

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

THE LECTURE (Tessie)

Commencing college in Melbourne at the beginning of my thirteenth year was a disaster. Various things combined to bring this about.

The year before I had gone through several weeks of silent terror from a schoolboy "child molester". I was subjected to little more than a series of obscene exposures, but from a family without boys in it, and from a social ambience at school where sexual matters were never discussed, it was all a great shock to my system. I feared and hated the boy. Sworn to secrecy, I could tell nobody for shame. When my sweet, loving Victorian mother found out what was going on she handled it badly and left me feeling frightened and guilty. I believed that if anyone at my new school ever discovered what had happened I would be expelled. My self-confidence was shattered.

Then I was too tall, had bands on my teeth and a red nose, and my mother made me wear tussore silk blouses and a burnt straw hat with my navy blue school uniform instead of the dazzlingly white cotton shirt blouses and panama hats the other girls wore. She had never come to terms with the fetish for sunbathing, and considered my sister Geraldine and me both too dark -skinned.

But worst of all was arriving at my new school three weeks late. My mother had been able to take her first trip back home to New Zealand the previous summer. She took Geraldine and me with her for two months. We arrived back late for my school's commencement.

My best friend at our primary school at Williamstown was Tessie Smith. We were inseparable. Tessie's parents decided to send her to Merton Hall for her college education because I was going there too - following in Geraldine's footsteps. When I arrived at school I found, to my distress, that Tessie had already found her feet. She had been incorporated into a tight little clique of new friends, accepted and even admired, it seemed, by them all. She had made her friends and did not need me any more. I was the outsider.

She did make some attempt to include me in the set. But the others would rush up to her at lunchtime full of excited chatter about what had happened in the past two hours. Nobody did that to me.

"Where shall we have lunch today, Tessie? On the hockey field? Above the tennis courts? Where do you want to go, Tessie?"

I would fall back feeling unwanted, usually left to loiter along behind the animated little group. Perhaps Tessie would look back.

"Are you coming?" she would ask coolly.

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And I would sit a little distance from the others, trying to efface myself, hoping that one of the group might want to talk to me.

I now often hated Tessie, bitterly resenting her inexplicable popularity and her indifference to me, her old friend. And yet I admired her for that something I could not quite put my finger on which made her attractive to the others.

Tessie moved from Williamstown to St. Kilda during our first year at school. I remember feeling hurt that she sprang this news on me literally the day it happened. In the old days that would have been unthinkable.

For me, our relationship came to a climax at the end of the second term, with an incident that quite overwhelmed me, such humiliation did it inflict upon me.

I was convinced that any popularity I might acquire in this unfriendly class depended on Tessie's influence. If Tessie showed outward signs of affection towards me, that was good news. If Tessie snubbed me, and was seen to do so, I was lost.

One day I had a chance to shine in front of the class, and I was determined to make the most of it. Maybe the tide would turn.

Each term every girl in our Third Form had to prepare a 15 minute talk on any topic she cared to choose, and deliver it to the class. I had already given one of these, and it had been well received by both teacher and class. A lecture, after all, is nothing but a story, and I was good at writing stories — and delivering them, too. So I looked forward to this second opportunity to show those girls I was not a wimp.

Three talks were scheduled for that Friday afternoon period, mine first, Tessie's next. I think I spoke on Captain Scott and his Antarctic explorations but the topic is now immaterial to my story. Heaven knows what Tessie spoke about.

When the bell rang to assemble for that class our teacher, Miss Monteith, entered the room.

"Sorry, girls!" she said. "We're having an unexpected urgent staff meeting now. I shall be back before this session has finished, but in the meantime the class captain will keep order. Please carry on as if I were here. I know I can trust you!"

Like hell she could.

I was introduced by the Chairwoman to a noisy class, and walked up to the rostrum. I shuffled my papers. Most stopped talking, but a few at the back started to yell at each other across the room.

"Go back, Dorothy!" they shouted. "We don't want to hear any lectures today." We're going to have a holiday! Go back!"

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"Go on, Dorothy!" urged one or two of the others. "Keep *quiet* you lot'."

But the rowdy group did not keep quiet. They got wilder and wilder, throwing things at each other with glee. The class captain was one of this gang. I didn't know what to do.

I decided to carry on.

The noises from the back row did not abate. Rude and abusive interjections were hurled at me — I was a rotten spoilsport, and so on. I was in despair at the course things had taken, but unable to do anything about it. They even threw sweets at me in their efforts to shut me up. I was determined to show them that I was a "good sport", I didn't care, I could take it. But of course I did care, and I couldn't take it.

Half in tears I stumbled on through the din, right to the very end of my lecture. God knows if anyone actually hear it. The whole thing was a nightmare.

At one point I heard an angry remark from Tessie, who had brought out her knitting. We were permitted to knit in that session.

"Come down, Dorothy! Come DOWN!"

I finished my talk, there was half-hearted applause from the rest of the class, shouts of relief from the unruly back row. What a disaster that lecture had turned out to be.

Tessie's talk was introduced by the Chairwoman. Tessie finished her purl row, collected her papers and coolly walked up to the podium. Now, I thought, she, too, would get it. She would find out what it was like trying to shout down a frightening group of bullies. I felt sorry for her. But at the same time I was a little spitefully pleased that Tessie too, would undoubtedly meet her nemesis.

In this I was wrong.

Tessie settled her things on the lectern and began her talk. Again, most of the class listened, the rest shouted. Tessie paused and glared at the back row. No change. Tessie picked up her things and calmly stepped off the rostrum, returning to her seat. She sat down and brought out her knitting again. Her knitting! This was unbelievable. What aplomb!

" Tessie, Tessie!" shouted the ringleaders. What are you doing? Go back!"

"I'm not going back *up* there!" replied Tessie haughtily to the now quiet class.

"But Tessie, Miss Monteith will be back soon! You *have* to go back!"

"I'll only go back if I get an apology from all the girls who disturbed my speech, and completely ruined the last one!"

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One by one the culprits shamefacedly rose to their feet said loud and clearly "I'm sorry, Tessie!" and sat down again in silence. The others pleaded with her. "Please Tessie. *Please go back!*"

Once more Tessie rose from her desk and walked proudly to the platform. Not a sound was to be heard.

"My lecture today ..." she began again.

Never had a talk been received with such respectful attention.

Miss Monteith entered the room in the middle of Tessie's lecture. When Tessie returned to her desk for the second time it was to a storm of applause.

Before she reached her place — and her knitting — she threw me a scornful glance. Those who noticed it nudged one another.

I slumped into my seat, wishing I were dead. I had never despised myself — or hated Tessie — so much in my life.