

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

GETTING OFF AT THE WRONG ISLAND

(Janet Howard)

My six weeks tour of Italy and France with three New Zealand girls in a Morris Minor ended on the beach at Calais with young Janet Howard trying to kick me out of the back seat of the car — in her sleep!

I was appalled that her hatred, resentment, jealousy, whatever it was which had been brewing up during that holiday had boiled right over. I slipped out of the car, crawled on the grass underneath, spent the rest of the night there and thought of England.

And I did, indeed, think of London at least, where I would be able to now avoid Janet. In fact, I swore that night that I would avoid her for the rest of my life.

With the passage of a few years Janet grew up. And I grew stronger, wiser and less vulnerable to hurt. Now it is thirty years since that 1964 holiday, and Janet and I love each other again, But the story I will tell.

I suppose the main trouble was that our ages were too disparate. Janet was 19, Margaret and Mary were 26, I was 45. The other problem was that we had to live uncomfortably, and in such intimate contact that I felt as long as everyone else was pretending nothing was wrong I should do the same. Although I was the oldest, the party was Margaret's, not mine. This was in the days before credit cards and we were committed to each other financially to complete the venture. I felt, rightly or wrongly, that open confrontation would be disastrous en route. There could be no escape.

Janet had been a schoolfriend of my daughter Anna's. When I planned a solo trip to Britain in 1964, Janet's parents asked if she could join me for the voyage.

During the 5 weeks trip we teamed up well, coping with two impossibly boring table companions, and had lots of conspiratorial giggles. We shared a memorable experience riding a camel in tandem on the Sahara Desert when the camel was apparently made to bolt by an evil cameleer who used threats and menaces to try to extract more money from us. We were both terrified, but stood firm. We were an unlikely pair, but it seemed that we got on passing well together.

In London Janet and I parted, and I saw little of her for the next, few months.

Margaret was a New Zealand friend in London, a fellow musician. She planned a two months motoring holiday in Europe for herself, me and her schoolfriend Mary who had come out to stay with her. To do the trip on the cheap, we would be staying in motorcamps and youth hostels. At the last minute Margaret's budgeting showed that our finances would only stretch to the original plan if we took a fourth person with us, even though this would mean a squash in the Morris. Did I know anyone?

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"Janet Howard would go anywhere at the drop of a hat" I said. "And she's thin! .How do you two girls feel about a 19-year-old coming too?"

"Let's meet her and find out!" said Margaret.

A delighted Janet was signed up.

I stayed first with friends In Switzerland, and met up with the party in Salzburg. At our *pensione* the beds were very hard. In the morning I had a back ache. The next day when we set off on the first leg of our journey to Italy, I found myself in considerable pain. The girls cheerfully did my share of the work in loading the car (four suitcases, an igloo blow-up tent and our bedding on the roof rack) and I expected to recover within a couple of days. However, it was nearly six weeks before I lost that violent attack of sciatica.

This was the beginning of the problem. I just could not pull my weight with the quite arduous physical labour required from us all when we set up camp and blew up our igloo and the four air-beds, with no foot pump. At first the girls were sympathetic and uncomplaining, but as time went on and my condition did not improve it was hard on them, and tempers frayed.

I did have one advantage over the others when we crossed the Alps. I could speak Italian. Maybe it was fractured, but I had taken the trouble to learn the language. But this did not improve the common weal as expected, because my conversations with the natives everywhere were invariably misinterpreted by those who did not understand anything, and I was often accused by Janet of coercing people into doing kind and helpful things for us. Not true. They were just kind and helpful people who sized up the situation and did things for us of their own volition, interested in a friendly foreign woman and three attractive girls whom they imagined were my daughters. But of this I was never able to convince the others. I would hear Janet's dramatic whisper behind the tent:

"Dorothy asked those nice boys! Isn't she awful!"

Perhaps you have to be middle-aged to realise that nice young men in all countries enjoy helping pretty ladies who obviously need help. It makes them feel good. But I never did ask them. They always politely asked me if they could assist.

So I was in the red with Janet for my inability to help out when physical exertion was required, for my ability to speak Italian, and for using a UNESCO card for discount sight-seeing which she envied. And I was soon to be despised for having a poor bump of direction.

The others seemed more relaxed about my shortcomings. But one could see there might well be rocks ahead. Sides would probably be taken. And finally they were.

I, too, had complaints which naturally I did not voice. One was about food, or

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lack of it. Those girls never seemed to get hungry. I did. Another was about the inane, trite conversation level in the car during those long, long drives. Janet was very young, saw every sight and event as something to tell her family about rather than something that might conceivably enrich her life, and kept our chit-chat at rock bottom level. If I tried to start up a more interesting, topic than Janet's brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles, she jumped on me, so I learned to hold my tongue.

We all did have some marvellous experiences together. There was the night we spent as the guests of all-night petrol station attendants near Ancona, sleeping on a filthy marble floor, closely guarded by our solicitous hosts. There was a drive of 20 miles along the autostrada on an empty petrol tank, with me frantically swotting up the Italian for "Please can you siphon off some of your petrol and give it to us?" There, was our mutual joy, at a youth hostel in Nîmes, at being given a wonderful free meal because it was part of a feast ordered by a large party of German archaeologists; and our mutual disgust at their revolting, noisy and inconsiderate manners when we were all trying to sleep. There was the opera in Venice, and in Rome at the Caracalla Baths, hundreds of marvellous pictures and statues in the galleries, fantastic churches, magnificent scenery, even occasional wonderful swims in the sea. And many more wonders and delights which we all shared. and doubtless all remember. However, I fear it was the events brought about by Janet's unexpected antagonism to me that stand out clearest in my memory.

Janet could not bear my lack of sense of direction.

The first evidence of this come on our first real day in Italy. Margaret drove us into Verona for an hour's sightseeing, parking the car on the kerb of a road outside the walled Old Town. Inside the wall was everything we wanted to see, including Juliet's house.

We locked the car, with our handbags inside, walked to the wall, found a narrow cutting through it, and inside was the Town Square with its big historic buildings including the entrance to the Roman arena. This we entered, to see our first amphitheatre. Then we walked to a nearby open-air market, a really big one under trees and awnings, and this was the first Italian marketplace I had seen. The atmosphere was wonderful, it was full of jostling, friendly people — I loved it. When the others wanted to move on to Juliet's house I pleaded my sore back as an excuse and said I would stay poking around in the market. If they had not returned within the promised half hour I would meet them back at the car.

I managed to get myself lost. The others had the map. It was no good asking the way to Juliet's house, the others would have left there long since. The only thing to do was make for the car, and this was what I could not find. The very road where we had parked seemed to have vanished.

I asked for help from a bookseller who recommended I try the Polizia. These gentlemen inhabited a sort of hole in the wall, not far from the cutting with which I was now becoming familiar. Without knowing the name of the road where our car was, they said they could not help me. They advised me to walk back to the Roman

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arena and wait outside the entrance, as the girls would have to pass by there if they were looking for me.

There was an ice-cream vendor sitting by the gate. I was lost, hot, and my back hurt. I sat down nearby, and a few tears trickled down my cheeks. The ice-cream vendor looked upon me warmly and kindly offered me a gelato. I shook my head, indicating that I had no money. With a friendly smile he still proffered the icecream. I took it.

Cheering up a little, I searched my pockets, just to make sure there was nothing useful there. There was. Money! It was a thousand lire note. This was then worth about five shillings in English money, but on my first day in Italy I thought it was a fortune. I jumped to my feet all smiles, waved goodbye to the kind gelato man and crossed the Square to a bank, to change the money for "taxi money". They looked a, bit surprised because it was taxi-money, but they gave me coins. My idea was to get a taxi driver to find our car.

Outside was a taxi stand. A driver motioned me to jump in beside him. He had no English. I explained with difficulty that we had driven into the city on a road leading right to the wall. It seemed there were several.

We went out a little and zoomed in on our first radial. Nothing familiar. I gave a plaintive cry of despair. The driver patted my knee sympathetically and made soothing noises. How I love the Italians!

We went out again. and drove in on the next radial. And there, heaven be praised, was our little Morris Minor drawn up neatly by the kerb. Nobody was in it, but who cared. The girls would soon be back.

The driver was all smiles that the poor Signora who was lost was no longer lost.

The girls appeared quite soon, and we all celebrated my re-emergence in the nearest icecream parlour. They had been quite anxious.

Janet was never to forgive me for getting lost in Verona. I think she decided then that I was completely senile and a millstone round their necks. From then on, when we entered a new town I was forbidden to stray far from the group.

However, once I was let off the hook for a whole day on my own. It was wonderful. But at one point I actually got lost again and was stupid enough when relating my adventure later, to say so.

The composer Sir William Walton lived, with his South American millionairess wife, on the island of Ischia off the coast of Naples. He knew of me, and I promised to visit him when we were in Naples. I was to warn him of the day in advance, but this proved difficult. When we arrived in Naples I had not been able to write, and tried to ring up. The motorcamp's telephone book gave no sign of a Walton. An

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unlisted number? Perhaps. I decided to just go.

I boarded the Ischia ferry at about 9 o'clock. It was almost empty. Half an hour later it stopped at an island with a signpost reading "Procida" on the wharf. Nobody was around to ask. I thought Procida must be Ischia's port, and stepped ashore. It was not.

There were no taxis, but a little horse and gig waited there, the horse with a straw hat on with a poppy, the driver a wild gypsy fellow who beckoned enthusiastically. I handed him Sir William's address, he nodded vigorously, I climbed up and we took off.

I was jogged up the mountain to the very top — and a staggering view across the bay of Naples and Vesuvius — and down again, but no sign of Sir William's villa. We stopped someone on the road, and I discovered that villain of a driver had only pretended he knew where to go. I was not on Ischia at all.

After an adventurous, rocky and seasick-making trip of another hour or so in a local fishingboat, in the company of a disconcertingly hot-eyed local just dying to chat me up in his funny dialect, I did arrive at the much more civilised island of Ischia, caught a taxi and was transported up yet another mountain to Sir William's villa. Here I found the formidable Lady Walton in shorts instructing her gardener. She seemed far from pleased to see this total stranger who wanted to see her husband. It was siesta time and nobody, but nobody calls anywhere in siesta time in Italy. In fact, to say she gave me the brush-off was putting it mildly. I had dropped a real brick by not having warned the Waltons of my arrival, and then coming at siesta time.

At last she reluctantly agreed to tell Sir William I was there. He emerged, looking tousled from his sleep, and greeted me warmly. Exit Lady Walton.

I spent a happy hour with him in that fabulous villa, and after a while his wife, suitably quietened and now properly dressed and made up, joined us and showed a different face, in two senses of the word. However, in spite of initial misunderstandings like having used an out-of-date telephone book, for me Lady Walton was Out!

The taxi waited for me, and I was nervous about what the bill would be, and whether I had enough to pay for it.

All of this, and lots more, added up to a quite eventful day.

When I finally made it back to the motorcamp at Naples and met up with the girls it was quite late at night. Margaret wanted to hear what happened. I started to tell my story, beginning with the episode on Procida. The others were listening.

"WHAT?" shrieked cruel Janet, laughing hysterically. "I just don't believe it! Do you mean to say you actually — got off — at the wrong ISLAND?"

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For six weeks we lived on ice creams, and one only (standing up to save money) between breakfast and dinner. Breakfast was invariably a hard-boiled egg without salt, eaten with a hard, stale roll and saltless butter, and very weak coffee made by Margaret. Dinner was usually packet soup, also brought from London, with another stale roll and butter. We were surrounded by wonderful Italian or French food, and I was always ravenous. But it had been decided at the outset we must all do the same thing, and this routine suited the others.

An amusing food incident occurred when we were passing through Avignon. The girls wanted to see the Pope's palace up a steep hill. I was tired, my back was still sore and there was a wonderful mechanical clock in the Town Square about to chime the hour and reveal its glories. I adored mechanical clocks. I pleaded to be left behind, promising not to move.

To fill in the quarter hour till 6 o'clock I did a little explore round the nearby market. There was a delicatessens shop with someone coming out eating the most wonderful looking roll enclosing a frankfurter, wrapped in a paper poke. The fragrance was mouth-watering. I slipped into the shop, feeling very guilty, and bought one. I returned to the clock, sat on a step and ate my absolutely delicious French wimpy. It was heaven. However, my guilt was such that I kept looking over my shoulder, afraid that Janet and the others would come back early and catch me out. Me! Not their mother, but old enough to be.

The clock obliged on the hour, and perfectly wonderful things happened angels and apostles appeared, birds popped out.

Stolen fruit tastes the best. Never have I enjoyed a snack so much as that French roll. I still remember the taste, thirty years later. And I still remember the guilt! What would Janet have said if she had known! That time I had the sense to hold my tongue.

But just once or twice I did manage the occasional coup which impressed even Janet. One such happened in a small youth hostel somewhere up the Loire Valley.

Our joint morning task there was to mop the tiled floor of the diningroom. A fat, uncouth, scarlet-faced German oaf, dressed carefully in Bavarian costume — feathered hat, shiny boots and all — appeared late and brought in his meal to a table in my area. As I drew near with my mop and pail he showed no sign of moving either his feet or himself, let alone his rucksack and jacket on the floor beside him, all bright and new. I stood expectantly before him in silence, leaning on my mop. He ignored me, shovelling food into his face in a disgusting manner. After a suitable interval I loaded my mop and slobbered savagely under the table, saturating his shiny boots and his rucksack and jacket. His reaction, in German, was violent and furious. I stood there in silence, staring down at him with distaste, for a good half minute. Then I snorted contemptuously: "Hrumph!" If looks could kill, I would have dropped dead on the spot.

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The girls were watching. Janet was definitely impressed. I was congratulated on my aplomb and treated almost like a human being for the rest of that day.

I saw no more of Janet when we returned to London. Two years later we both returned, independently, to New Zealand. Janet had a hard life with a difficult husband who deserted her and her little boy, and an even harder one raising the boy alone, living, as she was, on a shoestring. I forgave her for ruining that holiday. She had paid the price. We never even discussed the matter, ever.

But quite recently, she did.

"We were jolly lucky to have you with us on that trip!" she said. "You were much older, and you saved us a lot of embarrassment with those cheeky Italian boys who tried to proposition us. I don't know what we'd have done without you!"

I was amazed to hear her give this belated, but certainly correct post mortem on our adventures.

"I was too young to go on that trip, you know!" she went on.

And she was.

"Oh, well," I conceded, "I suppose I was too old."

And I was.