

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

DR LANGLEBEN'S FRONT TEETH

I had been living in London for over two years and was preparing to return to New Zealand when I met Dr. Langleben. It was a chance encounter lasting no more than two weeks. But it changed my life.

I was 47 years old, and my two front teeth were badly stained. The orthodontic treatment I had had for buck teeth, as a child in Melbourne, had damaged the enamel, and in the course of time ineradicable stains from coffee and cigarettes had appeared in the pitted surface of my two front teeth. Crown capping, as it was then called, was hideously expensive in New Zealand, and I planned to have this cosmetic work done while I was in Britain.

I asked my Australian dentist in London to do the job. He agreed, and X-rayed my jaw. He read the pictures and looked distressed.

"I'm sorry, I've got bad news for you," he said. "I can't cap your front teeth. The roots lie across the gums horizontally instead of vertically, and it isn't possible to "pin" caps into roots lying like that. I can't do it, and neither can anyone else. So for goodness sake never let anyone try."

I was quite upset.

"What can I do, then?" I wailed.

"Nothing!" he replied. "It's just the cross you'll have to bear. But don't worry. It's not as bad as all that, is it?"

I thought it was. I became so self-conscious that I began to hold my hand up to my mouth when I laughed in public. Everyone thought I was mad, but I did mind about my front teeth. Very much indeed.

A few weeks before my planned departure for New Zealand I happened to tell my composer friend Ted Carr how disappointed I was that I would not be able to have my front teeth done in Britain.

"I know someone who could possibly do the job," said Ted. "He's an absolutely crazy old man, but very clever. You should go to see him before you give up. If he says it can't be done, you can really believe it. Give him a try."

This character was called Dr. Langleben. He was an elderly Polish Jewish dentist who had once been Ted's landlord, and done a remarkable bit of cosmetic dentistry work on him. Ted had not seen him for years, but said he used to have a flourishing West End practice specialising in cosmetic work on teeth. The actress Margaret Lockwood and many other famous British actors and filmstars had been his patients.

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I looked up the London telephone book and found only two Langlebens, though one of them looked possible. I rang and was answered by a very charming Mrs. Langleben. No, it was not the right one. But yes, she had heard about the dentist. She believed he had been widowed and married again, had had a nervous breakdown, given up his practice and gone to Spain to recover. But that was years ago. However, she had heard he had now returned and set up practice in Ilford.

I rang the exchange and found there was, indeed, a Dr. Langleben in Ilford. An appointment was made for the following afternoon. I took time off the North London school where I was then working and spent an hour travelling to Ilford. I found the address to be an unprepossessing building, climbed up a couple of flights of dingy stairs covered with dust, and walked into a waiting room containing a couch on which sat an enormous old white-haired man with a lab coat on.

The sun was shining into my eyes through the dirty window. I was wearing a white linen suit, and had bare legs and sandals.

I announced myself to this strange-looking man.

"Who sent you?" he barked, after a dramatic pause. He had a thick mittel-European accent.

I felt like saying in a conspiratorial whisper, "Jake sent me!" However, I replied that it had been Ted Carr.

"Ah, a crazy New Zealand musician! I remember him. Writes horrible music.No tune. And who are you?"

"Oh, I'm another New Zealand composer. And I suppose you would say I write horrible music too."

"Ah, vell, never mind. My second vife she was a New Zealander. She left me. She was neurotic. All New Zealand vomen are neurotic. Never mind though, never mind."

He still sat on the couch, eyeing me up and down.

"Vot are you doing mitt varicose veins in your legs?" he asked accusingly.

This time I positively bridled. I had not thought they were so noticeable. Who did this crazy old man think he was, anyway?

"I'd like to know," I said with dignity, "what varicose veins in my legs have got to do with you."

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"Plenty!" replied Dr. Langleben. "How do you think I can treat your teeth properly if I don't know how your blood stream vorks?"

This was getting impressive.

I never did get a chance to actually tell Dr. Langleben what I had come for. He pushed me roughly into his surgery, a nurse settled me into the old-fashioned chair, he thrust his huge, garlic-smelling fat fingers into my mouth and fished around right and left, all the time talking non-stop.

He wasn't a "real" dentist at all, it seemed, but he had five medical degrees. With five medical degrees he assured me dentistry was just common sense. His last New Zealand patient had come to him for the removal of bags under her eyes!

What sort of a dentist was this? I was beginning to be quite scared of him. He was so rough, uncouth and strange, and he was telling me so many frightening things. He had married a young New Zealand wife, they had a daughter, the wife took off with the child to her home in Auckland and he had never seen her again. They were out of touch. He had been ill for four years in Spain. In fact his hands trembled like an aspen, which did not reassure me in any way. I was terrified of what might be going to come, and decided I was quite mad to put my life, so to speak, into the hands of a lunatic, however talented. Those five medical degrees after all had been acquired many, many years ago.

I had also once been married to a Polish Jew, I told him. But I think he found this coincidence less impressive than the fact that I, like his wife, was a New Zealander.

While waiting for the X-ray photographs to develop I did manage to tell him what my Australian dentist in London had said to me. I still had that ominous "I can't do it, and never let anyone else try!" ringing in my ears.

Dr. Langleben read the X-rays.

"Your dentist is a good one!" he cried. This was the first positive remark I had yet heard him make. "Vot is his name, pliss?"

I told him.

"Goot! I vish him to come to work for me! English dentists are not so goot. But this one, he is an honest man!"

The session ended with my being told that my Australian dentist was right, — nobody in Britain could do the job. Only he could. He said perhaps four or five specialists in America could also do it, but they would charge a fortune. What could I afford to pay? Was I a rich voman?

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"No!" I laughed. "Far from it."

"Vell, never mind. I do it for a New Zealand voman, even if she is neurotic. I do it for £125, specially. Is that too much?"

This was then amazingly cheap for such work, even if it had been normal. For something thought to be impossible, it was a miracle. Dr. Langleben's generosity and my vanity overcame my fears, and I agreed to have the work done.

"You vill come to me on Sunday, yes? Sunday! In the morning, 9 o'clock. Nobody will be here, the telephone it vill not ring, I shall be undisturbed. I must have nothing to disturb my concentration, because it vill be very difficult. It vill take three hours. You vill come to me at 9 o'clock, pliss."

"Yes, yes!" I cried, quite unable to argue with something that would put me, living in far-off Hampstead, to amazing inconvenience on a Sunday morning, so formidable was this "saviour" of mine. No arguments!

"How long will the job take?" I asked.

"Altogether two veeks," he said. "For one veek you vill be vithout. I must send to Birmingham to get the fixture made. There is only one dental mechanic in Britain who can do such difficult vork, and he is in Birmingham."

"During the week when I will be without," I said, "will I have something temporary in my mouth?"

"Most ladies stay at home for that veek," he said evasively..

"Well, I can't. "

"Then let me see — I think I can find some temporary teeth for you."

He opened a drawer full of teeth — an awesome sight!,— and started to stir around among them with his huge, fat, garlicky forefinger.

"Molars!" he muttered. "Molars. Nothing but molars!"

That was the end of that exhausting day. I reeled down the street to the railway station, full of terror for the coming Sunday and wondering if I really was going to have to go to my school for a week with molars sticking out of my mouth.

On the Sunday I turned up, dragging leaden feet, mildly terrified. I thought I must be round the bend to take such a risk, with this madman. "Never let anyone try!" rang sharp in my ears. But vanity, ah vanity!

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The attractive young nurse was not there. Dr. Langleben filed my two front teeth down to points. He took measurements by forcing an uncomfortable gadget full of wax up and around in a most painful manner. Every time I squirmed or groaned he slapped me on the cheek.

"Keep STILL!" he yelled. "No wonder your husband left you! All you New Zealand women are NEUROTIC!"

I was outraged. Through gummed-up jaws I shouted back at him (or tried to).

"He didn't leave me! I left him!"

But I doubt if this was received and understood. All I got was another cuff on the cheek.

"Shut UP!" he yelled.

By this time he was talking to himself, muttering interesting things like "I think I can do it!" I was fast becoming a nervous wreck myself!

Finally I started to cry quietly. It was all so absolutely gruelling, if not actually painful, and Dr. Langleben was being so awful. The tears just started to run down my cheek. I could not stop them.

"How can I do such precision work when you cry all the time! Get up! I need a cup of tea. You will make me a cup of tea!"

I rose to my feet like a zombie, still sniffing, and accompanied him into the next room, a dirty little back office with a gas ring in it and a rusty old kettle. I boiled the kettle and made the tea. We both sat down in the waitingroom and had our cups of tea. Dr. Langleben pulled some writing paper out of a drawer in a desk and handed it to me.

"You will write the letter to the mechanic in Birmingham!" he commanded. "You write better English than me."

That was for sure, I thought. I picked up a pen. He dictated:

"Dear MrThis patient has pathological roots"

I put down the pen.

"No, I won't write that," I said.

"WRITE!" he shouted. So I wrote the shameful words. I did not like someone

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else to be told I had pathological roots. It sounded awful.

The gist of the letter was that a perfect fit had to be managed so that the new fixture would jam into my top jaw with extreme precision and give the necessary support that the normal root "pins" would have given.

After the cuppa tea we returned to the torture chamber and things were not quite so bad. At about half past twelve he finished, and started poking around in that drawer full of molars. I held my breath. He actually found two suitable incisors, and jammed them into my mouth. They looked rather dreadful, but at least they were not molars

I went home sore and chastened, but relieved as to my appearance. It was bad enough, but it could have been unthinkable.

Next day at school I found these temporary teeth very difficult to manage. I kept my mouth shut for most of that week, and lunchtimes were horrible. Those teeth seemed to be on the point of coming adrift all the time. I hardly ate anything for a week.

The next thing was to await the arrival of the new fixture from Birmingham. It was expected on a certain date.

The day arrived, and Dr. Langleben rang me at home in the morning before I left for school. (He had made a habit of doing this anyway, just to see how I was. I think the poor old thing was lonely.)

"It has not come mitt the mail!" he told me in a voice of doom. "And I have just heard he has gone off to Spain for his holidays. For a month."

"Good heavens!" I cried. "In a month I'll be on the high seas, on my way back to New Zealand!"

"Do not worry yet," he said. "Perhaps your fixture vill come in the afternoon mail. If not, then vee vill start to vorry."

What a morning that was!

At lunchtime I rang his nurse. The fixture had just arrived.

"Come in at 4 o'clock," she said.

And so the bizarre Dr. Langleben was able to finish his job. And a very nice job he made of me. too. The fitting session was also rather gruelling, though. He kept abusing me for being hysterical and neurotic, and even his nurse spoke to him reproachfully.

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"It's just as well you are the only person who can do what you do, Doctor," she said. "Otherwise you'd never have any patients!"

Well, that was as maybe. Doubtless Margaret Lockwood was pushed around and told she was neurotic too, even if she was not a New Zealander. I walked out of Dr. Langleben's surgery on air. I was delighted with my new appearance. I had not looked so pretty for years. He apologised for having to charge me an extra £25 for something, but that bit of cosmetic dentistry was the best £150 worth of anything I've ever had done to myself. A woman who, as a girl, was admired for her looks feels deprived of her charm when she appears to be losing them, and the self-confidence I gained from Dr. Langleben's beautiful two front teeth certainly had a bearing on the professional and social successes I achieved over the next twenty years.

As for Dr. Langleben himself, I was moved by his pathetic little phone calls during that fortnight. He asked me to try to contact his wife and daughter in Auckland when I returned to New Zealand, even if only to send him their address. It was his daughter he longed to hear about. I did look up the Auckland telephone book when I got home, but found no likely Langlebens there, and I did nothing more.

Several dentists expressed admiration and amazement at his work on me, and one, a specialist for crown caps, wanted to know his name.

"He's a crazy old Pole," I said. "I'm sure you wouldn't know about him."

"Don't you believe it!" he replied. "I could well have heard of him. There are very few dentists in the world who can do work like that."

But he had not.

A young New Zealand friend with a difficult tooth problem was impressed with my story about Dr. Langleben and his undoubted skill. She went to London a year or so after my return, and tried to find him. The number was still in the telephone book for Ilford.

An embarrassed nurse said Dr. Langleben was ill, and this was confirmed by the dentist working as a locum in his surgery. My friend said she would ring again a few weeks later, but was quietly but firmly advised not to. Dr. Langleben was not expected back in the surgery for a very long time.

I feel sure that poor old Dr. Langleben went round the bend. And I have since heard from Ted Carr that he is dead.