

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

AUNT MARY BESTERS BEERY BEA
(Mary Henderson)

For the first quarter of my life Mary Henderson, her brothers and her mother were a salient feature of it. Life without the Hendersons was unimaginable.

Our two families met when we had just arrived from New Zealand to live in Australia for my father's new job. The Hendersons had migrated there also, from Britain. "Uncle John", as I soon learned to call him, had been a cavalry officer with a Scottish regiment in World War I. In peacetime he had come down in the world, and was looking for work.

Mary was my age, nearly seven. Her two brothers Sandy and Jack were older. I was fascinated with the boys' kilts and wee breeks beneath, Mary's tartan skirt and her auburn plaits, and the wonderful Scottish accents of Uncle John and my new "Aunt Mary".

Aunt Mary and my mother soon become firm friends, and remained so until my mother's death seven years later.

The Hendersons settled in Geelong where Uncle John managed a run-down carrying company. We settled in Williamstown, the sea pilots' suburb of Melbourne.

From Williamstown I spent school holidays in Geelong with the Hendersons, travelling there and back in one of Uncle John's broken-down trucks. Holidays in Geelong to me meant a choice of butter or jam on my bread (instead of both), surreptitiously collecting the brambles out of Aunt Mary's runny bramble jam, fascination with the Hendersons' front lawn wherein crouched, in majestic splendour, a full-sized concrete lion, and diving off a jetty into harbour water to try to retrieve old rubber tyres which were sitting on the mud at the bottom. Inside these tyres there usually resided two or three little octopuses. They gave me the delicious creeps.

Mary often came up to us in Williamstown. She loved dressing up with me, because my mother had a wonderful collection of cast-off stage clothes from her acting days in Dunedin. We got up to tricks which made us hysterical with laughter. One day we dressed up a broom, and fooled my mother when she opened the front door to our summons without her glasses on and saw our Broom Lady. We even fooled, for a glorious moment or two, my supercilious, lordly sister Geraldine with our Broom Lady, carefully re-assembled in our front hall for when Geraldine came home from an evening party. We giggled in bliss behind the hall curtains when we heard her involuntary gasp.

There was also the continuing drama of The Spider, a large black hairy one who inhabited the plaster "wedding-cake" holding the light cord from the middle of my bedroom ceiling. Each morning it would be seen in a different place, spread out,

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apparently transfixed, until darkness came, when it moved somewhere else on the ceiling. Mary and I were secretly terrified of this creature, which mysteriously appeared (or perhaps one of its offspring) each summer. My mother said we should let it be as it would eat the mosquitoes. However each morning the first thing we did was gaze with wild surmise up at the ceiling to see where the monster was today. We had heard a story from some child about someone who had a spider drop from the ceiling on to her cheek and felt the flesh pucker up into a little peak! A likely tale indeed. but we believed it. One morning, waking together, we both scanned the ceiling but found no spider. No spider! Where was it? Perhaps on our very bed! Without a word we leaped on to the floor, one to each side, and shook out our coverlet. And there, indeed, it was. I persuaded my father to take it outside. on a broom and dispose of it.

One winter holiday an aged aunt of my father's came to stay. It rained every day and Aunt Annie taught us both all the many card games she knew. Every morning, after breakfast Mary and I dashed for the card table. set it up and waited for Aunt Annie to join us. She turned us both into proper little card fanatics. We were good, and remained so all our lives. That was indeed a memorable winter holiday.

Something mysterious happened to Uncle John and the carrying company, and he was out of work. The Depression was starting. He took a job managing a poultry farm eighty or so miles down Port Phillip Bay from Melbourne, a place near two most glorious beaches. Portsea and Sorrento. The poultry farmer had pensioned-off race horses on his farm. and the Henderson family, plus their guests, were allowed to ride them. Mary actually had her own naughty little pony, Titch. What excitement for me!

I learned to ride bare-back on Titch. behind Mary. Titch had a habit of suddenly stopping from full canter, and bucking. This put Mary, followed by me, straight over his head on to the ground. Titch would look down on us with sneering contempt, but he never moved. We never hurt ourselves falling, and there was no danger from Titch's hooves, so there was nothing much to being bucked off Titch. We sort of enjoyed it. Later I graduated to a trotter called Winnie, a big roan with a sweet nature, and I was allowed to have a saddle. Winnie never bucked, and never went fast enough to throw me off, so I adored riding her. Sometimes in bathing suits we took our horses down to Portsea beach, removed saddles and rode into the sea. The horses loved it, and so did we.

But Uncle John lost that job, too. It later transpired that he was an alcoholic, news from which we children were carefully guarded. Aunt Mary was severely wowser-minded, and no alcohol was allowed inside the Henderson house. Parties there were strictly good company and great Scottish food. She was far better at real Scotch shortbread and black bun than bramble jam. The Hendersons were poor, but on that farm everyone always ate well.

The family moved up to Melbourne very down at heel, and even Mary had to

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leave school at 14 to try to find a job. Uncle John obtained, but soon lost for the usual reason, a job as manager of a small racecourse near Williamstown. He ended up at a leading Melbourne hotel, in livery, managing the bellhops and lift boys. Of this job he was desperately ashamed. It was *The Job We Don't Mention*.

The Hendersons moved house to St. Kilda, a seaside suburb, to live in a series of rented flats. As the Depression deepened and they became poorer (in spite of all three children working) the flats moved further from the seafront. However, for me, by now working in an office myself, my mother dead and my father remarried, those weekends with the Hendersons at St. Kilda were wonderful.

One day Aunt Mary, whom by this time I adored although I was a bit afraid of her, told her son Jack to bring up the big armchair for dinner, as usual, to turn sideways so that he could sit on the arm to eat, and I had a brainwave.

"Aunt Mary!" I cried, anxious to please her. "I've got a small basket weave chair in my bedroom at home that I never use. What about me bringing it over here for you? Then we could all sit down to the table comfortably together."

"Thank you, dear! " replied Aunt Mary. "That would be very nice."

By this time my father had married his horrid new wife Bea and was, as I now know but certainly did not then, terrified of her. I planned to return to St. Kilda as usual the following weekend. My weekends with the Hendersons were my lifeline in those days, so dreary and unpleasant was my life at home with my often absent father and that awful, vulgar, ignorant woman who was so smug, self-righteous and contemptuous of everyone including me.

A few nights later I was sitting with my father listening to the new radio, my stepmother's importation. (My father had always hitherto refused to have what he scornfully called "canned music" in the house, whether radio or gramophone.)

She had left the room in disgust because we were listening to Wagner.

"Daddy!" I said, "I'm going to take my bedroom chair over to St. Kilda on Friday night to give to Aunt Mary. She really needs an extra chair for when I go over there and I don't use that chair here.

"You can't do that!" cried my father.

"Whyever not?"

"Because it's not yours, that's why. It's mine."

"Daddy! " I protested. "That chair was bought by my mother. I remember when she did it. And she gave it to me for a Christmas present."

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"Yes, certainly it was your mother's," replied my father. "But everything that used to be hers is mine now. And that chair belongs to me. You can't take it to the Hendersons and that's that."

This was absolutely out of character for my normally reticent, but hitherto gentle, caring and amenable papa. It was a complete shock to me. Following soon after an episode when he had tried to stop my much-loved piano lessons, it was shattering. Here was a second example, proving how completely changed he had become since his marriage. And how unfair! Of course it was my chair. I was outraged.

I burst into tears and flung out of the room, more at the idea of not being able to fulfill my promise to Aunt Mary than being rebuffed. I went upstairs and packed my weekend bag, although it was only Wednesday, picked up the chair too, and marched downstairs to the front door, ready to do battle.

"Goodbye!" I cried in what I hoped was a haughty voice. "I'm going to St. Kilda now, and I'm taking my chair with me."

I flounced out with my baggage and chair into the street, walked to the railway station. waited for a train — it was 9.30 p.m. and trains were scarce — boarded it, and still weeping, placed my chair in the empty middle aisle and sat on it. It looked more comfortable than the hard train seats. Two or three people in the carriage looked at me sympathetically with raised eyebrows.

The train took me to Flinders Street station where I took my chair up and down ramps to the St. Kilda train. Again I sat on it, still weeping. A few more people were around for this trip. They, too, showed polite interest.

At St. Kilda I disembarked and carried my chair up the main drag, Fitzroy St. Lots of cafes were still open and people stepped aside to let me proceed along the shopping street. I arrived at the building where the Hendersons lived, climbed up the steps to their flat, rang the bell, sat on my chair and waited.

Aunt Mary opened the door.

"I've brought the chair!" I cried, thrusting it at her.

She took one horrified look at the pathetic object I must have seemed and asked for no explanation.

"Come in, darling! You're going to bed here right away, with a good cup of tea!"

A good cup of tea was Aunt Mary's cure for all ills.

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I soon found myself in the bed I shared with Mary, and the rest of the family came in, bearing food, drink, cigarettes, a hot water bottle, etc. Jack, the clown of the family whom I secretly adored, succeeded in making me giggle.

"It's that Bea, isn't it! I know it is! She's an old bite. You and I are going to write a book about her one day! We're going to call it *Beery Bea, or, Should a Barmaid Tell!*"

I laughed, I cried, and I laughed. Beery Bea, or, Should a Barmaid Tell, indeed! Bea's dark secret had recently been discovered by us — that far from having been the smart hotel receptionist she claimed, she had actually been a barmaid. In the 1930s barmaids were far from respectable. Even this background would not have shocked us had she not tried so hard to hide it. Such hypocrisy and lies were not acceptable to the Henderson family. Nor to me.

I never did explain just what happened that evening. But Aunt Mary, as my dead mother's closest friend, bitterly resented Beery Bea and felt my father was not doing the right thing by his daughter. Next morning when I left to go to work in my architects' office she told me to come back to St. Kilda afterwards. She rang my father from a call box (the Hendersons were too poor for even a telephone) and made an arrangement with him. If I liked the idea, I was now to live with the Hendersons in St. Kilda. My father would pay Aunt Mary board money for me.

And so walking out of our vulgar new bad-vibes Williamstown house with my chair that night was, unbeknown to me at the time, my last night in my father's home.