

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

23 I seem to have forgotten the elephants ...  
(Jackie Power)

In 1973 my big blonde friend Jackie invited me to stay with her in Singapore for three weeks. Her husband, a New Zealand naval officer, had been posted there for three years, and they lived in Changi in a bungalow with their two young children, the Chinese amah and a big dog.

Jackie wanted to visit some New Zealand friends in Bangkok. She hated flying, and persuaded me to go with her by train. The journey was to take two days and two nights each way, and we would have two days in Bangkok. Our experiences "in the train from Singers to Bangers" (and back) became proverbial.

Our spending money had to be arranged.

Jackie has always prided herself on understanding money. I was happy to let her do the arrangements. This was in the days before credit cards. We were, she said, to carry American dollars, and we would go to Change Alley in Singapore to exchange my travellers cheques and her Singapore bank cheques for the necessary.

"Why don't we go to the bank?" I asked.

"Gracious, no!" cried Jackie. "This is the East! You've got to understand that you always drive bargains here. I can get far better rates on the black market in Change Alley than by going to the bank."

In Change Alley I watched Jackie going from one tout to another, talking, arguing, bargaining. At last she seemed to be satisfied, and left a smiling vendor with a huge wad of American banknotes.

"I did well!" she said. "I'll look after the money, Dorothy. Alright?"

"Yes, sure!" I replied.

The first leg was Singers to Kuala Lumpur (locally known as K.L.), about six hours in a, steamy first class carriage with no air, the conditioning system having gone down. It was too hot for our usual diversions — scrabble and card games. Along with Indian fellow-travellers we sweated it out.

At K.L. we tried without success to get a shower at a big hotel, and had to settle for pork and beans on toast in a revolving restaurant on the roof instead. A fabulous Malaysian sunset sky over the city backdrop rewarded us.

Back at the famous and beautiful Kuala Lumpur railway station at 9 p.m. we found our train for Butterworth (near Penang) sitting there, but not yet ready for

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

occupation. They said it would be another hour before our beds were made up and we could board.

"What about a game of Scrabble to pass the time?" said Jackie.

There were few seats on the platform so we found a large barrel, perched one on each side of it and set out our Scrabble board in the middle. After a few minutes people started to drift up, and quite a little crowd congregated, watching our play. We were a little disconcerted, but went on playing. We were both good players, and it took a lot to put us off our form.

People grouped behind each of us. A smiling Malaysian excitedly touched Jackie lightly on the shoulder.

"Lady!" he whispered conspiratorially. "I see a place for your Q!"

Golly gosh! What a nerve! As though wily Jackie had not seen all possible places for her Q ages ago! And I was not supposed to know she had the Q.

Jackie turned her head and gave her helper a hard, unfriendly stare which seemed to disconcert him not at all. I was laughing.

A policeman came by. What was going on, pliss? What was this game we were playing? And he picked up the Scrabble box and examined the rules on the inside of the lid.

He spoke quietly to our fans and they all quickly melted away. Then he politely handed back the box to Jackie and went on his way.

I wondered about this strange event, until Jackie mentioned that gambling was illegal in Malaysia. And perhaps our audience, in their two groups, had indeed been quietly placing bets on us.

After a reasonable night in our grand but shabby and smelly private compartment (shades of 19th century English colonial life!) we arrived at Butterworth station at about 6 a.m. Here we needed to change some of our American dollars into Thai bhat, and buy our sleeping accommodation tickets for that night on the Thai train.

"Leave it all to me!" said Jackie.

She found a newspaper stand, bought the daily paper and sat down to study the form of that day's official currency rates. She extracted from her wallet the necessary American dollars to buy our sleeper tickets and went off to the money-changing desk.

This was manned by a sleepy, cross-looking Indian.

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

An argument at the counter seemed to be going on. Big blonde Jackle, towering over the Indian, was waving her arms around and raising her voice.

"You thieving, conniving cheat!" she yelled.

She marched angrily back to our bench and sat down determinedly.

"Dorothy!" she exclaimed "Do you mind sitting up in our train all night tonight?"

What a fearful thought!

"Well, actually — yes, I do."

"Well, you go and change the money, then. That crook wants more than the paper says! I won't pay it!" cried Jackie.

"Why is he asking more?"

"Because I've only got single American dollars! He says they only pay the official rate on larger denominations."

So the bargain-hunting Jackie who claimed to understand oriental trading habits had been sold a pup in Change Alley!

Jackie was furious, and it was far from tactful to even smile about our predicament. I took the wad of notes, plus some more, and went up to the money-changer.

"What are you paying today for U.S. dollars?" I asked innocently.

He told me the figure given in the paper.

"Good!" I said, counting out the number of dollars we needed.

"But not for single dollars!" he said.

I was not going to argue. Nothing was going to make me sit up in a Thai railway carriage all night on the way to Bangkok.

"How much more, then?"

He told me the amount, and I paid it. I bought our tickets for the sleepers, and took back the change to a still furious Jackie.

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

"Here you are!" I said in some trepidation. "And I hope there's enough baht change left for our meals on the train."

The friends we made on that train were many, and of many nationalities. The ones I remember best were Jesus, a Spanish chap in his late thirties who seemed to have bummed around most of the world; and Mary and her elderly parents, Chinese residents of Penang. We made our friends in what we called "the nosh car", a diner compartment common to all on the train, where meals were being constantly prepared, and consumed, cooked on the spot on a huge open stove in the corner of the carriage. In spite of the heat of the stove, it was the most convivial place to be on those trains.

Mary was an interesting, well-educated schoolteacher. Her parents talked little, but smiled at us benignly. They, too, spent most of their time in the nosh car. When it became very sultry in the middle of the day, Mary, travelling second class (un-air-conditioned) was glad to accept our invitation to rest with us in our private compartment. We enjoyed her company.

At one point, the train stopped at an isolated little railway station in the middle of the Thai jungle. Our locomotive took on water for a climb ahead and was joined by a second one. We were all leaning out of the windows watching the sights. To get a little peace and quiet, Mary's father had taken his newspaper back to the very last carriage, which was empty.

We watched the guards unlink the last two carriages, blow the whistle, and the train took off with a hiss and a roar.

"Stop the train!" Mary yelled. "Father's been disconnected!"

We all rushed around and the emergency cord was discovered and pulled vigorously. Slowly the train slowed down, and stopped. Away back down the line stood the two carriages, alone and desolate, with Mary's Papa in the last one. He was waving desperately out of the window.

The locomotives were inched back to those two lonely carriages. A shaken Papa climbed out. He was helped on board, and took his seat again beside his agitated wife. Everyone in the nosh car rushed around to congratulate him on his lucky rescue.

We could have had our evening meal served to us in our private compartment, but it was much more fun mixing with the others in the nosh car.

All the dishes looked alike on people's plates - rice with bits of this and that. Jackie suggested something familiar to her and I ordered it. When it arrived it was hard to see it properly in the light of one of the 15 watt bulbs which hung over each table, but I did notice little red strips of something in the rice. I decided with

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

pleasure they must be slivers of tomato. I took a large mouthful — and nearly passed out. Those red strips wore the hottest of hot chillis.

My mouth and throat burned madly. "Oh, oh, oh!" I cried as I turned away from Jackie so that I could gasp some air into my still rice-filled mouth. "I can't stand it! I think I'm going to die!"

People rushed over, all wide smiles and sympathy. One had a glass of water, another some tea, another some dry bread, a waiter brought some plain boiled rice. In no time everyone in the nosh car was around me, all laughing their heads off as sweat streamed down my face and I couldn't even speak, only gasp for air. Even the reticent Buddhist monks looked up with interest from their prayers.

Jesus rushed up with cold coffee and I swallowed everything they all brought me. It seemed ages, though, before I could get a word out of my poor burnt mouth.

The burning sensation took well over five minutes to subside, but it finally, did. Everyone looked so pleased to see "the English lady" more or less comfortable again.

"I've never seen you utterly speechless before!" Jackie giggled.

That episode made us lots more friends on that train. All evening people were waving and smiling when I passed by. But what humiliation!

It was during that day in the jungle that we saw the elephants — the elephants that I did not even remember twenty years later. But I sure remember that rice dish full of chillis.

We arrived in Bangkok with two baht — about 10 cents — left. This time Jackie did not argue with the money-changer at the station.

There was no way her friends could put us up for the two nights, but they said they could get us concession rates given to New Zealand embassy people at one of several city hotels. The catch was, those hotels were very, very Ritzy ones, very expensive. All we had for money was a lousy handful of U.S. single dollars and Jackie's Singapore chequebook. But we decided to live it up.

We were taken to the Dusitani Hotel, a very grand affair indeed. The palatial entrance at the top of a drive up from the road below was graced by the presence of an elephant. This animal was most magnificently caparisoned, as was its mahout whose brilliant costume and dazzling gold epaulettes were a sight to see. All the elephant had to do was stand there all day looking magnificent, but it certainly made an Impression.

"We can't order beans on toast here!" I whispered to Jackie.

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

We felt very much like gypsies in our casual slacks and shirts, sweaty and grubby from the trip, and our chit from the Embassy was reluctantly accepted by obviously disapproving staff. They showed us to a wonderful double bedroom on the top floor with a magnificent view over half of Bangkok. After the discomforts of our previous night's accommodation this was from the sublime to the ridiculous.

With Jackie's friends we saw the sights of Bangkok. We drifted in a boat for a couple of hours among the lotuses of the many klongs, under the shade of huge forest trees, and watched fascinated as the klong people went about their chores on the water. They cooked with it, bathed in it, urinated in it and threw their rubbish into it. We saw more than one dead pig, decomposing rapidly, floating around in it. But the all-over effect was of sylvan peace and beauty, and the cool shadows, among which our boat glided were heavenly. Thailand is indeed the land of flowers.

On our last morning we walked to the railway station to buy our sleeping-car tickets for the night trip down to Malaysia. We decided to take a rickshaw ride back, for fun. We hailed a character riding his conveyance with long skinny bare legs, greying wispy hair and a hangdog look. When we told him to take us to the Dusitani Hotel he nodded enthusiastically.

We rode through the streets, the two big English memsahibs in a rickety cart behind an emaciated, elderly bicycle-rider, and loved it. When we came to the foot of the driveway up to the hotel our driver stopped, disembarked, and grinning a toothless smile held out his hand for money. But we insisted on being driven right up to the door. It was too hot to climb the ramp on foot. Doubtfully he pushed his rickshaw up the drive. We reached the grand entrance and met the elephant with its magnificent mahout who looked at us all with utter disdain. All of a sudden the foyer was filled with smartly dressed, outraged bellhop boys, all shouting at our poor driver. We realised that he was not allowed anywhere near such a grand precinct. We had forced him to go where he knew he was far from welcome.

We stepped down from our go-cart and fished out money for him. It was embarrassing having to pay him off in front of that yelling mob of lackeys. At least he could not argue the price! He grabbed our money and took off smartly.

This left Jackie and me to walk through the lobby with our noses in the air, trying to look as though we had just indulged in a rather scandalous spree for a bet. The supercilious clerks tried to smile back, but they were just too shocked.

The highlight of the return trip happened on the border of Thailand and Malaysia, next day.

We had made friends with a young couple, English school teachers seeing the world before settling down. They had come overland through Europe and Asia and were now on their way to Singapore where money awaited them. The girl wore

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

a long Indian skirt and her long golden hair hung to her waist. The husband had fashionably ragged shorts and an open-neck shirt.

We all had to have about 50 Malaysian dollars, I think, when we crossed the border. This was to make sure travellers did not enter Malaysia penniless itinerants.

Our passports were taken from us on the train and retained. We were told by the guard they would be returned to us at the border station, as indeed they were. But I most certainly did not enjoy being parted from my passport for twelve hours or so.,

The train pulled into this tiny station in the middle of the jungle at about midday. We were told to get out of the train, show our fifty dollars and collect our stamped passports back. A couple of Australian boys on the train stepped out first, looking a bit like hoboes. Then we followed with our English friends. It was very hot, and they, like the Australians, had kicked off their sandals in the train and not bothered to put them on again.

There were two counters inside the station. The Australians went to one, I went to the other. I had my money inspected and my passport stamped in a couple of minutes. Jackie was with the others, waiting for the Malaysian chap to finish with the Australians.

Soon a fine old row was going on..

"Get out! Get out of our country!" cried the passport clerk, a youngish, goodlooking chap beautifully dressed in a tailored safari suit.

Heaven knows what the Australians had done, but there was no arguing with the indignant official. Those two boys had to go. They collected their rucksacks from the train, and we watched them wandering off into the jungle, roughly faced towards Thailand. This was a salutary sight. We were all shaken.

Now Genghis Khan turned his attention to our English friends.

"Where are your shoes?" he shouted. "How dare you come into Malaysia without shoes! it is an insult! You English hippies come to our country and corrupt our simple, innocent young people with your immoral ways! Why don't you stay where you belong?"

There was a deathly silence as we all listened to this incredible diatribe. The English girl looked distressed. Her husband stayed calm, waiting for his papers to be returned. Jackie looked as though she was spoiling for a fight. How I wished she had come to the other desk with me!

The official looked at their money

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

"Not enough!" he yelled. "You have to have 80 Malaysian dollars."

"But the regulations say 50!" protested the young man. " We don't have 80 dollars with us! Our money is waiting for us in Singapore."

"I don't believe you!" replied the clerk, "You can't go on in the train. You'll have to go back to Thailand!"

The little wife burst into tears. Big Jackie looked as though she would explode. She shouldered her way forward, waving her chequebook.

"Here, what's all this?" she demanded, towering over the clerk. "Why are you making these people pay 80 dollars? How dare you!"

"Jackie, Jackie!" I whispered anxiously. "Don't argue with him. He's got your passport too. Jackie, you've got to play it cool till you get your passport back!"

But Jackie took no notice. The official, however, was taken aback at this new element in the drama.

"What do they need?" demanded Jackie loudly. "Thirty dollars! I'm writing out a cheque for them, on the bank of Singapore. I live here, you know. You can't get away with this sort of thing with me!"

The clerk looked uncomfortable. Everybody started to whisper.

Jackie started to write out the cheque. She took her time.

"Thirty dollars, is it? Is that right?" she demanded.

He put out his hand and stopped her writing.

"Don't write the cheque," he said quietly. "I'll let them through for fifty dollars, seeing you are guaranteeing them."

And so our young friends had their passports stamped with no more ado, as did Jackie, and we all tottered back into our carriage, speechless with thinking about what might have happened if Jackie had not had her chequebook.

"You know," laughed Jackie back in the train, "there isn't any money in my bank account! Gerard's salary doesn't go in until the end of the month. It's just as well that chap wouldn't take my cheque, isn't it!"

Back safely in Singapore Jackie and Gerard's pukka sahib friends laughed heartily at our adventures, Nobody, but nobody, it seemed, travelled to Bangkok by

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

train, or with over-spent cheque-books.

But Jackie and I loved it. We have our memories — even if I did forget about those elephants.