

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

“IF ONLY SHE LIVED NEXT DOOR”  
(Mela and Kuba)

"Do you realise what you're taking on?" said my sister Geraldine when I told her my husband Bill's Polish mother and stepfather were coming from Europe to live with us. "You don't even know your mother-in-law. And her husband isn't even a relation! It isn't easy, you know, sharing your home, even with New Zealand in-laws."

"Well, I have to, really," I replied. "On our income I don't have much choice. Don't forget what they've been through as refugees. And I don't see why it can't work. We should be able to get on."

And so Bill's mother Mela and her second husband Dr. Jakob Scharf flew from Israel, where they had fled for the war years, to New Zealand, to live with us.

We had three children aged 4, 5 and 7 when they arrived. We were poor, but now the Scharfs were, too. They had no complaints.

They loved Dunedin on sight. It probably reminded them of their beloved Karlsbad in Czechoslovakia where Kuba had been a popular practising specialist for gastric illnesses between the wars. The small group of European Jewish refugees already settled in Dunedin gave them a warm welcome.

They arrived in Auckland from their wartime home in Tel Aviv and travelled down both islands by train and ferry. The North Island train stopped for refreshments in the middle of the night. The Scharfs were astonished at the general exodus and apparent panic. Used to queues, Kuba got to his feet to join this one. He was ready with passports and all relevant documents, apprehensive about what was to happen. He could not believe his eyes when he saw that everyone had rushed out to get cups of tea and pies. After rigorous food rationing for years the piles of food on the counter astonished him.

On their first morning at our home I cooked our usual winter breakfast — porridge, tea and toast. Kuba was absolutely thrilled.

"Porridge!" he cried. "We got it on the plane from Sydney and I loved it."

From then on Kuba had porridge every day of his life. It been love at first sight.

Kuba's English was correct but quaint. He was an accomplished linguist but had never really tried it out. Shortly after the Scharfs' arrival he said he would go by himself by tram to the University. When he boarded the no.4 Castle Street tram at the Exchange he said to the conductor:

"I wish to go to the University. Will you tell me, please, where to alight?"

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"Uh?" replied the conductor.

Kuba repeated his request. The conductor stood still, scratching his head. Then a smile spread over his face.

"Oh, d'ye mean, where d'ye get orff?"

Kuba nodded and the conductor promised to oblige.

"Why did he not understand me, Dorothy?" asked Kuba when he came home. "What did I say wrong?"

Mela spoke no English at all when she arrived but the children soon taught her. She was much better, in the end, on colloquial usage than her linguist husband, and she was also good at guessing what people must be saying.

An accomplished pianist, Mela had always enjoyed playing piano to Kuba's violin. We had a piano, and Kuba soon saw that I was a reasonably good pianist and loved music, too. I think he also felt sorry for my position as unappreciated cook, housewife, charlady, laundress and nurserymaid, as this was unusual with young women of good family in Europe. There had always been some peasant girl to help out, but we had no peasant girls in New Zealand, and the Freed's would not have been able to pay one if there had been any. Kuba saw that I had a creative side longing to get out but little time or encouragement to indulge it.

Kuba loved to play his violin, and suggested that we both play duos together every morning, my free time with the children at school and kindergarten. He was not a good violinist but he was very musical, and he introduced me to a brave new world of music, the violin/piano duo classical repertoire. Starting off with the Schubert sonatinas, we worked through Mozart, Beethoven and Brahms and beyond until circumstances temporarily broke up the family when the Scharfs moved up to Wellington.

Mela sat quietly upstairs in her bed-sittingroom listening to the music we made below. I believe she still could have played those pieces with her husband better than I did, but she swore she could not. This was a sacrifice on her part, and I think she, too, realised that I really needed this outlet for my limited skill and my unlimited emotions. I really loved those morning practices.

As a boy Kuba had been forbidden by his stern Jewish father to own a violin because of his school work. In his second year at Medical School he coached some of the first year students, and with the money he earned he secretly bought a cheap violin and studied with a "cheap" teacher. This teacher, he later claimed, taught him bad playing habits he could never overcome. He practised when his father was out, but one day he returned home unexpectedly, heard his son playing a fiddle in the

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attic, stormed upstairs and smashed it over his knee.

Another story of Kuba's youth interested me greatly.

When he had graduated as a specialist in gastric diseases, he set up his brass plate in Karlsbad, a well-known spa for wealthy people from all over Europe with digestive and obesity problems. For many months he waited for patients, but none came. There was no Russian-speaking doctor in Karlsbad for the many Russians who came each year for "the cure", so a friend suggested he travel to Russia for six months to learn the language and meet colleagues who would doubtless send their patients to him when he returned to Karlsbad.

So Kuba went to Russia. And Russian colleagues did indeed promise to send him their patients.

He waited. Nobody came.

One day Kuba told his friend about the Russian colleagues and their false promises.

"Of course you gave them something?" asked the friend.

"You mean, paid them? Of course not! They were colleagues!"

"Nobody does anything for nothing. You should go back, find them again and give them something."

But no way was innocent, honest Kuba going to compromise his integrity in this way. He just went on waiting.

One day there was an accident outside his house. A group of rich, well-dressed people were gathered anxiously around a Russian princess, no less, who had taken a fall. Seeing the doctor's brass plate, they rushed into Kuba's rooms.

While the nurse was preparing the new patient one of the retinue took Kuba aside.

"She is a member of the Czar's family, you know!" He said.

Not only did the grateful princess send other Russian members of her family to Kuba when they visited Karlsbad, but also members of the royal families of Denmark and Holland connected by marriage with the Czar's family. Kuba was "made".

He deserved it, too, because he was very good.

He was never able to work as a doctor in Dunedin because at 74 he was

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considered too old to embark on the final three years of the Otago Medical School course considered necessary for foreign doctors to repeat, in order to "anglicise" their European degrees. But when he diagnosed our 7-year-old Jane as having acute appendicitis and rushed her to hospital in the middle of the night he probably saved her life. And there were many other occasions when I had reason to be grateful to Kuba the doctor. He had wonderful old wives' recipes for upset stomachs and fevers which really worked. It was wonderful simply to be able to abdicate medical responsibility for the children to him.

"Go to Grandpa!" I would say when a crying child came in with a cut finger. And sweet old Kuba would do the finger up in an elaborate bandage, arrange a sling and send his "patient" back to me all delighted smiles, showing off the new gear.

Mela, whose father was a businessman, probably came from a wealthier and more privileged background. She married Dr. Alfred Fried, had two sons by him and helped bring up the daughter of his first marriage. All reports of Fried Senior from Mela and his three offspring who later came to New Zealand were bad news. A handsome and comparatively wealthy man, he was an army vet, reputed to love animals, particularly horses, and treat his family, at least, in an arrogant and autocratic manner. Proud of his beautiful young wife's looks, he had a riding habit made for her by the personal tailor to the last Austrian Emperor, and enjoyed showing her off on a magnificent horse as she rode beside him in the fashionable park for such purposes. Mela was terrified of her horse, but her husband ignored her protests. One day she fell off and swore she would never ride again. This was probably the last straw for Mela in a marriage where she probably counted for little in her rather brutal husband's estimation. Mela was proud.

Divorce was then easy for Jews in Poland, being a purely religious exercise. However, it was not possible for Mela to take her children away with her when she "fled" to Czechoslovakia. Boys born in Poland had to stay there until they had completed a period of compulsory military service after leaving school. So Mela left her two boys, aged 10 and 12, to the tender mercies of their unsympathetic father. Many years later they, too, escaped, to the arms of their welcoming mother and kind and generous stepfather in Karlsbad, but a good deal of damage was done by her desertion of the boys during their adolescent years.

If Mela wielded no power and authority in her first marriage ambience, she did in her second. The handsome and charming Dr. Scharf idolised her. To the end of his life his devotion to her never wavered. She had a wonderful life in Karlsbad during the summer, and travelled with her husband all over Europe every winter. They owned an apartment in Vienna as well as a house in Karlsbad. But she refused to give her husband the child he would have loved to have.

When her two boys arrived in Karlsbad they were ready for tertiary education. Bill was sent to Zurich in Switzerland to study architecture, and his younger brother Alfred studied electrical engineering in Germany. Kuba paid all the bills and

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supported both boys virtually until they both left Europe shortly before the outbreak of World War II.

All his life Kuba was dedicated to the service of others — his patients, his wife, his wife's children, and later, in New Zealand, his wife's daughter-in-law and grandchildren. Anyone who asked Kuba for help always got it. He was a gentle, understanding person who never complained, never criticised, dissociated himself from any kind of family conflict and successfully walked a tightrope in our household discreetly pouring oil on troubled waters so that his loyalty to his wife could remain firm even when she was causing ructions. Never, not even Bill at his most irascible, could any of us bear the thought of distressing our darling Kuba in any way. He was a saint.

Mela basked in her husband's adoration. It gave her the power she craved. She was clever enough to soon see that none of us was prepared to do battle with her if it meant distressing her husband. So occasionally Mela got away with murder in the Freed household.

When they first arrived in Dunedin she lay low for a few weeks to recover from the trip and improve her English. Kuba lovingly tended to her wants. The only request she made at first was that nobody should make noises which might waken her after 10 p.m. Otherwise she swore she would get no more sleep that night.

This seemed a fairly harmless rule to accept in our Dunedin days with the children in bed early and the layout of the house suitable. But as time went on and the children grew up it became a bone of contention. In our Wellington home Mela's room was near both kitchen and bathroom, and loo flushing, bath emptying and making cups of tea for supper were all no-no activities. I would not confront her on the subject because I felt Bill should. He refused to do so. As the years went on, things worsened.

Finally I did go on strike. But not until the dreadful occasion when Bill and I came home late one night from visiting friends, and I had forgotten to use the loo at our friends' house before we left. Surreptitiously I used a secluded corner of our front garden, only to be floodlit by our next-door neighbours arriving home in their car at the same moment. The shame of it!

It seems I made a mistake early on, in Dunedin, when Mela first decided to emerge from her protected purdah upstairs and fiddle around below on the domestic front. One day when I went out, I returned home to find her looking at me with nervous apprehension. She had, she said, a confession to make. She had cleaned out my cutlery drawer in the diningroom sideboard.

"Jolly good!" I said. Doubtless it had needed doing.

This was my mistake. Mela had expected me to be outraged that she, a

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newcomer to our household — *my* home — had interfered in such a way.

From then on she took it upon herself to make all sorts of changes in the house, decide what the children were to wear, and so on. This did infuriate me, and I used to seethe. I did not ever confront her, because it would have meant distressing Kuba. I took it out, I fear, on my husband, who, I felt, should make it clear to his mother what was and was not acceptable to his New Zealand wife. He did not. But even if he had, Mela would never have understood. I had not been upset about the cutlery drawer, had I?

This and other incidents finally led to a big row between Bill and me. It was not so much Mela herself — I realised she never acted in malice — but her influence over her son, that upset me. I complained bitterly that I was not supported, it was always two against one. Bill swore he was impartial. I claimed he was not. Finally I told him I had had enough of being a second-class citizen in my own home, and he would have to choose between living with his mother and living with his wife.

This caused great consternation, but was temporarily sorted out by the arrival of Bill's brother and stepsister from Europe. They had decided to work and live together in Wellington, and as both were without spouses it seemed to me only fair that they should share responsibility for the oldies and help to support them. So they rented a house in Wellington, and the Scharfs moved north to live with them.

The Freed's, too, were preparing a move to Wellington, as Bill had a job waiting for him there. A house for us had to be found, and this took several months. The new menage was to be sans Scharfs.

Disquieting news trickled down from Wellington. The oldies were getting a hard time, it seemed, from their new hosts. Bill told me a tale (later denied by Kuba) that he never wanted to see his dear old stepfather in tears again. This melted my heart. Not to my surprise, it was Mela who had been causing the trouble. She was trying to boss the show up north now, and her other son and stepdaughter resented it.

Would I please, please let the oldies live with us again, pleaded my husband.

Ah, well. Gone, lovely freedom! I could not have Kuba reduced to tears. I had to give in. And so began a new phase in all of our lives.

The Freed family arrived in Wellington. The brother and stepsister took off, virtually walking out of our lives. We were left once more to support, as well as live with, the oldies. I had to find a full-time job for this to happen. And in the course of time the small house Bill had found for us had to be sold and a bigger one bought, so that we could all live under one roof.

This time I made conditions. The new house must have two loos, two living

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rooms, and my mother-in-law was to keep out when I was busy cooking in the kitchen. Her chronic curiosity (and criticism) about what I was preparing, and how I was doing it always drove me crazy.

My conditions were met by the Karori house we bought. But I had forgotten to stipulate a decent distance between bathroom and kitchen from Mela's room, so the difficulties connected with "No noises after 10 p.m." continued, but on the whole we did not get on too badly in the ménage-à-sept.

While working as a secretary at the University I managed to complete a music degree and later a post-graduate course in librarianship. Mela and Kuba were supportive. Both Bill and I were now earning more money, and bought our first car.

However, something was starting to give seriously at the seams with the Freeds. Bill's university work — anglicising his European architectural degree — was not going as well as mine. He failed one exam, and one only, year after year, with disastrous results to his temper and his self-esteem. I was, as usual, the whipping boy. And I could never see, as his antipathy to me built up, that it was probably because I had been passing exams and he was failing them. Finally he did pass, but the damage had been done.

Unlike the Freeds, the Scharfs always went as a couple. Everyone loved them. "Isn't your mother-in-law marvellous!" the grocer would say when he made yet another daily delivery to the Freed household in answer to her telephone request. (Mela did do the housekeeping, if not the cooking.) "And the old man, too! What a couple!"

And indeed they were a wonderful couple. I was proud of them when the three of us went to concerts together. Goodlooking, intelligent, well-dressed, they would be bowing and smiling to half Wellington in the Town Hall Concert Chamber in the 1950s. Really, in spite of irritations I was luckier with my in-laws than any other New Zealand woman I knew who had married a European and acquired imported aging parents-in-law. "If only my mother-in-law lived next door," I used to tell my husband, "she would probably be my dearest friend!"

One day the inevitable happened. Kuba ten years older than his wife, just died. So considerate, self-effacing and uncomplaining was he that nobody even noticed that he was dying. He just turned his face to the wall.

And so the wonderful couple was no longer a pair. There was only Mela.

Kuba's absence saw many changes in the Freed family. Mela was heart-broken, but stood up to the loss well. But things started to deteriorate in the family. Bill, after a heart attack, became more irascible, my mother-in-law, craving lost

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attention, more of a hypochondriac. Frictions between husband and wife, father and son, daughter-in-law and mother-in-law came out into the open now there was no Kuba to be hurt by these things. Mela was in the thick of it with no Kuba for protection. She became quieter. She shrank.

Finally there was a fine old bust-up between Bill and me, and I was the first to leave home — forever. Mela retreated still further. She clung to Jane, her favourite. Jane, now 21, left home. She went to Australia to work as a violinist.

Anna, too, left soon after. She came to London to live with me.

What happened when Mela, Bill and Stephen were the only ones left from our original extended family of seven, I never fully discovered. But whatever it was, Bill and Stephen battled, and Mela must have felt even further alienated from the home she had dominated, in many ways, for years. Her power was shrinking.

Then Mela left home too.

This staggered me when I heard about it in London. Never would I have dreamed she would ever leave the house I had had to share with her for so long, the house I had abdicated, in a way, in her favour. But everything must have got too much for poor Mela. A new Jewish old people's Home in Wellington had opened, and Mela became a reasonably contented foundation-member inmate.

This left Bill and Stephen alone. They seemed to be at daggers drawn most of the time. Stephen was tied to his University degree work and could not leave. But Bill could — and did.

He let the house in Karori and followed in the footsteps of his estranged wife and his two daughters, to London. Four years later he died there.

By the time he left I was already on my way back. I wanted to get my divorce, which then had to happen in New Zealand. I hoped to return to London later to live, but changed my mind when I was offered, and accepted, the most exciting and enjoyable job I was ever to have — Reference Librarian at Victoria University of Wellington's library.

I visited Mela sometimes in her old people's Home. She had retreated, shrunk, still further. She was a shadow.

She lingered on for another ten years, still admired, still pretty, still in possession of 31 of her original 32 gorgeous teeth, let alone her mind. Yes, indeed, a marvellous old lady. Now she lived "next door", the love-hate relationship between us settled into mutual affection.

Jane, in London, had a baby and decided to return to New Zealand to bring



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up her little daughter. She had inherited the family home in Karori. I went to London to help her with the trip.

Jane visited her grandmother the day after we arrived back. Mela was now 92. Jane placed little Jenny in her arms.

Mela looked at Jane's baby quizzically, at Jane with speechless delight. At last, at last her favourite grandchild was back.

That night Mela, too, turned her face to the wall, and died.

The battle for power had just petered out — with a whimper.