

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

SOCIAL REPORTERS

(Betty Benton)

When I was 18 Betty Benton was my best friend. She was the first pal I ever had who liked the things I liked, felt the same way I did about people, wanted to do the same things I did. When we were together we felt as one.

I had only had two "best friends" before. Tessie Smith had happened to sit next to me at primary school. Through habit, we continued to sit together at college. Ours was initially a friendship of chance, certainly not of any but superficial interests. When we were both 17 I left Australia to return to New Zealand to live, and our friendship virtually ceased, with no regrets on either side.

Then there was Mary Henderson. We first became friends because our parents were friends in Melbourne. Although Mary and I were still in touch, in New Zealand we were separated by a great distance.

Now here I was, an attractive newcomer to Dunedin from Melbourne, with smart Australian clothes. Gone were the relaxed, fluid social situations we used to form and break up so easily on the Melbourne beaches. Dunedin was too cold for that kind of ambience for liaisons. One was invited to parties and dances as the girlfriend of some particular young man. Mine, a family acquaintance from years back, was excruciatingly dull. The only reason I accepted those invitations as his partner was that if I had not, I would never have been invited anywhere. Convention dictated that the young man who was one's escort monopolised one almost completely. And I was eager to meet new people, make new friends, especially exciting young men.

The Dunedin girls were on the whole cool to the newcomer. I expect they felt threatened, as well they might after Betty Benton and I got together. We were considered to be dynamite at parties.

Betty was my first close woman friend in Dunedin. She, too, was a bit of a loner, or at least a little out on a limb like me, even though Dunedin was her home town. She was 28 when we met, ten years older than me. She was beautiful, vivacious, charming, from what my Aunt Lillian described as a "good family", but mysteriously unmarried. This alone, in 1938, was unusual. I was a secretary, Betty was a journalist doing Women's Page interviews and social notes gossip for a weekly. I wanted to write for a living too.

Betty needed help. She had had a serious car accident a year or so before we met which had given her head injuries, and these continued to play havoc with her concentration. She had bad headaches. She would panic before the weekly deadline for her Auckland paper. I often wrote up the material for her, and in return she would put in my way interesting bits of freelance journalism which had been offered to her. Through Betty, I was getting a journalism CV together for, I hoped,

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more interesting things in the future than secretarial work.

One day Betty drew my attention to an advertisement by another national weekly newspaper for a Dunedin "Social Notes" correspondent, and suggested I apply for the job. I wrote a witty article about hats, and got it. So now, although we were in professional rivalry, Betty and I were doing the same thing. Leading the same sort of life style. Surely it was All Meant!

Betty Benton and I, in a genteel, polite, pre-war sort of way, painted the town red. By design, we went to the dances and balls partnerless, accompanied only by our photographers. When we had arranged for all our groups to be photographed, our colleagues departed and Betty and I shamelessly pirated, from their furious girlfriends, the attractive men who showed signs of interest, for a few forbidden dances. And we went home with each other. Here was the freedom of action I really enjoyed, and an exciting dash of wickedness to spice the occasions. We were incredibly naive and innocent — or I was — and it was really fun to shock some of the provincial fuddyduddies.

I was absolutely delighted with my new friend. Betty, like me, was no academic intellectual, but she enjoyed intellectual things. Her forte was acting, and she introduced me to much of the traditional and contemporary drama literature. We would lie on my bed on wet Sunday afternoons alternating parts and reading aloud from Wilde's *Salome*, Sheridan's *The Rivals*, Shakespeare, fashionable modern American plays. Betty, who had a beautiful speaking voice and some amateur stage experience, was sometimes given a part in a radio play. If the play needed background piano music she would wangle that part for me, because my forte was music. This was all great stuff, new and exciting.

We took long rambling walks together over the Dunedin hills, swapped ideas, discussed art, music, literature, poetry. Ideas, ideas! I adored this; it was all so stimulating. And we used to laugh and laugh together. I don't think I have ever had a happier relationship with anyone.

My Aunt Lilian had a large dog called Laddie. She also had a beach cottage at Brighton. She had no car, but there was a bus. Aunt Lilian and I, and sometimes Betty, too, would go out to Brighton for weekends and smuggle Laddie into the back seat of the bus where he would be hidden under a rug lying across all of our knees. Hubie Hobbs, the popular driver, turned a blind eye, I am sure. If Betty or I had "jobs" to do for our papers on a Saturday night and could not join Aunt Lilian at the beach, Betty would stay with me in her town house and Laddie would be left with us, to protect us.

On one such weekend an Australian warship was in port. I knew one of the ship's officers from Melbourne days, and had been invited to a cocktail party on board as his guest. Betty came too. An arrangement was made for my Australian friend and a fellow officer to take Betty and me to a film that night in town. Betty and

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I duly arrived for the appointment but the men did not. In disgust we went to the film by ourselves.

We decided to walk home along George Street. Girls walking alone at night in the city in those pre-war days were never accosted, as they were in Melbourne.

However, we were. A car cruised by slowly when we had passed Frederick Street and Knox Church into the suburban part of the main street, and male voices seemed to be quietly calling out to us. We were scared.

"What shall we do?" whispered a distressed Betty. "What would you do in Melbourne?"

"I don't know!" I whispered back. "Just keep going as if nothing was happening! It's not far now."

So we did, and still that car trailed us. And still the voices kept saying things we did not even try to understand.

At last we reached Aunt Lilian's house, opened the gate and dashed up the long path. I opened the front door with my key, and was greeted by an exultant baying and leaping around from Laddie. Good old Laddie! We both fell in a heap in the hall on top of him, half laughing, half terrified.

A moment or two later footsteps and voices were heard outside. Laddie barked. The doorbell actually rang! Betty and I looked at each other aghast.

"What do we do now?" whispered Betty.

"No idea!" I replied tremulously. "This never happened in Melbourne!"

"Let's push Laddie out at them!" urged Betty.

Our sweet, gentle Laddie! Laddie would have shown any burglar where the key of the house was if he could. But we gave it a go. We clutched each other, grabbed a barking Laddie by the collar, opened the door about a foot and shoved him out.

And who was there? Our two swains from the Australian warship, of course! They had been unavoidably detained by someone taking sick at the party, and had been trying to track us down to explain, Dunedin being a pretty small city.

Betty and I had wonderful parties at Aunt Lilian's house when she was out at Brighton. Our Medical School student friends with whom the area abounded loved coming over with a keg of beer. We danced, sang and played the piano all really very innocently, but at the time it seemed deliciously naughty to see the boys off in

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the early morning sunshine lugging the empty barrel down the long path. "What would the neighbours say, indeed!

Betty and I were inseparable. Then one day we had a tiff, about a photograph promised to Betty for her paper which I understood was meant for "mine". I took it and sent it up to Wellington. Betty was absolutely furious.

Shortly after we had shakily recovered from this, I decided to go to Sydney for a sinful holiday with my Belgian wool-buyer.

I tried to borrow some money for the trip from Betty, but she was averse to lending it to me. This was a shock. I thought that Betty would have done anything for me, as I would have for her. But she drew the line at money. Wise girl.

After the Sydney adventure I did not return to Dunedin. There was such a row about my peccadillo that I was sure half Dunedin must know, so I decided to stay in Wellington. Soon it would be my 21st birthday, and I would be able to do what I liked!

Betty and I were now geographically divided. We made a temporary exit from each other's lives.

The war came. I married, we had a baby. I returned, with new family, to live in Dunedin in 1942 and we stayed there for the next eight years. Betty moved to Australia, but did return for occasional visits to Dunedin. To my distress Bill, my husband, could not bear her, I forget now for what reason. It was difficult for me to entertain her because I soon became housebound with three little children and felt impelled to ask Betty along for dinner sometimes. This usually generated a family row later, though Betty seemed unaware of it. Life was not easy.

Strangely enough, many years later my children, now grown-up, told me that their brightest memories of people from those years in Dunedin were sloppy old Aunt Lilian (of whom my husband also disapproved) and Betty Benton. Both of these women had no children of their own, but had a wonderful way with other people's. With Aunt Lilian it was love she gave. With Betty it was charm, and a great gift for story-telling. Her dramatic ability held the young spellbound.

Betty went to Washington D.C. where she worked as a secretary for the New Zealand Embassy. At the end of the war she suffered mysterious aches and pains and was diagnosed as having severe rheumatoid arthritis. The onset was rapid, and American specialists advised her to return to New Zealand for the social welfare system then in operation, because her treatment in the States was going to be very expensive indeed.

So Betty Benton returned to Dunedin to hibernate. She rapidly became gnarled

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and pitifully thin, moving only with pain with sticks or crutches. She seemed to bear her harsh fate with great fortitude. Fortunately she inherited some money which enabled her to live alone in comparative comfort.

It was now 1970. I was divorced, my grown-up children were dispersed abroad, and I was living alone in Wellington. Betty wrote to ask if she could come to stay with me. I told her about the 27 steps up to my flat.

"I'm sure you couldn't manage them, Betty!" I said.

"I can climb up steps like a mountain goat!" she cried gaily.

So she came up from Dunedin to stay with me for a fortnight. After over twenty years we were together again, buddies once more.

Betty managed to manipulate my outside steps with her two sticks to help her poor crippled feet, but it was not easy. She refused to be touched. She had suffered various misadventures from well-meaning but thoughtless taxi drivers and over-enthusiastic hospital orderlies. She was easily bruised now, and terrified of being pushed into things. Poor Betty.

An old flame of hers from her youth in Dunedin was Dr. Robin Stark, now a practising specialist in Wellington. Still in love with her after thirty years, his clandestine morning visits to my flat to see her were kept a secret from his private surgery and his wife. He invented consulting visits to the Hospital. Under the circumstances nothing could have been more innocent than those daily trysts, but I found it charming as I left for the University each morning to see the two love birds sitting close together on the divan in my living room, under Betty's rug.

Betty had told me of a fellow patient at a summer camp for arthritics, who had suggested they try to have a physical love

"My dear!" she cried, tears of laughter running down her face, "we couldn't manage it! We got cast!"

Betty was so sweet, resigned, uncomplaining and philosophical about her terrible illness. She was one where ere suffering had brought out the best in her. I really loved having her. She was such fun.

Betty decided she would go to a lunch-hour concert at the University nearby. Robin Stark would get her there in his car, and help her up the stairs to the theatre auditorium. I worked out a way to get her on foot to the library, where I worked, afterwards, but it did involve a short but steep climb up a path.

So many students offered to pick up the featherweight cripple in their arms and carry her up that little path, but she would not have it. Painfully she inched her

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way uphill, but it was obviously too much. When we finally got her home she had badly swollen ankles.

"That may be a kidney thing," Robin Stark said next morning. "It is possibly connected with medication she's taking. The swelling will probably go down soon."

But it didn't. Betty didn't complain.

A few days later she was to return to Dunedin. I had no car to take her to the Airport, so we planned lunch in town near an Airport bus-stop. Two city streets, one one-way, had to be crossed between the cafe and the bus stop. Wellington turned on one of its worst gales that day, and Betty panicked crossing Featherston Street. She stood stock still, unable to move, while concerned motorists slowed down to let her go. I was helpless beside her, standing guard but unable to touch her. All of a sudden the worst happened. Betty's pants fell to her feet! They were tangled round her ankles — not lacy flimsies, but sensible old ladies' fleecy-lined bloomers. All Betty could do was shuffle forward until she reached the kerb, bloomers trailing along the ground.

The poor darling was terribly distressed. On the kerb I tried to help her bunch things up a bit, and got her across the second road to reach a safe haven near the bus stop. While nobody was looking, I helped her pull the wretched garment off, and stuffed it into her luggage. By this time Betty was crying hysterically.

At last the bus came and she was helped aboard. The driver seemed caring and friendly. I waved her goodbye, and out of the window a forlorn little smiling-faced Betty gave me a pathetic wave back.

That was the last time I saw Betty Benton.

About six weeks later Robin Stark rang me. He sounded emotional, holding back tears.

"Betty died yesterday, Dorothy!" he told me.

I gasped. I couldn't believe it.

"She never recovered from that kidney trouble in Wellington," he said. "She went to hospital recently with quite serious kidney complications. And she just died."

I thought of the happy reminiscences, the laughs we had had together so recently. I thought of the wonderful, warm, animated creature she had been. I thought of the pathetic but moving little romantic episode she had just had with Robin, which had given her so much pleasure. I thought of the bizarre episode in Featherston Street. And I, too, shed a tear into the telephone.