

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

Going Down The Big Dipper
(Tessie)

My Williamstown girlfriend Tessie's retired father, permanently semi-invalided through having been gassed at Anzac Cove in World War I, and, as I later learned, an alcoholic; a busy, warm-hearted mother and a number of interesting older brothers, all handsome and relatively grown-up. After the fiasco of the lecture at college I had a love-hate relationship with Tessie, but her family I always adored unconditionally.

When the Smiths moved to St. Kilda I was invited over, as before, to stay weekends. On our home territory we seemed to be excellent friends. I think Mrs Smith pressed Tessie to invite me, knowing nothing of the changed situation which our new school had brought forth and Tessie was well enough brought up to behave well as a hostess, or as a guest at my home.

These episodes raised my hopes in vain.

After Tessie moved there was something frightening to be faced each time I was invited to her home for the weekend. Not that it would ever have prevented me from going. Tessie herself, whose goodwill had to be constantly wooed, and her wonderful brothers, were far too important an element in my life at that stage.

St. Kilda boasted a popular bathing beach, a large picture theatre near it called the Palais, and an exciting Luna Park. On the beachfront at night St.Kilda was all bright lights, blaring music from Luna Park, and noisy, happy crowds eating popcorn and candyfloss. At Luna Park there were many exciting sideshows, dodgems, merry-go-rounds and a fairly impressive "ghost train". But the piece de resistance was the switchback, or scenic railway; and a very special second one called the Big Dipper.

Once embarked on the Big Dipper it was Goodbye, World for the next five or six minutes. One sat, strapped into a seat for two, in one of the three coaches and set off on an enormous slow climb. Looking down from the top as the coach paused uncertainly was terrifying. The people on the ground looked like ants. Then came the complete disappearance of the coach in front, a horrifying glimpse of the void and the huge, relentless swoop down, the coach gathering hectic speed all the way, everyone on board screaming like banshees. The ensuing climbs and swoops were dramatic and quirky with sudden jolts, short bursts and dips, just enough to throw one around a bit. Then it was over.

I was petrified of the Big Dipper.

When I visited Tessie her mother used to arrange for two of the older brothers to take out the two young girls on the Saturday night and give them a good time. This meant "the pictures" at the Palais (early black and white talkies), followed by a visit to Luna Park. And that meant the Big Dipper.

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Funnily enough, I adored the Big Dipper once the big swoop was over. The exhilaration of having survived that was wildly exciting. But the psychological effect of that slow climb to the top and the awful pause in mid-air was so frightful that the very thought of it in advance brought me out in gooseflesh.

The whole week prior to the event had its horrid moments of foreboding. When the time came really near, and we were sitting in the Palais watching the film, I would chew in a fever the sweets Tessie's brothers were proffering me, trying to stop myself from biting my fingernails with nerves.

It never occurred to me to confess my fear of the Big Dipper. Tessie's scorn would have known no bounds. I had to go through with it if I were to keep face.

Tessie's oldest brother Lin, then about 23, was a charming, sensitive young man who played the piano. Of all of Tessie's brothers Lin was the one I loved best. He probably knew this because he always took my arm and squeezed it encouragingly when we did that huge climb, and he would give me a warm cuddle. At the age of 12 or 13 I loved Lin Smith so much that the horror of that swoop down was almost worth it to get the hug. Definitely Lin was my first real love.

Certainly he knew of my terror, the only one who did. But I now wonder if, perhaps, Tessie did too. It may well have been she who insisted we always go on the Big Dipper.

During our first two years at college Tessie was a bitch. The feeling of power she had over me must have been delicious to her.

We got on much better together when we were in the Sixth Form. By that time I had grown quite attractive, was admired, and my self-confidence gained ground. Adoring little Third Formers got what we called a "thrill" on me, and pleaded to be allowed to carry my books. My nose was no longer red. Bands on teeth were long gone. Gangling long limbs had settled into good flowing lines. Nobody can tell me looks don't matter to an adolescent girl.

After we left school Tessie and I went to a business college in the city. The horrible ambience there, new to both of us — vapid girls, loutish boys and ignorant teachers who took it for granted that were all dumb — certainly brought us together temporarily. But now that we were almost grown up it was clear that really we had few mutual interests.

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I joined the staff of a Melbourne architect's office; Tessie went into a bank. Later I went to New Zealand to live, my working life became varied. Tessie stayed in her bank. Tessie always believed in doing one thing at a time, and doing it properly. I liked variety and change.

The war came. Travelling was "out". We both married. Apart from mutual letters sent at Christmas and birthdays, we virtually passed out of one another's lives.

We did have a brief meeting after the war —one only. In 1950 I flew to Melbourne to bring back my sick father to New Zealand, and I visited Tessie.

She was now the typical suburban housewife, and doing it very well. I, in New Zealand, had been there, done that (probably not very well), and was now, with my three children well on at school, back in the work force, even contemplating a university degree in music. Not so Tessie. She was bringing up her only child and doing it properly. She was busy being the perfect wife and mother.

As the years went by we wrote less and less and finally lost touch. Our lives were just so different it was getting hard to know what to write about. Tessie did write to me when her brother Lin died of some untimely disease, and again when her husband died. But I never saw Tessie again.

When her son would have been about 32 and all of my children were even older, a friend went to Melbourne and I asked her to ring Tessie. She did so. I learned from her that not only her husband, but her son, too, was dead. He had been killed in a car accident a year or so before.

"I think your friend Tessie is still recovering from the shock of her son's death," said my friend. "She sounded terribly distressed, and very lonely."

Poor Tessie. One thing at a time and do it properly. One child, to which she was the perfect mother. All her eggs in one basket. And she lost him. I wrote. But Tessie never replied.