

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

AH, WELL, LIFE WAS ALWAYS INTERESTING
(Bill Freed)

I married Bill Freed, then a Polish-Jewish refugee-from-Hitler architect called Wilhelm Fried in Wellington in November 1940. He was twelve years older than me. We had three children. I left him twenty-three years later, for a future life of independence, and he died of a heart attack eight years later. Our life together was often stormy, but always interesting.

"Take a girl's shoes off and you've got her." said Bill Freed to me in his boarding-house room at our third meeting. He had just done that, and it worked. How do you resist seduction with dignity when the first thing you have to do is look silly struggling into a pair of shoes!

The things people remember about Bill Freed today are his outrageous wit, and the outrageous, if delicious food he used to cook in conservative, war-time New Zealand. Possums, huhu grubs, squid, deer, hawks, seagulls, black swans, calves' lungs, wood pigeons, eels—if a wild creature moved and he had a gun or a fishing line, he nabbed it and the Freeds ate it, usually sharing the meal with friends. If nobody knew how to cook it, he invented a way. He dearly wanted to try hedgehog but was never quite able to dream up a recipe. He always handed me the animal, bird or fish cleaned and prepared for the stove. To this day I barely know how to degut a fish or pluck and clean a bird. However, Bill usually cooked it too.

Having cooked some then-considered inedible member of the local fauna, he would serve it up anonymously. After the creature's safe transference from our plates to our palates, he would then narrate what it was our guests had just eaten, and, if suitably horrifying, the conditions under which his prey had been acquired. Picking up a recently run-over possum on a midnight Karori roadway usually shocked our friends into stretching their eyes, at least. Shock tactics were Bill Freed's specialty.

One day Bill, at a city butchery in Dunedin, noticed the two butchers carrying out some unspeakable-looking offal in a bucket, for rubbish disposal. Told it was a calf's lung, he insisted on buying it from them for sixpence. The butchers could barely conceal their horrified incredulity, especially when he told them it was for the table, to make a Viennese dish called *Beuchel*. "Why do you look like that?" cried Bill. "These calf's lungs are full of the beautiful clean mountain air. And *you* eat disgusting pissy kidneys."

Our guests that night happened to include a local journalist. They thought they had been eating tripe. The story made Dunedin's morning paper.

One Christmas the Freed family of five stayed with friends in Alexandra. Our hostess was known for her warm hospitality but poor housewifery. She tended to

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rely on her grocer husband's access to his stock, which meant tinned food in those days before deep freezers. Tinned food was not so good during the war.

We arrived on Boxing Day — a day most housewives would have stocked up piles of food for the five day shopping break. Barbara said, "Bill there's only one thing in our fridge — a quart of sour cream. Can you make a meal for the eight of us out of that?"

"Of course!" cried Bill, always rising to a challenge. "We'll have borsch! Russell and I will go out with a gun and shoot the stock, and you two girls can find the beetroot while we're away!"

Barbara and I combed the wayside dairies—the only shops open — for beetroot, but no luck. Tinned beetroot was then unknown, so Russell's shop was no help. In the kitchen on our return we looked at each other in despair, hearing the returning car with the two men, presumably bearing the makings of soup stock. I glanced out of the window and noticed the next-door neighbour in his garden, digging up — could it be true? — BEETROOT! "Look!" I shouted to Barbara. She shot over to the fence like an arrow from a bow, arriving back with an armful of beetroot at the same moment the stock arrived. That turned out to be two tiny rabbits, two pukekos and a hawk.

The borsch was delicious. However, even I thought it was a bit much when Barbara served the main course, because it was the stock from the soup, drained and carefully arranged on an elegant silver serving dish. Even the children knew of the drama preceding our dinner, so we all fished away at that platter as surreptitiously as we could, trying to pretend we were not avoiding the hawk.

We were living in Dunedin during the war when food rationing was on, for what that was worth. A family of five like ours had little difficulty here. Sugar was rationed. It was therefore illegal to home brew beer (wine had not yet been thought up elsewhere) because that used lots of sugar we were not supposed to have hoarded. Bill, used to wine with his meals from his European background, home-brewed anything he could find. He also made sauerkraut in a large barrel. All of this was done in the otherwise disused wash-house in our back yard.

One day the local policeman knocked at the door. He told me he had come to check on the home-brew situation in the Freed household. (Who on earth reported us to the cops we never discovered but funny things happened to foreigners in wartime Dunedin.) Horrified, I rang Bill at his office. "Come home at once!" I cried. "The police want to know about home-brew!" Bill rushed home and greeted the local cop in his usual hail-fellow-well-met fashion (everyone knew everyone in the suburb of Roslyn).

"Home brew?" he cried. "You must be joking! I suppose it's the smell in our wash-house. Come out and I'll show you what it is!"

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In the wash-house was a large keg of sauerkraut, very smelly, a small keg of elderberry wine maturing nicely on a shelf, and a copper full of beer bubbling away gently under its wooden cover. Bill lifted the lid of the sauerkraut. The smell nearly knocked us all sideways. Our local constable left, full of apologies for having obviously been misinformed.

He may well have turned a blind eye to other vessels in that wash-house. Bill always got on with the sort of person he called "the honest British working man", a breed to which our dumb but pleasant Irish cop belonged.

Bill Freed was an intellectual. As a newly-fledged young architect in Europe he had actually spent his first professional year working in Paris for the world-famous French architect Le Corbusier. This gave him great mana with his architect friends in New Zealand, but obviously did not impress his local employers who were either conservative architects building conservative houses for conservative people, or government departments who wore building neat boxes for cheap housing for the needy in wartime New Zealand. He ended up working for the Wellington City Council, His first job there was-designing the new public lavatories for the city's central public library. Poor Bill! He would have been more at home re-designing central Auckland.

Shortly after he met me, war was declared. We were in Wellington. Bill Freed joined up — a sapper, wearing a beret. He lied about his poor eyesight to the Army doctor. Sappers can't build bridges or lay mines in the rain in berets when they can't see without glasses. All was discovered when Bill was on "final leave", and instead of sailing in a troopship to Egypt, he was grounded in New Zealand for "the duration", as we called it.

We had just married, and I was three months pregnant, expecting to be able to live as a soldier's wife on a pension for the duration. Instead I found myself with a real husband, demobbed. And Bill found himself confined to New Zealand, married and with a baby coming. We were both somewhat shocked to find ourselves in this situation — not entirely pleased, but not displeased either. I, at least, was determined to make a go of things.

We went to the Motueka district near Nelson for tobacco picking a month or so after our marriage. There I got larger and larger. The Rowling family farmed , alongside "our" farmer, and their vegetable garden ran alongside the fence dividing the farms, with our farmer's cottage for a married couple which we inhabited on the other side.

Bill Freed used to read the Saturday night's paper on Sunday morning, lying in a tin bathtub — our only ablution vessel — set up alongside the fence. He would fill this tub with cold water after breakfast, wait until the hot sun had warmed the water by about 11 o'clock and then lie in it for the next hour. He wore his glasses

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and a hat, and his knees stuck up over the top. As he had decided to grow a beard for the holiday and it grew in red although his hair was yellow, his strange appearance, especially in his weekly bathtub, encouraged the innocent natives to think of this odd foreigner as a spy. Mrs. Rowling apparently did not, though unbeknown to Bill, she had a dress circle view of him in his bath each Sunday morning. She invited us both to a Sunday picnic at Kaiteriteri beach with her family. Young Bill Rowling, then about fifteen, behaved most gallantly to the highly pregnant lady who was really enjoying that wonderful seawater. I had never felt so buoyant in my life! I thought it was the Kaiteriteri sea. But of course I had never *been* so buoyant in my life! That baby was like a rubber tyre round my middle.

I never dreamed that young Bill Rowling would one day be our Prime Minister.

When we returned to Wellington we took a cottage at the beach for a "winter let". There our baby was born. Just before that I had acquired a stiff face — a mysterious paralysis which required six weeks at the Physiotherapy Dept. of Wellington Hospital to cure. The day it happened I was appalled and incredulous.

"Look what's happened to me!" I cried to Bill.

Bill, the bastard, laughed and laughed.

"The Lord has struck you for being so vain!" was his comment.

Well, it did finally go away, thank the Lord. And maybe I was so vain that I deserved it.

We had a dog, a much loved spaniel bitch called Lubra, so when our baby girl was born we were a family of four. Jane looked like her father. In case she did not turn out to be a raving beauty we called her Jane. But she did. She was also very good, and a complete charmer. Her father adored her.

Bill commuted to town by train to work in the Housing Department each day. We had friends to visit us at the weekend. I enjoyed my quiet weekdays with my baby and Lubra, playing with them both on the sand, planning and cooking our meals — I was most inexperienced in both departments — and lighting driftwood fires in the evenings, I even had a beat-up piano of small dimensions, bought with some of our "workin'-in-the-tobaccer" money. I believe it cost £10. We were very poor, but we had the necessities of life, and were reasonably happy with the strangeness of our new life. Bill sometimes shot things to eat, and fished from Paremata bridge. One day he took my best suitcase without asking and brought it home stuffed full of a revolting and huge conger eel, still twitching. The suitcase never smelt right after that.

When our winter lease ended with the beginning of the summer I went down to Dunedin to show off my new baby to my sister and other relatives down there,

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while Bill stayed with friends in Wellington. Before my planned return, Pearl Harbour was invaded by the Japanese. New Zealand was suddenly catapulted into the war, at much closer range than ever dreamed of. Wellington started building air raid shelters and defences along the coastline. Bill Freed panicked about his wonderful new baby, rang me up and said he was coming down to Dunedin to live, because no way was Jane to be brought back to such a dangerous city.

Well, well. So the Freeds settled in Dunedin for the duration, and after. We stayed there until 1950.

Life in Dunedin during the war was frugal for us, but not too difficult. At first I worked for a year at John McGlashan College as the school's secretary, mornings only. Bill would take Jane to the City Council's creche, and I would pick her up at 2 o'clock. Bill, unable to practise as a registered architect in New Zealand at the time, was ripped off by a local church-going architect, as one of his draughtsmen. "Bum-pinching Presbyterians," Bill used to mutter, his term for Dunedin-values hypocrisy. With male teachers disappearing overnight into the armed forces, I found myself teaching not only typing and book-keeping at my boys' college, but also piano, and filling in for any teacher of anything who suddenly wasn't there. Then we planned another baby, and I had to stop and look elsewhere for free-lance paid work which it seemed necessary for me to have for the common weal. I did occasional journalism stints for 4YA's women's sessions, writing original skits and talks at home and delivering them over the air. After Anna's birth I coerced my sister Geraldine into attending various W.E.A. evening lecture courses with me. We "studied" literature, music, short story writing, drama, even philosophy one winter (because we knew the Professor). Geraldine was free to accompany me, because her husband was at the war in Italy. All the things I studied during those years, with the possible exception of Philosophy, paid off in later years in different aspects of my varied professional life.

We were poor. But then, so were most people we knew. We had no car, but neither did lots of our friends, and if they did, petrol was rationed and they could not use their cars much. We walked everywhere. We ate well — in fact, that is where most of our money went, plus paying the mortgage on our Roslyn home. We went to the pictures, and we read avidly, books from the excellent Dunedin Public Library. Through my husband Bill's wide educational and literary background I read dozens of books by American and European writers I would otherwise never have heard of. Radio was good value, the Listener was already making good reading each week — they actually published my occasional story. I acquired an old piano from my elderly Aunt Lilian, and when the children were at kindergarten or school, played it for an hour or so every morning.

We also had good holidays. Lubra's puppies, born just before Christmas each year, saw to that as they fetched good money and paid the twice-yearly telephone bill as well. We piled our babies (the much-wanted son arrived, at last, in 1945) into buses and trains with all our gear and took off for cottages, called cribs, in wonderful places in the South Island — Manapouri, Queenstown, Alexandra, Stewart Island, at

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the very least my aunt's beach cottage at Brighton near Dunedin. or my sister's family hide-out at Taieri Mouth. We always went away at Christmas, usually to places where Bill could use his gun or fishing-rod. and made that a top family priority.

There were also beach or lake-side cribs belonging to friends who would lend theirs to us, or ask us to share it for a holiday. My daughter Anna was astonished when I told her recently that when she was young parents who had to choose between owning a beach cottage and having a car usually chose the former. A crib somewhere was wonderful for hospitality reasons, if nothing else. And petrol was rationed.

Bill adored New Zealand as a country, but he did not always take to New Zealanders. He enjoyed our intellectual (i.e. university) friends and he loved "the honest British working man". The in-betweens he tended not to like, and this finally poisoned his life in Dunedin where people then did tend to be caricatures of their types much more than in, say, Wellington or Auckland. This attitude of his made me wild. But later, in the 1960s when I lived in London for nearly three years, I felt exactly the same way about the English.

He could never stand pretentious people. One day a very social-climbing "new rich" lady we knew asked Bill to take a photograph of her for the press, as she was to be interviewed about something. Bill took good photographs with his good German camera — that is, when he could get film for it. Imported cameras were out in New Zealand during the war. This lady came up to our house, dressed to kill with a floppy hat. "Well, Aileen," said Bill, setting up his camera. "Do you want me to make you look beautiful, intellectual— or natural!"

He did not get on very well with my family whom he considered provincial and bourgeois. He didn't make much effort on my behalf. This riled me later when I was expected to fall over backwards for his relatives, when they arrived here from Europe after the war as "displaced persons", after endless red-tape hassles in which I was heavily involved. My poor old Aunt Lilian, whom all of my children adored, was never welcome at our home when Bill was there. He found her one day dipping her licked finger in the sugar bowl and popping it into little Jane's mouth, and that was the end for him. When another aunt arrived from England on a visit to stay with my sister, an aunt of Jane Austen respectability and social correctness (no dirty fingers in sugarbowls there), and asked to meet him, he tried to get out of even visiting her with me. When I virtually made him go, he behaved like a sulky boor all night, hardly opening his mouth. I almost cried with vexation, as it was totally unnecessary and obviously aimed at me to punish me for having made him go to the party. However, that visit taught me a salutary lesson. The only time Bill opened his mouth during that stiff, tense evening was to get his head together with Aunt Winnie for a few minutes over a *Times* crossword puzzle book she was using to amuse herself. A difficult word was eluding her. She said. Bill asked to see it and saw the answer at once. Next day, still upset at the poor impression my husband must have made on

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his new aunt-in-law, I had a call from my sister Geraldine.

"Aunt Winnie thinks your Bill is absolutely marvellous!" she said.

Of course, it was the crossword puzzle that did it.

So the Freeds had their ups and downs during those Dunedin years, neither of us quite getting used to culture shock. To European Bill, too many New Zealanders were mean, smug, mealy-mouthed and hypocritical. To me, the New Zealander, Europeans (as epitomised by Bill) were arrogant, overbearing, domineering and unfair, with unsatisfactory views on husbands' duties to their wives. Neither of us, sadly, ever quite learned to count our blessings. The writing was already on the wall for many years later, when we parted.

However, we did have real crises, and these did not improve our rapport as they might well have done. The terrible year of 1945 nearly sent me demented. All of our children (then aged a year, two and four) had all of the usual childhood complaints, and two of them very serious illnesses. For all of these ills, Bill blamed me. I fed the children — it had to be my fault. In Bill's book, everything unpleasant had to be somebody else's fault, He just was not much good at coping with adversity.

More complications in our deteriorating relationship happened with the arrival from Europe to live or stay with us. of his mother and stepfather and later his brother and step-sister, all Jewish refugees from war-torn Europe who had either suffered badly, or at least been badly deprived, for years. Of course Bill felt a strong conscience towards them - all Jews who had escaped the Holocaust did. And of course I had to offer my parents-in-law a home, as they were now practically penniless. But I expected my intelligent mother-in-law would get on fairly well with her intelligent daughter-in-law, and this turned out to be not necessarily so. Language misunderstandings and more culture shock on both sides created real difficulties in our first year as a family of seven. and I finally rebelled. Surely now the brother and sister-in-law, both capable of working and unencumbered by spouses or children, should take their share of looking after the oldies. My husband, embroiled in a row with his brother, thought not. He wanted to be the patriarch. I had to put the gun at his head. It was to be them, or me.

He chose me. The others went up to Wellington in 1949, and Bill and I, with the children, followed a year later to live an independent life, as we thought. Bill seemed happy to brush the dust of provincial conservative Dunedin from his feet. I bade my family a sad farewell. but looked forward to a new life, away from the oldies, in a brighter climate. The parents-in-law left Dunedin sadly — they had been royally received there by fellow European refugees of their own class, and had loved the city itself. Our children, now 6, 7 and 9, were excited full-stop.

And so began the busiest and most prosperous years of our married life. The

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Freeds even managed to buy a car at last.

However, things did not work out the way we thought they would.

Nothing ever does.