kiss his ring, indeed! She did, in fact, see the Archbishop walking in the garden reading his breviary, and realised to her horror that their paths would cross. Hastily she climbed a large tree and held her breath as the illustrious prelate passed beneath her. So the message was duly delivered, and the be-ringed hand had not had to be kissed.

Our mother, surprisingly, used to visit the nuns in the big nunnery overlooking

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the sea, often taking me up with her after school. She took them figs from our tree, home-made jam and biscuits, and made them laugh merrily with her naïve questions about their monastic life. They adored her. And she, soft-hearted as she was, loved them, too, in a way.

"Those poor women!" she would say to me on our walk back down the hill. "What a hard, uncomfortable life they have; I do feel sorry for them."

The nuns did, however, go swimming. They assured my mother that dumpy, middle-aged Sister Jerome was a champion swimmer. They bathed in the local sea baths which ran up a special flag when the nuns were there so that nobody else was allowed inside. There was a kind of pallsade fence of palings built out into the water with the dressing sheds above it, and if you dog—paddled out into the sea outside far enough you could see through the slats and watch the nuns swimming in the baths.

Naughty children like me and my friends loved peeping inside at the nuns. We were enchanted with fat Sister Jerome's exploits. In a black, heavily skirted leotard with sleeves to the wrist and tights to the ankle, like the others, she splashed and laughed, swimming strongly the full length of the baths many times without resting. It was the bathing costumes which we found so irresistible.

The school was in the parish church hall, a one-room affair. The seniors inhabited one end, the juniors the other. Sister Bruno, a tall, thin, grim-looking lady, taught the seniors, including my sister Geraldine, and dear old kind Sister Jerome had the juniors, including me. Sister Bruno was the Head.

In the section for seniors there were half a dozen older children who had not passed the external examination known as Proficiency that all children then sat at the age of 11 or 12, which graduated them to secondary school. These also-rans marked time at primary school until they were 14 and could leave school altogether.

Our school's group were mainly boys, big, rough and dumb, and the bane of Sister Bruno's life.

She ruled her end of the room with a rod of iron. Never a day passed without Dick Bragg or one of his no-hoper pals being ordered up to the dais in front of the blackboard, in full view of the whole school, to be publicly thrashed by Sister Bruno's awesome strap. This hung from her belt, and was made of solid leather, looking like a wide strip of brown seaweed, the kind that streams in broad swathes from the roots of kelp. The air was electric, the silence profound when the ruthless Sister Bruno's strap swished down with brutal force. The boys would get six strokes, three on each hand. They never made a sound. We girls wondered how they could bear it.

One day Dick came to school with a large bandage on his left hand.

"What's that?" asked the dread Sister Bruno when he came up for a dose of

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his usual punishment.

"I've got a whitlow on my finger, Sister!" mumbled Dick. "It's very sore."

"Right!" replied Sister Bruno. "I'll double the number of strokes on your right hand, then."

And the strap whistled down the usual six times.

Two days later Dick Bragg still seemed to be in pain with his heavily bandaged whitlow finger. But whatever he had done, it was too much for Sister Bruno. She called him up and loudly demanded the left hand.

You could have heard a pin drop in the room. Swish came down that fearsome strap.

Dick screamed—a ghastly scream of pure terror.

That horrifying shriek turned my blood cold. I can still hear it today.

Fortunately this sadistic behaviour of Sister Bruno's did not pass unnoticed. We all told our parents, the priest must have heard about it, and I am sure Sister Bruno was severely upbraided. The other boys stole her strap and threw it into the sea. Until she could get another one she was powerless, useless at a school where she ruled by fear. She absented, herself as officially sick for a couple of weeks, and her place was taken by the charming Sister Mary from the nunnery, a beautiful, sweet and gentle lady whom everybody adored. Even the naughty big boys loved her. The change in atmosphere in the seniors' half of the room was startling.

However, I would not like anyone to think we all lived in a state of constant fear. Far from it. Only about half a dozen of the incorrigible seniors had cause to fear Sister Bruno and her strap, and none of us juniors was ever touched or threatened. Darling old Sister Jerome did not seem to find the littlies at all difficult to handle.

Actually, I adored the Convent. We had dancing lessons on Friday afternoons from an itinerant lay teacher, and I learned the Irish jig. We played hopscotch in the yard I learned to cool my wrists under the pump at the well at play-time. We Protestants were allowed to draw pictures, always a happy occupation for me, while the rest of the school had Religious Instruction every day at a quarter to twelve. And best of all, we had prayers from 3.45 to 4 o'clock every afternoon, all of us - on our knees.

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I loved this ceremony. The prayer, always the same, was an interminable invocation to numerous saints to intercede for us, and took the form of Question and Answer. Sister Bruno conducted us like an orchestra. She intoned the names of saints ad infinitum, and after each one we all shouted "PRAY FOR US!" The only name I can remember today is, "Saint-Teresa-the-Little-Flower — PRAY FERRUS!" In our church, whether the old Presbyterian one in Dunedin or the new Anglican one at Queenscliffe, we had no such dramas as this constant, exciting pleading to the saints to save our souls from hell!

We had plaster statuettes of the Virgin Mary and several saints in niches in the wall, and these had to be served each day by filling the potted meat jars at their feet with fresh flowers.

Our Convent school was not accredited by the State Education Department in Melbourne to hold the External Proficiency examination on our premises, so each November those from our school who had been prepared for it had to go to the local State school, which was presided over by one Mr. Grey, the Headmaster. Geraldine and three other Convent girls were to go there this November for the examination.

Two weeks before, Geraldine got the mumps. It was a light attack, and she was quite well after a week. But the quarantine period for mumps was three weeks, which meant she would not be able to sit the exam.

This caused consternation with the nuns who were ambitious for their pupils to succeed in the annual State examination. Sister Bruno, accompanied by Sister Jerome, paid a visit to our mother after school one day.

"Mrs. Doorly, we are so anxious that Geraldine should sit the Proficiency exam, and she seems quite well enough to do so."

"Oh, yes?" said my mother.

"*Would* you let her just go to the other school with the others on Thursday?"

"And not say anything about the mumps?" cried my mother.

"Yes, Mrs. Doorly. Please — please! You wouldn't be telling a lie, you know, if you just let her go, and said nothing,"

"Well," said my mother doubtfully, "I don't really like this very much. But if it really means so much to you Sisters, I suppose I could turn a blind eye and let her go, if she wants to."

The nuns were delighted.

On the day of the examination Geraldine, dressed in her school uniform,

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duly presented herself with the others at the State school. The children were summoned indoors to Assembly. and the whole school addressed by the Headmaster.

"Is there a girl in this room who has recently had the mumps?" he asked.

Poor Geraldine! Covered with confusion and scarlet with shame, she raised her hand and whispered her name.

"Weil, Geraldine, I'm afraid you won't be able to sit the exam. You can go home now."

So she ran home, weeping bitterly, changed into her favourite old dress, climbed into a comfortable fork in the fig tree by our well in the back garden and tried to read a book between sniffs and sobs.

Meanwhile back at the Convent we were in blissful ignorance of the drama along the road. The whole school was down on its knees before the Virgin Mary's statue with the flowers in potted meat jars, praying fervently that Geraldine and the others from our school would get inspiration. at that moment for the exam. We prayed most of the morning. What fun it all was!

But news had got back to the nuns who, interestingly enough, saw no reason to stop our pious supplications. But one of the nuns slipped away. Sister Bruno, it was. Forbidden to walk in the street alone, she took a schoolgirl with her. They hurried round the block to our house. Sister Bruno banged on the door and greeted my startled mother with a battlecry!

"Don't die soft, Mrs Doorly! Don't die soft! Come with me to see Mr. Grey and we'll *plead* with him to let Geraldine sit the exam."

"No, Sister," replied my unhappy mother. "I feel I did wrong to let Geraldine go at all, Mr. Grey is right. I'm not prepared to take the matter any further."

"Well, do you mind if I try alone? Will you let Geraldine go back if she's sent for?"

"I suppose so," said my mother. "but I rather wish you would give up, Sister!" "We never die soft, Mrs. Doorly! With your permission, I'm going to try."

About twenty minutes later a girl was sent round from the other school to tell my mother that Geraldine Doorly was to be allowed to sit the exam. She was to work outside, in the school grounds .

She did, and she passed well. Perhaps after all it was our fervent prayers to that rosy-lipped, pink-cheeked statue surrounded by fresh flowers in potted meat

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jars, I like to think so. But I really think it was because that intrepid Sister Bruno would not die soft.

There is a dénouement to this story.

Forty years later, when I was living with my own family in Wellington, I opened the evening paper one night and my eye caught the following caption:

### **PIRATE GOLD FOUND IN SCHOOL GROUNDS.**

The school was the State school at Queenscliffe. In the school grounds there was a knoll with a large tree with a seat beneath it — the only big tree in sight. It was in the shade of this very tree that Geraldine had sat that exam. And it was under this tree that a chance dig had happened to uncover a mysterious chest full of Spanish coins and treasure!

It has always been known that Spanish adventurers pre-dated by at least a century the discovery of Australia by Abel Tasman and later by Captain Cook. A landing party must have stashed away a cache, meaning to return later to collect it, but something must have happened.

One wonders what disaster befell them.