

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

### SONG WITHOUT WORDS

(Miss Johnstone)

Miss Letie Johnstone was nearly 70 when our family moved into her house in Williamstown, near Melbourne, to stay in the flat she had divided off from her own living quarters while negotiations were afoot to buy our own house nearby. This was in 1927. We stayed there for six months.

Miss Johnstone was a retired piano teacher who had taught at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music. She had a magnificent grand-piano in her gracious drawing-room in the tip, big rambling old villa typical of Australian cities in those days, with its wide verandahs and flat lawn where we had croquet parties. We brought our piano with us while we waited for our own home, because my father was a good amateur pianist, singer and composer, and for him it was unthinkable that there should be no piano of his own where he lived.

Sometimes we would hear Miss Johnstone playing to herself quite brilliantly, usually virtuoso pieces by living British composers like Arnold Bax. This was impressive in those days when I remember how conservative about "new" music most people were, and how old Miss Johnstone seemed.

My sister Geraldine had already learned piano for several years, and I had had, one year, at our last home in Queenscliffe. My mother asked Miss Johnstone to teach us. She had given up all pupils by now but agreed because she liked our family so much. With touching delicacy she said she would not like Geraldine and me to have to practise knowing that their teacher could hear us, so she refused to start until we had moved into our home.

Miss Johnstone was a very sweet, gentle old lady with wonderful blue eyes and a charming smile. She used to invite me into her drawingroom, play to me and give me sweets. I really liked her when I was seven.

One evening I was in the back garden waiting to be called, for dinner, and noticed the new moon. I had been told by school friends that when you saw the new moon for the first time you must bow to it three times, with each bow reciting the magic words: "How do you do, New Moon!" Then you were entitled to make a wish, and this would come true.

I decided to try this out. I performed the ceremonial rites, the moment came for the wish and I realised I had not prepared one in advance. No way could I think of anything to wish for! I panicked, fearing I might lose my precious wish if it did not get wished soon enough. I looked round the garden wildly for inspiration. My eye fell on a plum tree. Under my breath I whispered to myself, "I wish I had a little fruit tree".

What nonsense! I didn't want a little fruit tree at all. I was furious with myself for having wasted my wish.

A day or two later Miss Johnstone called to me in the garden.

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"Dorothy," she said, "Do come and have a look at this. "

I went with her to the plum tree. She parted the low branches, and there was a little seedling tree, perhaps two feet high, growing beside the parent trunk. It was a little fruit tree!

"That little tree is yours!" said Miss Johnstone. "You will water it and look after it, and when it has plums on it, all the plums will be yours. What do you think? "

What did I think! I was astounded, speechless. I have believed, in superstitions ever since.

We moved to our new house, and Geraldine and I duly embarked on our twice-weekly piano lessons with Miss Johnstone. This went on until our mother died seven years later. Geraldine, at 20, gave up the lessons. She was a busy art student and she wanted to sew her trousseau, as she was to marry the following year. By this time she was a pretty good pianist.

As for me, I don't think I was really a very apt student. Although scales and arpeggios did not worry me, I did not like practising my pieces in the sense of repeating difficult passages until I had overcome the difficulties. I liked playing my pieces. I was listening all the time to the music I was actually making, loving it, not wanting to torture it by endless repetition of particular phrases. Actually what I was doing was trying to realise the composer's intentions.

Certainly during adolescence I was over-romantic and musically intense, but I am sure Miss Johnstone recognised in me a really musical child. I think she enjoyed teaching me.

She tried to teach me theory but in those days I found that tiresome and uninteresting. Twenty years later when I was taught it under another name — harmony— at University in Wellington with a brilliant and inspiring teacher it all suddenly made sense, even became fascinating. In fact I ended up distinguishing myself as a composer.

None of this would have happened without Miss Johnstone, even if she did succeed in teaching me very little theory. But what that dear old lady did for me was beyond price. In selecting suitable music for me to play she showed wonderful taste, a fine appreciation of the great composers and a real interest in my musical education. When my fellow primary school pupils were learning "music" they were playing trite pieces called "The Robin's Return" and "Sleigh Bells" while I was playing Haydn sonatas and Bach suites and enjoying them. They thought I had a very boring teacher but I was not bored. Miss Johnstone opened a whole wonderful new world for me.

Even just talking to Miss Johnstone about music, and what I felt about it in a way nobody else seemed able to understand, was wonderful. I never wanted my piano lessons to stop happening and never dreamed they ever would.

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During a tempestuous and difficult period of adolescence when I was convinced nobody, but nobody understood me or ever would, I often found myself in painful and distressing situations. Then I turned to my much loved piano and my favourite composers. I was a lonely child, and they talked to me through their music.

Sometimes I dreamed of being a real pianist one day, playing on the concert platform and sharing my passion with all those people. However, I knew this path was not for me, especially after something Miss Johnstone said one day when we were discussing my future. I suppose I was about ten.

"You've got webbed fingers, dear!" she said, pointing out the stretched tendons beneath my knuckles. "That's too big a handicap for anyone who wants to become a concert pianist."

She should not have said that, because it isn't. The biographies are full of stories of famous instrumentalists who overcame worse handicaps than tight tendons. But she was right really. I never had the temperament for performing my best in public. Perhaps that is why I later chose the composer's path. One doesn't really have to practise for that!

A year after the death of my mother my father remarried. When Geraldine saw what was happening she took off to New Zealand to prepare there for her forthcoming marriage. This suited her very well, as she had no intention of playing second fiddle to a new "lady of the house". I was still at school, with a year at least to go before sitting the University Entrance exam which would officially complete my college days — at least in the mind of my new stepmother. It was understood that I was to leave school at the end of my sixth form year whether I passed the exam or not.

I did pass, but that was neither here nor there. I was still only 15. If mother had been alive I suppose I would have had another year at school and then gone on to university. However, my stepmother Bea described herself as a self-made woman and despised anything she could not understand (which was a great deal). Her plan for me was to have me taught something useful which would get me a job, allow me to establish my independence, and thus help to get me out of her hair as quickly as possible. Bea was jealous of me, and, I now realise, hated me.

Part of my miseries in those two ensuing years were caused by my not recognising this. Bea was careful never to have a confrontation with me. She usually spoke reasonably politely, and the fact that my instinct made me dislike her seemed at the time to be irrational nastiness on my part. As things turned out she was a first class bitch who ruined my father's life, so my original instinct was correct.

Bea hated me playing the piano and getting so much pleasure out of it. In fact, she hated anyone being able to do anything that she could not do herself. At the time I was deriving great solace, in an unsympathetic household (my father trying desperately to please his new wife) from my piano and my beloved

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composers. I found completing my piece (and the composer's "intentions") much more important than rushing to dinner when Bea announced that it was ready, and this infuriated her. Usually all I did was complete the cadence after her call, because the idea of leaving that musical idea in limbo, unresolved, was unthinkable — like leaving off the Amen at the end of a prayer. But even so it drove her crazy. When Bea said dinner was on the table, I was supposed to jump to it. I really did get on Bea's nerves, especially with anything connected with music.

At 16 I was through the business college Bea had insisted I attend to learn shorthand, typing and book-keeping and working for a pleasant firm of architects in the city. I was living at home with my father and Bea in Williamstown, because that was what one did before marriage in those days; but spending as many weekends as possible with old family friends in another suburb. I would have loved to run away and live with them, and actually did so in the end. But at first my piano at Williamstown and my lessons with Miss Johnstone kept me tied there. Giving up those would have been a great sacrifice.

One day I was preparing my music to take over to Miss Johnstone's house for my lesson when my father came in. He was looking embarrassed, but I hardly noticed.

"You'll have to stop learning music now, dear," he said. "You've been learning for long enough. Tell Miss Johnstone today that you won't be coming to her any more. I can't afford to pay for your lessons."

"What?" I gasped. I could hardly believe my ears, My father talking like this! It was indeed the end of the Depression, but I knew he could well afford to pay for my lessons.

"Bea thinks you've learned for long enough," he muttered. "You're too old for music lessons now."

I felt as though the bottom of my world was falling out. How could I learn beautiful new pieces without Miss Johnstone to help choose them for me, and encourage me, and show me how to play them properly? Also, how would poor old Miss Johnstone live without the money Daddy paid for her only pupil's lessons? (In this supposition I was wrong. Miss Johnstone did not need the pittance my father paid her. She just enjoyed teaching me.)

"You don't really mean this, do you?" I asked him tearfully. "I can't imagine my life without my music lessons."

"Well, Bea says we haven't got the money to keep them on. You'll just have to tell Miss Johnstone that today. "

There was nothing to be done. I could not think of any argument to use. I think this was the first indication I had that Bea really did hate me.

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I was devastated, too, to think that I myself was to tell dear Miss Johnstone the bad news. And so suddenly! It seemed that that day's lesson was actually to be my last. My father had never before expected me to do something like this. I felt quite outraged at his treachery to me. He should have been the one to ring her up and tell her.

When I knocked at her door Miss Johnstone saw at once that something was amiss. We sat down side by side at the piano as usual.

"There's something I have to tell you!" I blurted out, dropping my head low over middle C so that she should not see my tears should they arise against my will.

"What is it, dear?" she said gently, with her lovely smile.

"Daddy says I can't come to you any more for lessons!" I gulped. "He says he hasn't got the money to pay for them any more."

Oh, the shame of it! She knew as well as I did that he could certainly pay for lessons — if he wanted to.

Quick as lightning she put her arm casually over my shoulder (which really did make me weep) and replied "Don't worry, darling! If you want to keep coming to me, well just you do it. Don't come twice a week, though. Just come once, on Fridays. And we won't say anything about the money."

I just burst into tears. Dear, sweet Miss Johnstone. I'm sure she would have liked to give me a big cuddle and comfort me, but she did not want to distress me further.

"Alright," I whispered tearfully. "I'll come on Fridays. Thank you, Miss Johnstone."

And so I did. And it was only much later that I realised what a neat, dirty trick my friend Miss Johnstone had played on my father's new wife, the one nobody liked, the one who had tried to usurp my popular mother's place, the one who was unkind to her stepdaughter. Because now that there was no question of money, Bea's power to hurt me over the piano had been taken from her. Even she would not have dared to try to get rid of the piano itself.

Dear old Miss Johnstone, I don't think much went on that she did not know by instinct, if not from me. Of course I could never be so disloyal to my father as to complain to anyone about his wife.

As it turned out later, my father was already terrified of the ruthless Bea, and the marriage finally broke up in disaster. But that was years away.

However, the resentment I felt then towards my much-loved father stayed with me for a long time. Not only was this incident the first time Bea had actually shown her hand, it was the first time she had successfully pitted my father against his previously cherished daughter, and won. And I never quite forgave him for being so

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gutless as to sacrifice me.

As for Miss Johnstone, a year or so later I left Australia to live once more in New Zealand, and I never saw her again. But if I have a love of music today, now I am in my seventies, and if I still play my piano, it is thanks to her. Under her tutelage I never sat a music exam, but she sure taught me plenty about music. So, music still being the great love of my life, I am grateful to her.