

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

The Boys at Golders Green

In 1965 I took my usual long summer holiday abroad from the London schools where I was working. I gave up the flat I had been sharing with my daughter Anna, as she, too, was going away for a long time, and was to live with her cousin when she returned to London. I was staying in my cousin's wonderful hide-out flat in Handel Street, Bloomsbury, while I looked for new accommodation for myself alone.

Walking along the Strand one day I came face to face with someone familiar, an Australian violinist I had last seen in New Zealand two years before. We had shared a memorable experience together during a ski-ing weekend up Mt. Ruapehu. I told her I was looking for somewhere new to live.

"I know a nice married couple who live in a gorgeous house in Golders Green," she said. "They are French. Madame Lyon is a concert pianist and her husband is an architect. They like letting rooms in their home to musicians, and that's what you are, really, isn't it? What about trying them?"

"Golders Green!" I said doubtfully. "That's a bit far out."

"It's only one stop past Hampstead, where you've been living with Anna."

"Yes, I suppose it isn't out of the question."

"You go and see the Lyons!" urged Jill. "I'll ring them to say you are coming."

So that is how I came to spend a couple of months living at Gloucester Gardens, Golders Green.

The good-looking couple were charming. The big music room downstairs housed a concert grand piano, and Madame Lyon played beautifully, but usually in the daytime when the house was empty. Monsieur had made a wonderful job of renovating a spacious two-storied house with an attractive garden. The Lyons lived downstairs and let the three upstairs rooms, where they had also installed a kitchenette for the rooming inhabitants. This had a large electric stove in it and a fridge. There was a very good and beautiful bathroom upstairs also which I, unlike the others, made good use of. It was here I learned that Friday night is bath night in England.

My room was the largest and the best, and contained a large cupboard containing a sink, a tiny stove and a few food shelves. These meagre cooking facilities were adequate under the circumstances. The room itself had a double bed with a magnificent olive green velvet bedspread., and apart from this was furnished as a quite elegant sittingroom. The house was centrally heated, and the view of the garden from the generous bay windows above an elegant curved windowseat was lovely. Yes, I was out in the affluent suburbs now. Goodbye terraces and semi-detacheds.

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The room next to mine was middle-sized and contained two beds but no cooking facilities. It was inhabited by Merv, a lively, attractive dental student, and James, a quiet, burly fellow who dressed beautifully and left the house each morning at 8.30 to travel to the West End to a never-clearly-described job in a City business.

The third bedroom was very small. This was inhabited by Rachid, a Palestinian medical student. He, too, dressed well and carefully. He was a very good-looking and rather quiet young man.

The boys and I shared the kitchenette and the bathroom. The arrangement worked very well. The only thing I did not much care about was a certain meanness on the part of our landlord where the central heating was concerned. We were all expected to be out all day, including the weekends. He turned off the heat from about 9 a.m. till 5 o'clock every day. There were no ordinary heaters, and it was November and December — cold. The Lyons had lovely coke fires in their drawingroom downstairs, the rotters.

After a day or so in the semi-grandeur of my boudoir cum salon, I talked to the two boys next door and invited them in for a cup of coffee. This led on to a game of canasta which I taught them. They thought it was great, James being particularly good at it. It ended up with a quiet knock on my door at about 11 o'clock most nights. James, anyway, would be there.

"What about a game?" he would whisper.

And yes, Barkis was always willing. A game, till about midnight, it was.

One night during my first week or so there the boys knocked at my door after my evening meal and suggested that the three of us go down to "The Bull and Bush", an ancient pub at the west end of Hampstead, for a few drinks. We took a bus because it was a couple of miles away. I realised on exploring the terrain that this old pub practically backed on to another, "The Spaniards", which I knew well and had been a favourite of mine when we lived in Hampstead, and we walked through a little dark copse from one to the other. The boys drank beer and I drank my usual stingo — a pint of Guinness with a pint of lemonade. I did not care much for English beer and could not afford to spend a whole evening drinking gin. The three of us had a convivial evening together.

Rachid the Palestinian was polite when we met, but reserved.

I decided to have all three boys for dinner to my room one evening. This was quite a success, though we did not play cards because Rachid was not interested in card games. James was rapidly becoming a canasta addict, very good in the dirty tricks department.

Soon after this the four of us went to "The Bull and Bush" for drinks one night. Rachid was very quiet all the evening.

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Rachid invited me to go with him to see a film in a suburb a couple of tube stops away. It was "Exodus" I had missed this epic film during, its long city run, though everyone was talking about it. It described the Old Testament story of the flight of the Jews from Israel.

It seemed rather bizarre seeing this pro-Jewish anti-Arab film with an Arab. At first I refused. After all, I had had a Jewish husband, and had three half Jewish children. But Rachid insisted. He said he was curious to see how the Arabs were painted in the film.

During the somewhat hairy scenes of Jewish persecution and Arab cruelties, I could feel Rachid stirring beside me in protest.

"Not fair!" he muttered. "Really — it's not fair."

I felt embarrassed on his behalf, and gave his hand a sympathetic squeeze.

When we got home I made my usual coffee for supper and Rachid came in to share it. The other boys must have known someone was there and did not knock on my door for canasta. Rachid and I had a long, long talk about Palestine, his family, Islam. He told me his rich older brother, a businessman in Beirut, was supporting him in his medical studies in London, and his mother, whom he adored, was very proud of him. He had not done well in his recent tests and he was now afraid he would not pass the final exams coming up soon. He was very, very worried.

I asked him why it had been necessary for him to come all the way to London to study medicine. He admitted he could have taken the course in Beirut at the university, but it was not as good as the London medical schools.

He told me about the Islamic religion, claiming that fundamentally it was very little different from Christianity. He said the religion, far from downgrading women, preached love and respect for wives and mothers. He said his mother was the supreme head of the household and all the family adored her.

All of this was reasonably interesting to me, and I was quite enjoying Rachid's company.

When I suggested he should leave because I was tired, he drew me into his arms and gave me a long, romantic, unlecherous kiss. I accepted this — lightly — because it was nice, and seemed innocent. Then I laughed and led him to the door. We parted, it seemed, good friends.

A couple of nights later the other two boys suggested another pub evening. I said I would get Rachid. I knocked on his door and he opened it. He had been sitting on his bed, all dressed up with nowhere to go. I invited him to join us. He refused. He said he was busy.

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I told the boys. They said they thought he was jealous.

"How absurd!" I said. After all, I was old enough to be the mother of the lot of them. And that, in fact, was what I was really trying to be.

Merv and James continued to knock on my door for card games. Rachid kept quietly in the background.

Feeling a bit sorry for him, I asked him in one evening to tell me about his latest exams. Trying to cheer him up, I gave him advice with encouraging smiles. When he responded and started to become romantic I did not stop him. I wanted to know what was the matter with him, what his real problem was. (Me and my insatiable curiosity about the human condition!)

Before I knew what was happening he was, not seducing me — far from it. He was proposing to me. I couldn't believe my ears. It was all rather charming and naive, and made me feel warm inside, but I had to be sure I did not offend him by showing my amusement. I fear I probably did.

Yes, I learned, he was jealous of those boys next door. He did not want to go to the pub with us all, he wanted to go only with me. He loved his mother. He would love me as he did his mother — and for ever. All Arabs loved one woman for ever. If I would marry him we would go to New Zealand. We would buy two beautiful Arab horses, and together we would gallop over New Zealand's windy plains — wildly, passionately, no London medical school exams to worry about, not a care in the world. And oh, how happy he would make me!

"Rachid!" I got in at last, trying to look serious. (My grey hair flying in the wind over a galloping horse, indeed!) "Rachid!" I think you're forgetting how much older I am than you. It wouldn't be suitable, you know!"

"How can you say that when I love you so much!" whispered my ardent Arab.

I started to visualise torrid love scenes from, "The Desert Song" and almost choked on my giggles. Really, what next!

God knows how I managed to herd Rachid outside and head him to his own room. I could not take this crazy love scene seriously, but I dared not offend him. Heaven only knew how serious he was. He might even try to commit suicide or something if he felt he had been insulted.

I think the other boys appeared on the stairs and wished us both a cheerful goodnight.

Rachid kept to himself after that, very hurt. I gave him a bright "Hello" whenever I saw him, but had enough sense not to pursue further my interest in the human condition — at least in as far as it applied to Rachid.

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I left Gloucester Gardens shortly afterwards, and Rachid and his problems just faded out. Thoughts of him only surfaced again when I told my Rachid story to delighted London cousins who screamed with laughter and made me repeat it to their friends. "Dorothy and her Arab Lover", they called it.

However, there was an interesting denouement to my connection with the other two boys, and our card games.

James's father was a military sergeant in the British Army, stationed at tile time in a section in Egypt. Merv's nice parents occasionally arrived to see him, arms full of goodies from the country. Merv insisted I meet his mother, and she thanked me for "being good" to her Merv. James's parents were in Egypt. However, his father did turn up once on leave, and I met him briefly as James, accompanied by Papa, was turning the key in his door at the same time as I was turning mine. He was a fairly rigid-looking, unimaginative, conservative type in uniform, very correct in manner. I had never discovered from James the circumstances of his coming to London, but I could see that James's Papa could well be a bit of a stickler for the conventions from whom James might well have wanted to escape.

Several weeks after I left the Golders Green house I met Merv in the tube. We fell on each other's necks, remembering past carefree evenings at Gloucester Gardens.

"Are you and James still there, Merv?" I asked.

"Heavens, no!" cried Merv. "James was kicked out for being months in arrears with his rent. So I went, too."

"Good lord!" I said. (What would James's father have said!) "Are you still together? "

"No, we split when James got arrested."

"Arrested? For not paying the rent?"

"No, not that. For things he was up to that none of us knew about — fun and games in a gambling den."

"What sort of things?" I said, eyes wide.

"Do you know where he went every day when he said he was going to the office? He went to a gambling house every afternoon and worked out some sort of shady racket so that he nearly always won. That's how he earned his living! Finally the police caught up with him and he went to jail."

"My God!" I cried. "I always did think James was just a bit too cunning at our canasta games. He was probably practising! How did his father take it?"

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"Pretty badly, I believe," said Merv.

I bet he did!