

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

WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE'S MONEY  
(MR. REID)

When I travelled from Australia back to New Zealand to live with my Aunt Lilian I was nearly eighteen. My father was to pay my aunt board money for me, but anything else I would have to earn, so a job was necessary. I wanted to write, but that sort of life seemed away out of reach for me, with no background or training. I thought then I would like to find an author of travel books or novels and be his amanuensis, as shorthand typists were called in those days. But with no likely author in the offing, it looked as though I would have to settle for just being somebody's secretary (if I were lucky).

One evening in Dunedin I was entertained to dinner at a boardinghouse run by a widow with her daughter Ena. Ena had always been the Queen or the Princess in my sister Geraldine's plays when we entertained our mother's ancient friends in our boxroom in the pre-Australia days. The boardinghouse was for men only, and Ena and her mother specialised in what today we would call yuppies. Oddly enough, the house itself, still called Inglewood, was the one that my great-grandparents had bought in 1870 when they first arrived from England.

It was a rather stiff meal, those seven or eight yuppies being rather social-protocol prone. Their landlady and her daughter were well below the salt in their estimation, and their landlady's daughter's friend from Melbourne to be treated distantly and with caution. I did not enjoy the meal.

Next day Ena rang me, full of excitement. Mr. Reid, one of the "gentleman guests", was the accountant of the Dunedin branch of W. D. & H. O. Wills, the cigarette giants. He had discovered I was a trained stenographer, and he had a position for such a person. that he was about to advertise. Would I go there on Saturday (a non working day) and do a test for the job?

The idea did not exactly grab me, but Ena's enthusiasm in promoting the wonderful name of this important firm, the good it would undoubtedly do me for the future if I could say I had worked there, and the immense compliment I was being paid, overcame my reluctance to apply for the job. I knew little then of working conditions or job availability in New Zealand so soon after the depression, and for all I knew, things could be really tough here in a smallish city. Perhaps I would be silly to turn down this opportunity.

But even in those days I was shocked at being asked to do a test.

That Saturday morning I went along to 'the office and did my shorthand and typing test . No comment was made, but I obviously passed with flying colours because a letter accepting my application arrived on the Monday. No mention of salary had been mentioned at the interview, only the exceptionally high standards demanded by this wonderful firm who was condescending to consider little old me.

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The letter now said I was to start at £1 a week.

This was small beer indeed, even in 1937. But this must be how things were in New Zealand. At least my pound a week would buy more in New Zealand than it would have in Australia.

I started that job immediately, thereby entering a world of Dickensian slavery. Looking back, it was appalling exploitation even then. But at the time I took it as probably being normal in New Zealand.

I was to be the assistant to another more senior typist. Between us we were to type invoices. They came in from all over Otago and Southland every day. We typed hundreds a week. It was very boring indeed. Every now and then Mr. Reid would send for me to "take a letter, Miss Doorly". This would be done in an atmosphere of extreme formality. Never a friendly word was exchanged between us. He obviously did not feel like uttering one, and I would not have dared.

The Manager of the office, a youngish, rather pleasant-looking Mr. Chappel, had his own personal secretary. I imagined that he was really the only person who needed a shorthand typist. Every day he passed by my desk in the main office to walk into his own room, and it was, "Good morning, Mr. Chappel" — "Good morning, Miss Doorly", and that was that. When his secretary was sick or on holiday I did his work. Even then, it was never anything beyond "Good morning, Miss Doorly" — "Good morning, Mr. Chappel".

One thing we did have in that awful warehouse-like office was a big fireplace. In winter they piled the hot coal on, and it was a beauty. I used to sneak over to stand in front of it and warm my legs sometimes when the coast was clear. The moment either Mr. Reid or Mr. Chappel appeared, I scuttled back to my desk and threw myself into the clickety-click.

Nobody ever told me I was any good at the job. No encouragement was ever given to anybody. but I knew from my partner's output that mine far exceeded hers every day. This was not surprising, because Miss Anderson was not a touch typist, and I was. She made a jolly good bash of it, but no typist who has to look at the keys as well as what she is copying can possibly compete in speed with a touch typist who does not. I certainly bore her no resentment that I polished off more than she did every day. I just felt pleased with my own prowess, and my good Melbourne training (unpleasant as it had been at the time).

All of this did not go unobserved by the stiff and forbidding Mr. Reid. One day, without warning, Miss Anderson was told that her services would no longer be required. She was to finish work that week. There was no mention of redundancy pay.

This was a catastrophe for the poor girl. She had started in the office there as

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one of the shipping clerks in the back room, and had been asked by the management if she would learn to type, on the promise of more interesting and better paid work in future. She had taught herself, and had managed very well with those boring invoices but had always needed an assistant to complete the output of work. She was 30 when the blow fell, and I guessed that she would have trouble finding another job as a typist as she had no shorthand or book-keeping skills and was only moderately fast as an actual typist. She was not to be replaced, it seemed. I was now to do all of the work.

She had been earning £3 compared with my £1 a week. That is all W. D. & H. O. Wills thought about in those days. I was now to do two people's work for my £1 a week.

This fact was brought home to me by the backroom boys in the Shipping Clerks' Room. The atmosphere backstage in that firm was always thick with intrigue and resentment. Management demanded complete, unquestioning subservience and got it. But nobody seemed to be happy, and whispering, discontented groups were always gathering in corners. At morning teatime, the hierarchical arrangement was that management had tea in their private offices, the three office clerks repaired to a cupboard of a room, a makeshift kitchenette, to make the tea and wash the dishes, and the shipping clerks called in to collect their tea. They sidled up to me and whispered, "It's not fair! It's not fair! You must complain Ask for a rise!"

And this, thanks to their urging, I actually did.

Nobody was more astounded than those shipping clerks. They just could not believe it when I did it. It was o-Tie thing to talk about things like that. But to actually do it was, in their opinion, showing bravery to the extent of foolhardiness. I might even lose my job for such cheek!

I certainly did not relish the idea of doing it. But I was used to listening to people's advice and taking it if it appeared to be the right thing to do, and this certainly did. Poor Miss Anderson had been cast to the wolves in the cold snow of the hard, dreadful, possibly jobless outside world, with no visible means of support. It really was not fair, though I could do nothing about that. But why indeed should I do the work of two people for the price of one?

I knocked on Mr. Reid's door, blushing scarlet with embarrassment.

"I think the firm should give me a rise. I do Miss Anderson's work now as well as my own."

"Miss DOORLY!" was the astonished reaction. "What can you be thinking of? All the years I've been here I've never had such a proposition made to me! This is a firm where you should feel yourself lucky to be employed! If you ever move on from here, any firm to which you apply will employ you, our name is so high. I don't think

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you realise how fortunate you are.'

But I didn't give in.

"I'd like you to think about the idea, Mr. Reid," I persisted.

"Well, this is most unusual, Miss Doorly. It's nothing to do with me, of course. Such an important decision must be made by Head Office in Wellington. But if you insist, I'll write to them passing on your request."

The backroom boys were all agog when they saw I had actually been to Mr. Reid's office. They were excited.

"Is he going to do it? Will you get a rise?"

"I don't know," I said. "He's going to write to Head Office."

Weeks, even months went By that time I had been in the job almost a year I had of course been managing Miss Anderson's and my own work together very well. But I didn't have the courage to press Mr. Reid, such was the atmosphere of doom and retribution in that office.

One day at last he called me into his office. He smiled broadly.

"Good news, Miss Doorly!" he said. "Head Office have approved a rise for you. You will receive 22/6 a week from Feb. 10th!"

He seemed to expect me to fall on his neck with gratitude.

February 10th. was my birthday. The Clerical Workers Union award stipulated that at the age I was about to become, 22/6 was the minimum wage approved. So all that stingy Head Office of W.D. & H. O. Wills had to do was wait.

Even I, browbeaten and conditioned as I had been till then, felt really aggrieved. They were so rich — and they were quibbling over a lousy half-crown a week for someone, I realised by now, who was the best typist they had ever had. I was probably only one of hundreds of their employees in New Zealand who were just being systematically ripped off. And never, never a word of praise!

My friend Betty, a journalist, had been indoctrinating me into her craft of writing Women's Page tittle-tattle, and I had already earned a bit from little free lance jobs she had put in my way, even one at the *Otago Daily Times* itself, doing this work at night. For three glorious weeks I had taken the place of "Phillida", the lady who ran the Women's Page then to be found in most daily papers, while she took a holiday.

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So, aided and abetted by Betty, I applied for a permanent job as Dunedin Social Reporter for the *N.Z. Free Lance*, a glossy weekly then published in Wellington — and got it. With joy I shook the dust of W. D. & H. O. Wills and their stingy, Dickensian world off my feet. I did the unheard of. I walked out.

Mr. Reid was, of course, "deeply disappointed" in me. I asked him for a reference. He handed me a bald certificate of service which he had signed. It merely stated that I had worked in the firm for fifteen months or whatever it was. Not a word about me as a person, not a word about me as a shorthand-typist. My face must have shown my astonishment.

"Nobody needs a character reference from this firm, Miss Doorly!" he said pompously. "The mere fact that you worked here and we employed you for 15 months will speak worlds for you anywhere in New Zealand!"

Well, perhaps it would. Perhaps it would tell the rest of the New Zealand corporate managers that here was another sucker W. D. & H. O. Wills had bled to death, and she had actually put up with it for fifteen months.

I tore it up.

On my last day the august Mr. Chappel stopped by my desk on his way into his own office and actually added to his usual four word greeting.

"Would you care to have tea with me in my office this morning, Miss Doorly?"

I was overwhelmed.

"Of course, Mr. Chappel!" I stammered. "Thank you very much."

At 11 o'clock it was I, for a change, who was served tea by the other girl. Mr. Chappel offered me a cigarette. Cigarettes had been the only perks in that firm. I took one.

"You know, Miss Doorly," he said, "I remember you from when you were a baby."

"What?" I gasped.

"Yes. You lived over the road from our house in George Street. Your mother knew mother, and sometimes they took their two babies to the park together, in their prams. I was about eight or nine, and I sometimes went too. I used to push your pram!"

Well, well. Not once in those fifteen months had Mr. Chappel allowed himself

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to unbend enough to even mention such a fact to me.

Perhaps he, too, was afraid of the dread Mr. Reid!

When war was declared in 1939 able-bodied men started to disappear from the work force overnight, drafted for overseas fighting. The few who remained to keep the home fires burning — including that good fire in the office of W. D. & H. O. Wills Dunedin branch — were finding themselves sought after, even in a position of bargaining power. I heard that all of the employees in that firm had to have their salaries more than doubled, to bribe them to stay with that firm where anyone who had a job was just so lucky.