

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

THE BLACKBOARD JUNGLE

(Joan and Artemis)

At the beginning of 1964 I ran away. I went to Britain to live.

My introduction to life in the London slums came through working in some of Britain's comprehensive schools. After thirty years I can still see Joan's beautiful, pathetic little face in her filthy school uniform, and feel Artemis's hand in mine stiffen with fear as we approached an ugly knot of bullies waiting outside the school yard at dusk, to "get" her..

It was through getting to know children like these that I learned about their family lives, that "Nanna", the grandmother, was the mainstay of the household and probably the true backbone of the country. Nanna went out charring every night, but was home in time to cook the family breakfast and get the children off to school. With Mum working in the factory and Dad on the wharves or driving a lorry, it was Nanna who was there when the children came home from school, Nanna who cooked supper before leaving for her cleaning job. And it was Nanna who listened to their stories.

When I arrived in London from New Zealand at the beginning of 1964 I was a trained librarian, but I could also type. I needed a short-term job only at first, because I planned to travel for two months in the European summer. I was prepared to do anything to just tick over the rent for that six months, but found it difficult as a librarian to get a lowly job I could pick up and put down at will. "We couldn't possibly have you!" cried prospective employers. "We'd have staff problems! But do come in and have a cup of coffee!"

However, nobody said that about my secretarial backgrounds so I "temped" for a couple of months through an agent, and nearly died of boredom. The boss who asked me to stick with him week after week was an American professor working at the London School of Economics, and he only wanted me as a status symbol. I soon discovered, through watching the rapid growth of the knitting of two other secretaries next door and listening to their gossip through the paper-thin walls, that I simply was not expected to do much. This did not suit my temperament.

One night at choir practice I told my problem to a fellow alto who happened also to be a New Zealand-trained librarian. She suggested I try the Head Librarian at the Inner London Education Authority.

Me, a schools librarian? I pondered on this. The job, in New Zealand, was then a humble one and badly paid. However, any port in a storm, and I went to see about this prospect.

To my surprise I found them falling on my neck with enthusiasm, and the job attractive and lucrative. They had a team of 80 trained librarians who were sent out

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

to various secondary schools in the Inner London region. Under the conditions of my "temporariness " would I consider being one of their two peripatetics?

It seemed that a peripatetic librarian was a trouble-shooter, moving around from school to school fixing up library problems. When the problem was solved I could either sign off (to be signed on again, it seemed, at my wish), or sent to another trouble-shooting problem. They thought I looked like a good trouble-shooter. I took on the job, and remained in it for the next two and a half years.

I worked in nine schools, all in different London suburbs, mostly in slum areas.

The problems I had to trouble-shoot varied from something as simple as holding the fort until the regular librarian returned from some extended leave, to supervising the amalgamation of one or sometimes two neighbouring school libraries into the collection of the largest school, with the help of students who volunteered to "help Madam in the library". This work — by far the most common problem at that time — required so much alteration to the original card catalogue that I sometimes had to start from the beginning and re-catalogue the lot. Larger school libraries were generously provided for by the I.L.E.A., there could be as many as 9,000 books in a collection. Cataloguing work usually had to be done when the children were not there, that is from 3.30 till 5 p.m. each day, and during holidays.

I loved the job because within limits I could do what I liked. I did not work for the school. My boss was sitting in County Hall. I only met one "difficult" Principal, a woman, but even she had no real power over me. When I discovered, through a whisper from the school's secretary, that she had plans to spend the remains of my annual Library allowance for book-buying for school prizes, I dashed into town and spent the lot in Charing Cross Rd., in a morning. She could not do a thing. In my own small way. I had quite a lot of power.

Apart from that woman, I got on fine with the Heads, as County Hall expected me to. In fact, I was constantly told by the different principals that nobody else had ever asked them for permission to have every class brought to the library once each week for four weeks, to teach everyone how to use the library properly. My Library classes were very successful because I saw to it that everyone had something to find, something to do. I usually spent the next period tidying up and reshelving books, but that was a small price to pay for the enthusiastic feed-back I got. I loved the job. And I loved those poor, deprived kids.

The toughest school I was in was for girls only, the daughters of Deptford Docks workers. The school was in Charlie Chaplin country, south of the river near the roundabout known as "The Elephant and Castle". A model school architecturally, it was constantly visited by bigwig educationalists from European countries to show what the I.L.E.A. was doing for its slum children. But it was here that I encountered my only nasty Principal. It was at this school only that I was constantly overwhelmed

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

with entire classes, as many as three at a time, being "sent to the library" (without my permission) for a period because their normal teacher was away sick. Away sick, my foot! At that school I saw new teachers arrive for their first day at 9 a.m., be in tears by morning tea and flee — for ever — at lunchtime.

What to do with these classes of thoroughly unruly girls? It was a problem, a real challenge. Teachers were not allowed to touch pupils. I did. I wasn't a teacher, was I? I was determined that if they came to my library, they would do something I told them to do, because the alternative — general mayhem — was not acceptable to me. I had no experience then of teaching, but I sure got it fast. All I really had to do was remember how I had brought up my own three children, who had had a certain amount of then unfashionable discipline to contend with. I discovered the system also worked for a class of 30 or 40. But it was really hard work. In that school, as in all the schools I was in, it was Control them or Bust. I saw many new teachers annihilated at first base. But

I was a survivor..

Almost each class sent to me meant that I faced a totally new sea of faces. I was on trial all the time. It was exciting!

"Where d'ye come from Madam?" would ask a girl innocently, a hypocritical smile on her face. The rest of the class would fall silent. Ah, a loaded question! If I said, "New Zealand", she would probably shout triumphantly, "Well, why don't ye get back w'ere you kime from?" to tremendous gales of approving laughter from the waiting audience. No, something else, please God — in a hurry.

"I come from a country where people were eating each other ninety years ago," I lied. "So be careful of me — I'm fierce!"

Laughter from the class indeed — but I had suddenly won a classful of friends. I discovered, to my amazement, that they really enjoyed it when Madam won. I was someone to be reckoned with.

The adrenalin sure flowed in that job. I thrived on the constant challenge.

Little Joan, aged 12, sat at my feet adoringly when she came with her class. Soon she was slipping in alone, for a period. "To 'elp you, Madam!"

"Why are you here by yourself, Joan?"

"Our teacher never turned up to-dye, Madam, I was told to come over 'ere."

Joan was one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen, an English rose. She was quiet and gentle, anxious to please and quite intelligent. I would give her card sorting to do.

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

She was invariably filthy. The school uniform there was a purple tunic with white blouse and bobbysocks. Her tunic looked as though she had slept in a haystack in it, and her blouse and socks were usually pale black, twisted and crumpled. Her golden hair was matted. She was Cinderella in person.

She told me she was the youngest in a family of seven. There was Nanna, Mum and Dad and four children, all crowded into a Council flat. She had no bed of her own. She was supposed to share her older sister's single bed, but was usually bedded down under the T.V. set in the livingroom each night. The family watched telly until about midnight, then turned out the light to go to bed. Joan either stayed up with them, or curled up on the floor and tried to sleep. What a life!

Nothing was ever done for the children in Joan's home. If that school had not provided daily school dinners she would probably have starved. I was appalled at the tales she told me in answer to my questions about her home life. Such neglect.

My daughter Anna had arrived from New Zealand to share my London flat. I told her about Joan.

"Why don't you ask her to come to visit us, Mum?" she said. "We could take her to the zoo or something!"

"It just wouldn't do!" I replied. If poor little deprived Joan had even a glimpse of a more affluent and caring life style she would be ruined.

One day one of the senior teachers spoke to me about Joan.

"She's telling you lies, you know!?" she said when I told her about her frequent visits to the library under various pretexts.

"I suspect that," I said. "But really, the poor child! It seems to make her very happy to come to me, and I do put her to work. I can't bear to report her."

"Don't worry, somebody already has!" replied my colleague.

And indeed, that was the end of Joan's secret visits to the library. A sad story, especially as I fear she got a hard time from her peers too. That school was full of bullies, and little Joan was a sitting duck for them.

It was at this school that I found a chance to put to the test an axiom we had been taught in Wellington at Library School. "Never under-estimate people's intelligence."

The situation was desperate that day. I found myself with three classes in my large library. It was far too many to control by finding them things to do.

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

"Sit down everybody!" I shouted over the bedlam. "I'm going to read you a story!"

Nobody was in the least enthusiastic. They were 13-year-olds, and they wanted a fun-and-games session. This was going to be difficult. I had to find a suitable short story fast, one that would last about the right time for the period. Hastily I pulled a book of short stories out of the shelf, the first to catch my eye. It was a collection by Maupassant. Heavens! But there was no time for hesitation.

I had to keep control — and fast.

The book fell open at a story called "The Necklace". It seemed about the right length.

"Here we are!" I cried triumphantly, hiding my apprehension. "This is a story written by a Frenchman."

"Aw, Madam! We don't want a French story!"

"Well, he's a very famous writer, even if he did live a hundred years ago."

"Aw, Madam! We want a story about to-dye!"

"And it's about married people."

"Married people! Come orff it, Madam! Married people are boring!"

"And after I've finished reading it, you're all to give me one good reason why Maupassant is such a famous writer of short stories, please! So you'd better listen."

I started off in fear and trembling, far from confident that the prosaic 19th-century-style slow opening to the story would hold my unruly audience. They would have me on toast for breakfast if it didn't, that was for sure.

At first there was chatter and laughing to override, but to my astonishment, by the time I had reached the bottom of the first page they had all fallen silent.

The well-known story concerns the snobbish wife of a small-town minor government official who borrows a valuable diamond necklace to impress at a party, and thus further her husband's career. She loses it. A replacement is bought, and the next ten years of the couple's lives are ruined paying the debt to the jeweller. Years later the owner of the necklace hears the true story, and tells the wife the lost necklace was only a replica - made of paste.

This story held those slum schoolgirls spellbound. They even had reasonable

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

ideas about why it was "the best story I ever 'eard, Madam!" How could such a thing have happened?

It was because the wife had tried to jump class. She was up herself, wasn't she? She deserved to have the mickey taken out of her. And that's just what had happened, hadn't it!

A very English French story.

My last school was in North London, in an area where the Greek Cypriots were the most recent new ethnic arrivals and therefore on the receiving end for persecution, especially from the second-last arrivals like the Jamaicans. Schools were microcosms of general society in the multiracial Britain of the 60s.

This was a mixed-sex school. Artemis was a Greek Cypriot girl of 11, another pretty-as-a-picture little thing, gentle like Joan from "The Elephant", but less worldly wise.

At her previous school Artemis told me she had done very well, and had obviously been the teacher's pet. She had not yet learned to keep her mouth shut at this big new school where she was in the lowest class. Her peers, led by a big, tough Jamaican girl, were determined to "take the mickey out of her".

Artemis, too, tended to drift into the library offering to help me under various pretexts. I did not bother to sort out her stories, either. At least she was doing something useful with me.

One day when I was virtually alone in the school, working, as usual, till five o'clock, a boy prefect on duty came to the door.

"There's a girl in her classroom, Madam. She won't come out. She's a Third Former. She says she's too scared to go home because the rest of her class are waiting to get her. What shall I do?"

"Oh, bring her here," I said despondently. "I'll work something out."

It was Artemis, snivelling away, scared out of her wits.

"They're after me, Madam! They're all waiting for me in the yard! You'll see them if you look out the winder."

I peered into the winter-darkening yard. There was indeed a group of children in the corner near the alleyway that led to one of the main streets.

"I'm working till 5, Artemis. But if you wait till then, I'll take you home."

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

"Oh, yes please, Madam. I'm scared! They'll beat me up."

I felt a bit annoyed, so I got on with my work and didn't speak much.

At 4.30 Artemis started to complain.

"I'll be in trouble when I get home, Madam!" she wailed. "I'll be so late! My father will be wild. He'll lam me!"

"Oh, don't worry, Artemis. I'll explain to him what happened. But you've got to stay till five o'clock if you want me to take you home."

So Artemis reduced her sobbing to a few soulful sniffs.

At 5 I packed up my things and looked out of the window.

"They've gone!" I said to Artemis. "Come along with me, now. Where do you live?"

It was not far. We set off, but something seemed to be worrying her.

"My father, Madam," she said doubtfully. "He isn't my real father, you know. He's my Mum's boyfriend." And she looked at me fearfully to see my reaction.

"Don't worry, Artemis," I said. "That's O.K."

She looked relieved.

"What did you do, Artemis?" I asked her.

"Nothin', Madam! I ain't done nothin'! They just took to me!"

'Nonsense. You must have done something, said something, to annoy them.'

"Well, I only said somethin' about the teacher at my last school, y'know, the one who thought I was good! They didn't like it."

Poor Artemis. She was a slow learner.

We went down to the yard, quite dark by now, and entered that little alleyway. At the far end we saw a knot of waiting kids. The big Jamaican girl was there too.

Artemis went rigid. I grabbed her hand. Her whole arm was stiff with fear as we approached the group. They didn't expect to see me, too.

"What are you children doing here?" I yelled, forging a passage right through

***I Seem To Have Forgotten The Elephants* © Dorothy Freed, 1995**

the middle of the group, pulling a trembling Artemis through with me. "How dare you lie in wait for somebody like this! You just wait till tomorrow morning! I'll see the Head about this! You're all in for big trouble!"

They quietly faded away into the darkness. Artemis's relief was immediate. She cheered up. But the nearer we got to her home, the more anxious she seemed to become.

"Me Dad will give me an 'iding, Madam, and that's for sure! He won't like me being this late 'ome."

"I'll talk to him, Artemis. Don't worry."

But Artemis had reason to shake. Her "father", when we saw him standing in the street outside his baker's shop waiting for her, was a very big man. And she had not told me he didn't understand English.

I explained to him what had happened. He eyed me suspiciously while Artemis translated my spiel. Then he took her by the arm and replied, politely enough, "Tarnk you!"

I had the feeling that this time Artemis was probably not going to cop it.

Next morning I did indeed visit the Headmistress.

"Oh, that Artemis again!" she sighed. "Whenever will that little girl learn that she can't go round boasting about how well she did at her last school. She was nothing but a teacher's pet, you know. That teacher should be hanged, drawn and quartered!"

Artemis kept away from me for a couple of weeks. When I did run into her alone she was obviously embarrassed, but full of thanks for "saving" her.

"What happened in class?" I said.

"Oh, Madam, it was wonderful.' The 'eadmistress came in and threatened the 'ole class with expelling them if they ever took to me again! It was super:"

Silly woman. She could not have done that. Even I know that you must never threaten something you can't carry out. But the rest of the class didn't, and the ploy worked for Artemis.

I hope Artemis learned her lesson. She was a silly little girl, but very sweet, very touching. Too pretty and sweet for her own good, in that blackboard jungle of North London slums. I shall not forget her.