

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

24 An Innocent Abroad in Trinidad
(Daphne and Claude Harper)

In 1980 I had a chance to visit Port of Spain, Trinidad

It was a marvellous flight over the turquoise Caribbean. Strings of islands like jewelled necklaces appeared below, some apparently uninhabited. What beaches and lovely hills and mountains, all deserted. Waterless, I was told by a fellow passenger.

Antigua, one of our two stops was absolutely grotty. I wandered around in a feeble Indian bazaar type building where local fat women in appalling cotton dresses sold unspeakably tatty trinkets. So this was the exotic Spanish Main!

The plane arrived late at Port of Spain, Trinidad, and we were all gone over, at Customs and Immigration, with a fine toothcomb. So it was a relief, if a trifle startling, to hear my name boomed out over the loudspeaker, assuring me that my friend was waiting outside. And there, indeed, was a frantically waving Daphne Harper to meet me.

Daphne had been a high-powered librarian in the Trinidad and Tobago National Library. In 1968 she was sent by the authorities to New Zealand to study the work done by our own National Library, where I was then working as a senior reference librarian, and she and I became friendly. Daphne was then in her early 30s, unmarried, beautifully dressed and quite lovely to look at with a touch of Indian and African to the predominantly Caucasian blood. She was what I was later to discover they call in Trinidad "kalilu". She was interesting and well-educated with a degree from Canada. When she heard that my father had come from Trinidad she insisted I must visit her one day.

In 1980 the University Library where I was then working gave me long-term leave. Daphne and I had kept in touch each Christmas, and I now had the opportunity to go far afield if I liked, en route to London and Europe. I arranged to spend a fortnight with Daphne, now married, and her family. There were two children.

In the meantime the newly independent, anti-colonial regime had switched her from library work to administration in the Bank of Trinidad and Tobago. Daphne enjoyed library work, but she had to do what she was told.

All I knew about her husband Claude was that he was a rich and clever orthodontist, previously married and divorced.

My fortnight in Port of Spain — my first brush with a Third World country — was an eye-opener for me.

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Daphne met me in her husband's big car because hers had just been involved in an accident and she was going to have to wait six months before a new car could be imported from England. Why not a second-hand one, I asked. Daphne nearly died laughing. No car in Trinidad was on the second hand market until it had been driven practically into the ground and was nothing but a worn-out bomb. And indeed before we had driven more than a mile into town it was obvious that this must be true. The Trinidadians drive like maniacs. Nearly all the cars I saw were derelict, apparently hanging together with elastic bands and no.8 fencing wire, the roads were appalling, and one could only wonder how any car could last long without being bashed up by other drivers.

"We are just no good at fixing things!" sighed Daphne.

There was no ferry to the nearby island of Tobago, for instance, because although two expensive ones had been bought second-hand from Venezuela by the government, when they arrived the instructions were in Spanish, a language few Trinidadians speak. So the ferries had been left to rot at the Trinidad wharf. The roads were all being dug up together, because somebody thought of the bright idea of laying waterpipes from the sea alongside the ordinary freshwater ones, for use when they have fires in the predominantly wooden town. Too late it was discovered that saltwater corrodes pipes. Also, instead of tackling the job piece-meal, all city streets were being dug up together, so there were traffic jams everywhere and appalling road surfaces. Water ran out frequently, so that Daphne's house was often bereft of it except for my room which had its own en suite bathroom, fed from a rainwater tank. And almost every day the electricity went off in some section of the town. Life was certainly difficult in Port of Spain, the largest and most flourishing city in the former British West Indies.

The town had great charm, with its lovely wooded hills and beautiful tropical trees and parks, its occasional magnificent old colonial houses and buildings with graceful wrought ironwork everywhere, alongside its shantytown hovels, themselves often attractive in their own way, and its lively and colourful inhabitants.

Land being at a premium in a hilly town, people tend to upgrade their existing houses when they can afford it, rather than rebuild or move to a better area, so all suburbs are mixed, rich and poor together. Mareval, the suburb where Daphne and Claude lived, is probably the most exclusive part of Port of Spain to live, being high up in the bushclad hills with a lovely view down to the lights of the city below at night, and the harbour with its many vessels

The only trouble with Mareval then was that the Harpers lived at the top of the steep hill, and the telephone wiring ran only half way up.

Their architect-designed house was magnificent, with a glorious view, a spacious and beautiful garden and good air. It had gracious high-ceilinged rooms, en suite bedrooms, five bathrooms, and air conditioning. The Harpers had

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everything. But no telephone.

This was awkward for me, because Port of Spain had little in the way of public transport. One needed to use taxis if one did not have one's own car. And how do you ring for a taxi when you don't have a telephone?

I had no independence. However, perhaps this was a blessing in disguise. Had Daphne's own car not been knocked up, she had planned to lend it to me. I would have lasted about five minutes driving any car in that crazy city of mad, mad drivers and pothole-riddled, half excavated roads. It would have taken me two hours to drive home from town each day — a distance I could cover in fifteen minutes in Wellington.

Arrived in Mareval, I was introduced to Curtis and Oliver, Daphne's two little dark-skinned sons aged 5 and 7, and Celie the maid. Celie came from the island of St. Vincent. She was an illegal immigrant. Daphne needed a maid for the children, and presumably they were hard to get. Physical labour tended to be shunned by native Trinidadians, as it reminded them of their background of slavery, Daphne told me. Sugarcane was left rotting in the fields unless Indians could be found to work them.

"If we hadn't found oil on Trinidad," said Daphne, "this country would be bankrupt."

Celie was only 16. but Daphne was sure she was pregnant. This would probably lead to marriage with a Trinidadian boy. and a permanent resident's permit. Life was so poor on St. Vincent that the young people would do anything to escape to "the Big Smoke".

My bedroom was wonderful, with its own bathroom and balcony. Rich and sophisticated Daphne and Claude had everything money could buy, but they could not get many of their luxuries to work. The family traipsed through my room each morning to use my shower, with its private rainwater tank, when the water was off, which was most days. I never saw a private swimming pool. Beaches for swimming around the town were non-existent, and I have never longed for a swim so much in my life, but I had to wait till our visit to Tobago to get one. I learned later that the big hotels did have swimming pools, and I, as a visiting "white," would have been able to use them. Daphne naturally did not tell me about this. And actually, I would never have brought myself to use an elitist swimming pool.

The only form of public transport there were wandering minibuses, for which people queued in the streets for hours. Nobody knew when a bus would come or where it would be going. You just got on board, if you could, and hoped for the best. I could have caught such buses from the main road at the bottom of our hill, but I never tried. It was too hot, and somehow other arrangements were usually made for we. But I did miss the independence a regular bus service would have given me

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when the Harpers were at work all day.

On weekdays, when Daphne and Claude went to work and the boys to school, we all travelled to town together in Claude's big car, leaving at 7 a.m. and dropping people off en route. I would go with Daphne to her bank and arrange my day, if necessary with the help of her office telephone. After lunch I would make for home and a siesta, either by car if anyone I knew would take me, or by taxi. There were taxi stands in the city. Celie would be at home, the boys would turn up later, and finally Daphne, at about 6 o'clock, for dinner and whatever diversion the evenings might offer. This routine worked quite well. especially when fellow librarians I met through Daphne invited me to visit them in their libraries.

Daphne and Claude were good to me while I was with them, but it was not until a day or so before Daphne and I took the boys to Tobago for the weekend that I realized they were probably both under some strain.

It came out as a result of my playing on Claude a sort of character-reading game of great antiquity I know, one evening when he and I were alone. I was seeking some way to entertain an obviously very sleepy and possibly somewhat bored man over our endless glorious rum punches. Electricity was off, so we were sitting in the dark.

The next evening I tried my game out on Daphne, She was thrilled with it. She wanted to know what Claude's answers had been to some of my questions. When I laughingly told her the game had suggested he was leading a double life, Daphne nearly fainted.

"But that's true!" she cried.

And so the story came out.

Before my arrival, while Daphne had been clearing out drawers in my room, she had discovered a bundle of love letters to Claude from his nurse pushed into the back of a drawer. This "double life", she thought, had been going on for over a year. She was outraged, insulted, furious. Claude was to receive a lawyer's letter — in fact, one had already just been sent. No way was Daphne going to stay on with Claude.

At the moment. Claude knew nothing of this letter, or of the discovery,

"Gosh, Daphne, that's an awkward thing to happen with me here!" I cried.

"Don't worry!" she replied. "It takes two days for an airmail letter from England to reach us here, but two weeks if it's local, Claude won't get the lawyer's letter till after you've left."

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But he did.

That weekend in Tobago was the most delightful part of my holiday. We all went to the grotty Port of Spain airport by taxi, the family's only remaining car now having packed up too, and took with us a trunk full of dirty washing. Water was off in Port of Spain that weekend, as usual; but not so in Tobago. After waiting for an hour or more in a crowded, stuffy little lounge we boarded a Heath Robinson contraption of a little plane, poor Daphne struggling with the trunk aof washing. There was a washing machine in the beach house. and Daphne eventually did sixteen loads! Trinidad must be one of the few places in the world where you take your laundry by air to be done on another island, and then have to do it yourself. Claude had not come with us.

After a pretty rocky ride ("Don't worry!" said Daphne, "Our planes may not be up to much but we have very good pilots!") we landed at Tobago, where Daphne's sister Lucille met us. She drove us to Claude's holiday house, alongside wonderful bathing beaches and primitive but pleasant country roads on this delightful island with its historic British fort at the top of the dominating hill. The beach house was quite luxurious, built of concrete. We slept on waterbeds.

On the Sunday I cooked dinner for the family, plus Lucille. It was Chicken Cacciatore. I couldn't find a green pepper anywhere in the local market. However, Claude's house contained wonderful goodies in its cupboards and I felt I could find something to replace the green pepper. In a high cupboard were tins of caviare, truffles, oysters, mushrooms, asparagus, everything expensive and luxurious that could be imported was there. There were dozens of tins.

I mounted a ladder and pulled down a tin of mushrooms and opened it. Lucille, now up the ladder, kept on handing me down more wonderful tins.

"What about these chestnuts? Let's have those in too!" she would say.

I thought, well, why not? These tins had been accumulated by Claude, who was cheating on Daphne, who was going to leave him. She may as well use up lots of his things before she goes,

"Did Daphne tell you she's got some troubles just now?" I asked Lucille.

"Yes, she did."

"Is that why you are throwing me down all these luxury foods of Claude's, then?"

"You bet!" laughed Lucille.

It was a marvellous casserole.

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It was relaxing at the island without Claude. We lolled on the brilliant white sand and swam in that marvellous blue sea. Swimming at last! It was heaven. We also took a boat to the reef about two miles out. to watch the coral garden fish activities through the vessel's glass bottom. This trip included a heave-to above a hidden sandbank in the sea which they call the Nylon Lake. We all climbed over the side in our frog's feet and goggles and lay on the surface watching the lovely tropical fish gliding over the white sand.

Claude did accompany Daphne and me to various events after we returned from the island, The most entertaining was a dinner at the international Hilton Hotel, an openair barbecue, for which one dressed up. Daphne wore a marvellous silk creation from Europe. I wore my home-made black and white cotton dress, which was the coolest garment I had. The entertainment was good. There was an exciting steel band. Then along came the Carib dancers, doing their stuff. Their specialty is back-bends and frog-walks backwards, on their ankles — quite spectacular. A rod held horizontally over each dancer was lowered practically to the ground. and he would still bend backwards beneath it.

The jovial compère called for a hands-up display of people from different countries. When he had gone through the visitors from South American countries he asked for anything different. I called out, "New Zealand!" There was a shout of applause.

"Ah!" he cried. "The Butter Lady!"

And I, along with various others representing their particular countries, was dragged on to the platform alone and made to copy the Carib dancers. I know I could not possibly do it. so I cheated all the way, to roars of delight from the audience. I was glad I was wearing my old cotton frock and not Daphne's elegant designer silk — it would have been ruined.

They certainly put me on a fuss that night. And that was the best meal I had in Port of Spain. Celie was not much of a cook.

Daphne swore there was no racism in Trinidad. Everyone, she said, was kalilu, or of mixed blood. And it is true I saw few blackskinned people. Whiteskinned Caucasian people were also scarce on the streets, although I met some at an art gallery opening and a local theatrical production. However, I did notice that I was often treated differently.

Daphne had a librarians' party for me where I was treated with rather embarrassing respect, She had another for me to meet important people of the new political regime with their wives, where I felt myself inadequately well-dressed and tended to be treated, though politely enough. as a non-event. Shop assistants tended to ignore me until I might possibly have reached the point of complaining before I was served. And my white relatives who came to light during that visit

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actually outdid any rudeness or lack of interest I experienced with the kalilu types. On the other hand, working-class Yvonne the Bread Lady, who came each week to bake loaves at Daphne's house, welcomed me to her clean, attractive but obviously very poor home with self-assured and genuine friendliness. She, and Daphne's own family, were among the few prepared to take me as I was — just a fairly unprejudiced visitor from another land.

The contretemps between the Harpers was far from resolved by the time I left Trinidad for Miami, but both my host and hostess showed their good manners, at least in front of a guest.

Naturally I wondered what was in store for my friend Daphne. And something mysterious about the mailing system to and from Trinidad has always affected the passage of her letters to me. So in fact it was from New Orleans, many months later, that I finally received a letter from her.

She and Claude had not parted.

My friend Daphne is one proud lady. Claude must have worked at it pretty hard.