

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

LIFE WITH THE HENDERSONS

(Mary Henderson)

About six months after the incident of the chair I travelled to New Zealand to live with my Aunt Lilian in Dunedin, as had already been planned. But that time with the Hendersons in St. Kilda was bliss.

Mary's brothers were good pals, especially Jack. I was not used to boys. Mary and I had few intellectual interests in common, but we complemented each other, me with my imagination, romanticism and education, Mary with her capable down-to-earth pragmatism, philosophical stoicism and love of fun. Aunt Mary ruled her little family with an iron hand in a velvet glove, and this did me, as an extended member of it, no harm. If I did not clear the hairs out of my brush with my comb each morning she would hide them both. My doting mother had been far too indulgent with me, and having a housekeeper at home after her death meant that I was spoilt and woefully untrained for pulling my weight in a household. Everyone had regular chores at the Hendersons', and I had them, too.

Jack introduced to the family his handsome seafaring friend Douglas Anderson from London, whom he hoped would fall for Mary. He fell for me — and I for him. For months I walked on air, delirious with bliss. But alas, Douglas was too much at sea and a poor, almost inarticulate correspondent. My ardour slowly faded for lack of nourishment, and Jack never forgave me. But it was a glorious few months.

There was no TV, of course, no radio, and little money in the family for paid amusements. Mary, at 16, earned ten shillings a week (compared with my pound a week), working as a sort of general dog's body in a little city office with a boss who pinched her bottom and made indecent proposals to her. I think she told her mother, but Aunt Mary only told her how to try to cope. She needed Mary's contribution to the housekeeping each week. Two shillings went to Mary's weekly train fare to the city, two shillings was hers to spend, and the rest went to her mother. Mary spent a shilling a week on a front row seat at the Palais, the local glittering picture palace, on Saturday night. The other shilling was for cigarettes — fourpence a packet for Riverhead Gold. I had all of my salary for myself, but at St. Kilda I could only do what Mary could afford to do. I soon learned how to enjoy those black and white early talkies lying practically flat on my back in the front row. But I could afford to smoke black Sobranies if I liked, and I did.

Mary and I had a great time on little or no money. On St. Kilda beach at weekends all the world passed by. We would see someone we knew who would join us, friends of theirs would arrive, and before long we would be a group of ten or twelve people sunbathing and swimming together. Friendships waxed and waned at will in a carefree and delightfully relaxed manner. Ad hoc pairings off and foursomes would be arranged for the evening's film or for an icecream parlour crawl, perhaps

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even a visit to Luna Park if our boys for the evening could pay for us, too.

When Mary and I split off for “necking”, as we called getting into a passionate if innocent huddle with our particular boys, I could never understand why Mary always had a hard time and had to fight off her importunate young man while I was usually treated with great respect. Was it Mary’s red hair? Was she really very sexy? She sure had to fight them off.

Aunt Mary had no idea of all this or so we thought. Many a Saturday evening we chose to “neck” with Mary’s nuggety friend Jim and my Bernie, Jim’s friend, a French born youth of exotic good looks. When we returned home at the expected time we would be quizzed on the film we had seen. I was always the one who had to make up the story, because Mary was no good at it. I don’t know that I was so good, either, and Aunt Mary was astute. However, she never questioned my imaginary tales.

The Hendersons moved over to New Zealand to live themselves not long after I went to my aunt in Dunedin. Uncle John had already scarpered to Wellington, unable to face his righteous wife over yet another sacking (as usual for drinking) from the despised job of captain of the bell hops in the big hotel. When it was discovered where he lived in Wellington the family decided to consign to him Darcy, the big black curly retriever dog, a relic from the poultry farm days at Sorrento. Darcy had become very fat and waddling in a city flat with little exercise. No warning was given to Uncle John, only a cable telling him to meet a certain ship from Melbourne when it arrived in Wellington. All of the Hendersons loved animals, and Uncle John coped.

In New Zealand Mary and I saw much less of each other, living in different cities. She quickly became very efficient as an advertising traveller and demonstrator for Lever Bros., using washing machines set up in department stores.

We fell out, and all communications between us ceased for many years.

I was 20, and had decided to find out what this sex business was all about. I more or less seduced an admirer much older than myself who, I believed, would be able to show me the ropes properly. It was fairly cold blooded on my side, I fear, though I was fond of my Belgian woolbuyer. No thought of marriage entered my head, just experience.

Of course I wrote to my pal Mary in Wellington about this secret affair. Such behaviour was considered very naughty indeed in 1938.

When my lover invited me to visit him for a few weeks’ holiday in Sydney, then his business base, I liked the idea. An opportunity occurred for me to do so when a friend wanted a companion for her sea trip to Sydney. I borrowed the fare money, and we went. I told Mary, but nobody else that I was really going to Sydney

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to "live in sin" as it was then called, with my Belgian woolbuyer.

Mary turned out to be much more puritanical than I had expected. It seems that all those years of fighting off importunate males had been for real. She was shocked, and told her mother about it. Aunt Mary cabled my father, still living with Beery Bea in Melbourne, and he kicked up a shindy. He sent a telegram to me in Sydney ordering me back to New Zealand immediately if not before. The liner *Wanganella* was leaving Sydney for Wellington a few days later. If I did not turn up on that ship, my father said the Captain would know, and the Sydney police be notified!

So I had the gun at my head, and my Belgian lover took fright. I was still a minor, and he said he could not run the risk of a scandal in his job, like an irate father arriving on the scene with a policeman. What a cad! I did not want to marry, but would have appreciated an offer!

But Mary Henderson was now Out. Such treachery!

Twenty years later she, too married — a divorced alcoholic. Aunt Mary must have been horrified And Mary even became a bit of an alcoholic herself. Eventually we renewed our friendship on a casual basis, and Mary asked me to visit her mother, now in a nursing home, who had become very difficult in her old age. Of course I did so. Aunt Mary died shortly afterwards.

Mary died of a heart attack three or four years ago.

Mary's brother Sandy had a daughter called Judy who became very interested in Mary in her old age. Circumstances had kept niece and aunt apart up till then. Judy wrote telling me of Mary's sudden death, and saying how many times my name had been mentioned when Mary had been telling her about her past life and her childhood. Could we meet?

We did meet later, in Sydney when I was staying with my son Stephen. He, with his girlfriend Jan, took Judy Henderson and me to a restaurant for dinner. Judy wanted to know why her aunt and I had fallen out. I told her the story of my Belgian lover.

The other two were listening, ears flapping. Jan said she was fascinated.

"How come?" I asked in surprise.

"It's been great listening to you, now you are an old lady, talking about that long-ago love affair, and everyone's values then. It's like history!"

Naturally my son Stephen, too, was fascinated.