

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

With Shirley On Arapawa Island
(Shirley Barker)

My old friend Shirley borrowed from her schoolfriend Tinker a cottage at Waipapa Bay, Marlborough Sounds, for three weeks of that summer holiday. She invited me to join her.

We had been friends for many years. Although very different in temperament we somehow complement each other, and had enjoyed other holidays together. We both liked playing cards, chess and scrabble, and these were things we did together in the evenings when we were in isolated places. Shirley was a botanist and she adored quiet, lovely spots in the bush.

We enjoyed two weeks at Waipapa Bay, although I developed an unpredictable toothache. I had aspirins. Shirley suffered from chronic migraines, but they seemed to be under control. She had her special painkillers.

Aunty Vera, Tinker's elderly mother, owned another cottage round the point from Tinker's, and her sons lived in their large yacht anchored offshore. Each child and grandchild in that family was given a cottage at the Sounds on attaining the age of 21. Aunty Vera was in charge of all such arrangements.

Just before the end of our second week we visited her and learned, to our dismay, that a double booking had been made for our cottage. It had been promised to others for our third week. But Aunty Vera had an idea.

"I've just bought a new cottage for my grandson John," she said. "It is on Arapawa Island. We've seen the place, but nobody has stayed there yet. If you two would like to be the first, we'll give you the keys. You could stay there for the extra week. All you have to do is arrange for the launch from Picton to get you there, along with your supplies for the week. What do you think?"

Shirley's eyes lit up. She was thinking of glorious isolation, wonderful fishing and birdlife. And it sounded alright to me. However, there were migraines to consider and my toothache.

We pondered these matters.

"Let's go!" I cried.

Shirley ordered the launch from Picton and the stores it was to bring. The boatman was trailing a dinghy which he promised to lend us if there was no boat for our cottage, and we took oars from Tinker's boatshed, just in case. We set off gaily for the two hour trip down Queen Charlotte Sound to Arapawa Island, veered to port around the point of it and chugged alongside lonely bays and inlets until we came to our own. Behind our launch bobbed what was to be our lifesaver — that little dinghy.

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Our beach was completely deserted. One small cottage was half hidden in the bushes just above the high tide line on the shingly beach. No other human habitation was to be seen. There was no jetty. And no boatshed. But we had our dinghy.

Bill the boatman dropped anchor offshore and landed Shirley and me by beaching the dinghy. Then he returned to his launch in it, to land our stores. Everything was lined up on the beach, and Shirley and I started lugging it all up to the house. Bill advised us to drag the dinghy up to a tree by the cottage above high tide mark and tie it up safely. Shirley rowed him back to his launch, and then we both managed, with difficulty, to manhandle the boat into position by the tree, the tide being high, and tie it up. Then we went inside to explore our new little home in the wilderness.

"Heavenly! It's heavenly!" cried Shirley.

There was the usual central livingroom-cum-kitchen with windows looking out on to a fabulous view of sea, mountains and bush. Two or three small bedrooms adjoined. There was no electricity, but who cared. There were lamps, and we had our games. There was no telephone, no TV, no radio, but everything was cosy and comfortable. This was my shy friend Shirley's idea of paradise. I listened to the wash of the waves on the lonely shingle, cast one or two thoughtful looks at the long, empty yellow beach with nothing in sight but seabirds, and wondered — just a little bit.

We began to think about supper.

"Where's the bread, Shirley?" I asked. "Did you put it away?"

"No, I didn't, It must be there somewhere."

But it wasn't.

Well, well, no bread.

"We'll just have to do without bread for a week, won't we?" I said.

"Heavens!" cried Shirley. "I get terrible migraines without bread!"

"We could make a damper loaf. Did we bring flour?"

"No!" wailed Shirley.

We found half a paper bag of flour in a cupboard, left there by the previous occupants. It was mouldy.

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"Did you order biscuits?" I asked.

"Yes, 2 packets of plain wine biscuits and 2 of chocolate biscuits."

"You always say chocolate gives you a migraine. I'll have the chocolate biscuits and you have the plain ones."

"Dorothy!" shrieked Shirley, outraged. "It's not as simple as that! Chocolate biscuits cost far more than plain biscuits. How can you dream of equating them biscuit for biscuit?"

She seemed to be getting really angry. I was astounded. We could not possibly have a row — the first in our long friendship — right now, at the beginning of a whole week together on a desert island! And over a chocolate biscuit!

"Well, what do you suggest?" I said placatingly.

"There's got to be at least two plain biscuits for one chocolate biscuit," said Shirley firmly.

"Okay, okay!" I said. "Whatever you say."

And so we sat down together, two intelligent, mature middle-aged women, and solemnly broke open the packets of biscuits and dealt them out.

Shirley was still sniffing disapprovingly. It had been a near thing.

There were other things Shirley thought she had ordered which were not there.

In fact, Shirley had been pretty remiss with that grocery order.

It looked as though we were going to need to do quite a lot of fishing.

When we were preparing to light the wood stove to cook our supper we noticed a pencilled note on the flue. It read, DO NOT LIGHT FIRE BEFORE REMOVING BUCKET FROM CHIMNEY. THIS MUST BE REPLACED WHEN LEAVING COTTAGE.

We went outside to inspect the chimney. There, indeed, was a plastic bucket inverted over the chimneypot, probably to prevent birds from nesting in the chimney.

The roof had a steep pitch up the middle. Near the apex was the chimney.

Shirley poked around in a shed and found a long ladder. Together we erected

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it against the wall of the house.

"I can't go up there!" said Shirley. "I'm no good on heights. I get vertigo. You'll have to go up. Dorothy."

Shirley was the outdoor type, I'm a city slicker. I have poor balance and poorer judgement when scaling cliffs. Climbing without support makes me nervous. But I don't get vertigo, so it had to be me.

Gingerly I climbed up the ladder and started to crawl my way up one of the ridges, clinging wildly to whatever I could. I finally reached the chimney with the greatest relief. It was no trouble to remove the bucket. But I certainly did not enjoy the coming down bit. However, Shirley was so delighted with my clumsy and inept performance that she overwhelmed me with thanks and unmerited praise. Perhaps that was what was needed for her to recover from the episode of the chocolate biscuits.

In the middle of the night I awoke with a really harrowing bout of toothache. I took several aspirins and finally fell asleep. But I started to worry about our isolation. That back tooth of mine was going to give me real troubles

Next day we went exploring. Walking barefoot, Shirley stepped on a plank with a rusty nail in it. By the time we returned to the cottage her foot was swollen and sore. We did what we could with our primitive medical supplies and basins of hot water. But this was a worry. If Shirley were to get a poisoned foot we would be in a real fix.

That night the worm gnawing in my tooth, waiting for darkness and quiet to do so, nearly drove me mad. More aspirins. They were going to run out.

In the morning Shirley's foot seemed no worse. We did not voice our qualms.

At breakfast we heard voices. Voices! We rushed to the window and saw a family party in a fishingboat landing on our beach. Laughing and talking, they offloaded picnic gear and walked along the sand with it, out of sight.

My heart leaped. Here was help! We could ask them to ring a doctor in Picton, or send the boatman down for us, or ring Aunty Vera at Waipapa Bay who would send their yacht down! Whatever they did, we could be rescued for my visit to a dentist and Shirley's possibly needed visit to a doctor, in Picton.

I said nothing. I was only the guest. It was up to Shirley to make the move.

And what did Shirley say?

"Oh, Dorothy, those awful people!" she cried. "How dare they come to our

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beach and destroy our peace and quiet! I hate them! I hope they go away soon!”

So my heart sank. They did leave, an hour or two later.

Nobody else ever called in at our little bay.

In spite of inauspicious beginnings we did enjoy the deserted beach, our quaint little home and our evening games.

We had to begin fishing for food. This presented two problems. The first was the struggle to get our dinghy down into the water, and then back again to the tree. It was a heavy boat for two elderly ladies. We had to wait until the tide was almost at the full, get out to sea, and come back soon before the falling tide had made much difference to the distance from the tideline to the tree. And the second problem was the horrible fish-hooks we had bought in Wellington, which turned out to be Japanese with nasty little barbs.

The bay was teeming with fish. Our four hooks per line were all twitching before the sinker even reached the bottom. But the fish on them were poor little undersized runts which Shirley, being a conscientious biologist, said must be thrown back, all bleeding, into the sea. I turned out to be useless at this job, so poor Shirley, with the greatest repugnance, seemed to spend most of her time de-hooking while I caught the fish. When we managed to catch one big enough for a meal, that was it. We stopped at once, and rowed ashore.

One night a storm blew up. Snug in our cottage we felt safe and cosy as the surf roared and the wind shrieked and the rain lashed. But next morning an unwelcome sight met our eyes. Our dinghy, though still safely moored to its big tree, was nearly buried in the sand, and full of water.

Stark naked as we were — we never bothered with clothes outside because nobody ever passed by — we tried to dig our precious boat out of the sand. We laboriously emptied it of water with plastic buckets. Then we found exposed about half a boatful of solid shingle, wet and heavy. With tremendous effort we managed to careen the boat. My tooth protested vigorously, and Shirley got a migraine. There was nothing for it but to empty that shingle out with our buckets as best we could. How we both wished our strong grown-up sons, with their good biceps, had come with us! When at last we had emptied the boat (it seemed to take most of the morning and we were exhausted) we had to take back buckets of water from the sea and sluice it out. Finally we righted it, with considerable trouble, and waited for the next high tide to float it once more.

What a sight we must have made! But by now we knew that dinghy was our lifeline.

One day we decided to go for a walk. When we were fishing we could see the

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bridle track far above our cottage from the sea, but had yet to discover how to get to it. It seemed we had to traverse about a quarter of a mile of rough tussock. Shirley, more bushwise than me, wanted to trace a sort of semicircle to reach it. I decided a more direct path up could be found, through a patch of bush. So we separated.

"Will you be alright, Dorothy?" asked a solicitous Shirley.

"Of course I will!" I replied. "I'm not a complete idiot, you know!"

How wrong I was. Because I found a stream in that bush, with very steep banks, that must be crossed. One might be able to jump across it, but with no space behind me for leeway and only rotting undergrowth to grasp over the other side, I was not game to try. I pondered.

"Are you alright, Dorothy?" called Shirley, now well out of sight and faraway.

"Yes, I'm fine," I lied. Shirley must not find out that I had, indeed, taken the wrong track. I decided to lie on my stomach and try to wriggle across.

Everything my out-stretched hands grasped on the far side collapsed under my touch, including a fair-sized tree. I wriggled until I was reasonably secure, but seemed unable, from my position as a human bridge, to get the purchase necessary to advance. I could go neither forwards nor back. The stream tinkled romantically far below me. I was stuck.

A faint voice called from far away.

"Dorothy!" I've found the track! Where are you? Are you alright?"

"Fine! I'm just fine!" I shouted.

Shirley would surely come back soon to look for me. I must not, under any circumstances, be found by her in such a ridiculous situation. I had to move.

My fear of Shirley's scorn lent me courage, and I made an extra heave towards the far side. Things I grabbed crackled and snapped but I did manage to lever the upper half of -my body across. Legs dangled over the side, but these I could manage. In five minutes or so I struggled out of the bush and saw Shirley already on the bridle path.

"Where on earth have you been?" she cried.

To this day I have never told her that I was busy being a human bridge.

Every exertion by now was bringing on agonising bouts of toothache. Shirley, now in better condition than I was, nobly gave me her migraine pills when my aspirins ran out.

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On our last day we spent the morning cleaning up the cottage — and this did give Shirley a migraine. I had to climb up on the roof again to replace the bucket, and this gave me toothache. We were expecting Bill the boatman at 2 o'clock. We lined up a bizarre-looking load of boxes, suitcases and bags on the beach and flopped exhausted on the sand, trying to read our books. We were both suffering. But we should be up in Picton before 5 o'clock, to get help from the Picton chemist. Shops there shut at 5.30.

Two o'clock came. No boat appeared. The wind blew up. We both tried to read, snatching occasional furtive glances round the point. No word was exchanged. Two--thirty. No boat It all started to feel a bit creepy and unreal. We had eaten all our food. Had the boatman forgotten us?

At last at 3 o'clock we heard a little chug-chug, and round the point came our launch, buffeted by choppy waves. We wandered down to the water's edge like zombies. Bill, alone as usual, waved frantically to us to load the boat while he held it off the shallows. We both dashed in, waist deep, laden with our motley and oversize pieces of luggage and heaved them aboard, then staggered back for more. Bill could hardly help us at all. Finally we jumped into our dinghy, and Shirley, like Grace Darling, bravely rowed us out to the launch. We clambered aboard, much to the relief of our distracted and harrassed boatman, and took off. We crawled exhausted astern to collapse on a bench in the open deck area, too worn out to speak.

With all this effort I was suffering agonies. So, it seemed, was Shirley. I swallowed the last of her pills. The boat forged out into the channel and a high wind and rough seas caught us. As we pitched and rolled I felt nauseous with seasickness. What, seasick too! This was too much. I curled myself up on my bench into a miserable ball, stared over the side into the swirling green sea, which suddenly seemed very inviting, and silently willed Shirley to push me in. If she had, I would have turned round before I sank and said, "Thank you!"

Suddenly I realised Bill had come a whole hour late, and we might miss the Picton shops. I struggled to the wheelhouse and shouted to him that if we did not make Picton by 5.30 I was sure I would die! Bill stepped on it. His sturdy little craft was sure no speedboat, but we did manage to race up the Sound at about eight knots instead of the usual five.

We made the jetty at Picton at twenty past five. Bill threw our stuff ashore and told us to leave it there and run, which we did. A startled chemist, glass of water in hand. rushed out from behind when I hurtled in from the street shouting, "Painkiller! Painkiller!" Soon we were both given appropriate medication, and Shirley and I were at least temporarily relieved of our ills.

We very much enjoyed a Chinese meal with real bread and butter served with it.

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On the ferry back to Wellington that night, the nerve in my tooth gave up the ghost and died. Farewell, toothache!

Now every time I pass Arapawa Island in the Picton ferry I think of endless waves washing on lonely shingle beaches, dinghies full of gravel, human bridges, wanting Shirley to tip me out of the boat, and — toothache.

But actually it was a great holiday!