

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

"I CHOOSE MY RELATIONS CAREFULLY"

(Cousin Jack and Edie Merry)

During my stay in Trinidad with Daphne and Claude Harper, more by good luck than good management I discovered some relatives.

My father, Gerald Doorly, now dead, had been born there, but had left the island at the age of 14, never to return.

I knew that all direct Doorly relatives in Trinidad had died, but there was a family called Merry, cousins of my father's, who might still be there. I wrote to Daphne to ask her to find the telephone numbers of any Merrys in Port-of-Spain. She did manage to contact the wife of one John Merry, but probably this lady gave Daphne the brush-off. Nothing eventuated from the telephone call.

The Merry family was far from my mind when I decided, on my first morning in the city, to explore the Anglican Cathedral. I left Daphne at work, promising to return at 12.30 for lunch and a lift home, public transport being very inadequate.

"Now, don't talk to strangers, Dorothy!" she warned me. "I know you! You'll be looking for adventures. Well, you are not to talk to any strange men at all, do you understand? And on no account are you to accept a lift in a car from anyone!"

"Yes, yes, I'll be good!" I laughed.

I walked to the nearby Cathedral, a timber version of a handsome neo-Gothic church. It was early, but finally someone opened the door of the Church Office. I was taken to the Dean, a venerable coloured gentleman of some charm. He told me he had not known my father but had, of course, heard of my grandfather (who had died in 1922). Although he had been Cantor and organist for the cathedral, his own church, of which he had been vicar, had been at San Fernando, 25 miles away.

The Dean sent one of the vergers into the Cathedral with me to look around.

My father's mother, Jane Doorly, had died comparatively young. She was known as "the Nightingale of the West Indies". She had studied music at the Royal College of Music in London, and both played the piano and sang brilliantly. She sang for many years in the Cathedral choir, and when she died the other choristers had subscribed to a stained glass window in her honour. This the verger and I found. It was not a difficult task, as there were only two stained glass windows in the church, both set in the wall side by side near the altar.

While admiring "our" window, a depiction of St. Cecilia, with a stylised face drawn in, playing a psalter, the verger said "You might well have posed for the artist who did that face, Miss!"

I was amazed, and had a closer look. Yes, the features, although prettified,

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were not unlike mine. The artist presumably worked from a photograph.

By now two elderly white gentlemen had entered the church. They seemed to be busy looting at the other stained glass window. One of them spoke to me.

"I see you are looking at the Doorly window,"

"Yes," I replied. "My name used to be Doorly. This lady was my grandmother ."

"Good heavens!" replied the man. "My name is Jardine, and this is my brother who is staying with me. And this window is our mother's stained glass window!"

This all seemed quite strange.

"Have you seen your cousin Jack Merry yet?" asked my new friend.

"No," I replied. "Do I have a cousin called Jack Merry?"

"Indeed you do. And another one called Harry Merry."

Mr. Jardine told me where my Cousin Jack worked. He managed a large mercantile firm called Gordon Grant's. I had already seen the building, one of the tallest in Port of Spain. It was near Daphne's place of work.

I said I would call on Cousin Jack next day.

In the meantime Mr. Jardine offered to drive me to the cemetery to show me our family graves. With a a giggle, I accepted. I was getting into a strange man's car!

Daphne was amazed at my morning's adventures.

"Trust you!" she cried.

Next day I called on Cousin Jack Merry. He knew all about me. The news had shot round the town, or the town's White West Indian community, like wildfire. He had a sort of family tree worked out to show me. It seems my grandfather, Wiltshire Doorly, had a brother who was an engineer in Jamaica who was Cousin Jack's grandfather.

I visited Cousin Jack almost every day, and was struck by the fact that he did not invite me home to meet his family. He seemed pleasant, and interested enough in me. He spoke of his wife Edie and his three children, one of whom, a daughter now married called Pat, was still living in Port of Spain. He told me that after Pat left school she had been sent all the way to London to learn shorthand, typing and bookkeeping. I found this staggering, and her father's pride in her secretarial achievements a little pathetic.

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Cousin Jack did offer to take me to see his brother Harry and his wife Doreen. Cousin Jack's chauffeur rather charmingly called the wife Miss Doreen. I liked that. We went there that day, in the firm's chauffeur-driven car which later took me home.

I found Cousin Harry's house singularly unimpressive after Daphne and Claude's spacious architect-designed mansion. It was cramped and suburban with a tiny garden at the back. Cousin Harry was not there but Miss Doreen was, covered in confusion to be caught out, in a pair of cotton shorts, hanging washing on the line. She explained that she and Harree were going to London on Friday and she was cleaning up. She seemed excitable and nervous, but quite sweet, chirpy like a little bird. Her West Indian lilt was fascinating. It was arranged that I would have drinks with them there at 5 o'clock next evening. She and Harree would come for me to Daphne's place in their car, to transport me.

Next afternoon there was a fearful thunderstorm, absolutely stupendous. Our steep road in the beautiful, leafy suburb of Mareval was literally a waterfall. I waited and waited for Miss Doreen and Harree, but nobody came. I could not ring them because Daphne and Claude had no phone (in spite of their money and influence). I talked for hours to Celie, the illegal immigrant maid from St. Vincent, and heard the sad story of her poverty-stricken island life.

Daphne came home at six, astonished to find me still there. She guessed rightly that the others had not been able to get their car up the hill in the heavy rain. She volunteered to drive me down to their house.

This was quite an experience. It was still raining hard, and it was quite dark. The electricity had gone off all over Mareval, a not unusual occurrence. I was supposed to direct Daphne to the house, and we did find the right street but I could not recognise it. I had to knock on bolted gates and doors to make enquiries.

This was scary, because no woman does anything by herself in the streets at night in Port of Spain, there are so many thugs around. Daphne had to stay inside her car, following me with her headlights blazing. At every gate there was a fearsome watchdog barking its hideous head off at me. I did manage to bring out one or two people, and one of them showed me the Merry's house.

When we arrived Cousin Harry, an unprepossessing, red-faced, uncouth boor, was sitting with Miss Doreen on the verandah drinking rum punches and taking the air. They welcomed us, or at least Miss Doreen did, but did not invite us inside. I sat on the verandah beside Cousin Harry, as we had not met before, while Miss Doreen chirped away to Daphne nervously but in a friendly enough way. Daphne's quiet, well-educated voice made Miss Doreen's sound even more shrill and birdlike. We stayed for about an hour. Cousin Harry did not speak to Daphne. And poor Miss Doreen kept saying madly tactless things like, "We just love going to London, Harree and I! Harree just adores London. He doesn't care how many Pakistanis and Africans and Indians there are around! He just loves the ceetee!"

Suddenly realising what she had said, she gave a little gasp and covered her

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mouth with her hand. Daphne ignored this.

So I was getting clues as to why Cousin Jack was not inviting me home to meet his family. I was staying with blacks, and what's more, educated blacks. There was not much sign of tertiary education with the Merrys. Shorthand, typing and book-keeping, in London, indeed!

I spent one of my mornings visiting the Trinidad and Tobago National Library where Daphne used to work, and found the archives division. I wanted to trace my grandmother's obituary, having ascertained, from the stained glass window, that she had died in 1907. I needed to consult the Port of Spain Gazette for 1907.

I was given a library car and chauffeur for the drive to the historical library and the run of the newspaper was brought to me, very brittle, yellow and fragile, not to mention insect-eaten. I leafed through the bound volumes until I came to June 17, and there it was, a long obituary, very good indeed.

I learned all sorts of things about my illustrious grandmother. Terminally ill with cancer, she had risen from her bed for last last time to accompany a coloured singer, possibly her pupil, who was performing for his Benefit Concert in order to raise funds for training in London. That, as I later told my violinist daughter Jane, is the true professional musician. He got his scholarship.

I was amazed that I was; allowed to carry the precious volume to a xerox machine in yet another building and photocopy it. In New Zealand we would never have allowed such a unique, irreplaceable object to be carried anywhere.

I gave Cousin Jack my copy of the obituary to recopy. He was amazed. He could not understand how I had retrieved such a piece of information.

"Oh", I said airily. "If you are a reference librarian, this is mere child's play!"

On my last afternoon in Trinidad Cousin Jack arranged for his chauffeur to drive us to San Fernando to see my grandfather's church. We were to have lunch in the city before we left.

I turned up at his office at a quarter to twelve as arranged. He sent me down ahead to the courtyard to find his car with the chauffeur. In it were two ladies, a white-haired one in the front seat and a younger one behind. These must be Cousin Jack's wife Edie and daughter Pat. Surprise, surprise!

I went up to the open window beside the older lady.

"Hello!" I said. "You must be Edie. I'm Dorothy, your long-lost cousin from New Zealand!"

"Not my cousin, you aren't!" replied this imperious lady, putting her vulgar little fat snub nose in the air. "I choose my relations carefully! I come from the Barbados!"

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I was so staggered that I started to laugh. This stupid old woman with her old-fashioned frizzed-up hair and her ridiculous dignity. Who did she think she was?

"Oh, Mumme, Mumme! Don't be so awful!" cried Pat. "Dorothee, don't take any notice of her! They are all like that in the Barbados!"

Well, what a beginning! Gentlemanly Cousin Jack now appeared, everyone pretended nothing had happened and the chauffeur drove us to a big hotel in the city.

We all helped ourselves to a delicious smorgasbord lunch. Cousin Edie and Pat were obviously thrilled, and I gathered they were not used to Daddee taking them out to lunch.

During the meal I fenced various remarks launched at me by Cousin Edie. Was Dr. Harper a very rich man? Yes, I supposed he was. He must be a very clever man, then? Yes, certainly he was — it takes something to get three European and American Ph.Ds. And did the Harpers have a lovely house? Did they have a servant, air-conditioning? And so on. And all the time real jealousy was shining out of that woman's eyes.

Surely, but surely, my guesses had been correct, though Daphne had stoutly denied any colour bar in Port of Spain. I had already experienced slightly cavalier treatment in shops; and here it was in reverse.

I was delighted to learn that Cousin Edie had a sick headache and would not be coming to San Fernando. We took her home and the rest of us drove out of town. Pat was chatty and pleasant but not particularly interesting. Her accent was wonderful, just like Miss Doreen's, the real West Indian singsong.

At about 3 o'clock we arrived in the quaint little town of San Fernando and found the church. The door was open with signs of activity within. We walked in, and found a black cleaning lady sweeping the floor in preparation for a funeral. Cousin Jack asked her, very pleasantly, if she had ever known Canon Doorly.

"No, Sirr, I never met him," she said. "But I know all about him. He was very greatly respected, that Canon Doorly, he was!"

"This is his granddaughter!" said Cousin Jack. The black mammy was thrilled, and shook my hand vigorously. She said the organist would be here soon, he was very old and perhaps would have known Canon Doorly. Also the bell-ringer, who was already up in his belfry.

We climbed up the bell tower.

"Canon Doorly? No, I never knew him, Before my time, Sir!" But the organist, now ...! "

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So downstairs we went to find the really ancient organist in his loft.

"Canon Doorly's granddaughter! Well, I never! No, I'm afraid I never knew your granddad. But he was a wonderful man, yes sirree, sure was!"

People were now arriving for the funeral so we decided to retire from the scene. In the doorway we walked into the corpse. It was a woman, with her face exposed in a round window cut in the lid of the coffin. I nearly fainted with shock.

I had been impressed with the easygoing approach to the black people in the church of Cousin Jack and Pat. This racial thing was puzzling.

We climbed back into the car. Suddenly there was a commotion in the fast gathering crowd of mourners. A dear old black lady with a scarf round her head rushed up to our car.

"Where's Canon Doorly's granddaughter? Where's Canon Doorly's granddaughter?"

"Here! Here!" cried Cousin Jack, jumping out of the front seat. He hurried round to the old lady and pushed her into the back seat beside me.

"So it's you, dear!" said my new friend, smiling happily. She put a friendly hand on my knee. "It's lovely that you are a religious lady, too!"

I just held on to her hand and laughed.

She told us that she had once had a sister who died, and Canon Doorly used to visit her in their house while she was ill, and finally buried her.

"He was such a dear, your grandfather!" she said. "He was so kind, and so friendly. He said lovely things to cheer up my poor sister. And she did love him, she really did! It's just wonderful that you are a religious lady too, dear!"

That was all she had time to say as she had to attend the funeral. but it was enough. Really very nice indeed. I enjoyed her very much.

And so, I was delighted to see, did Cousin Jack and Pat.

"Wasn't that delightful?" he said, leaning over from his front seat as we drove away.

"Yes, indeed!" I replied. And what I was thinking was, "And most of all delightful to see you two being so extremely nice to those simple old black people".

Back at Mareval I told Daphne about my cousin from the Barbados and her extraordinary opening gambit when we met.

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"Oh, yes," said Daphne, echoing Pat's words. "They are all like that in the Barbados. It's historical."

"What's so special there?" I asked.

"Nothing, really. Compared with Port of Spain they are small and provincial. But they're all up themselves if they come from the Barbados."

Since then I have read fascinating books on the West Indies. It seems that not only are the Barbados whites more English than the English, they even use archaic 18th-century turns of speech. They try to hold the clock back in the Barbados. Even in 1980, to Cousin Edie a white lady of good family staying with blacks was well, unthinkable.

I was never invited inside Cousin Edie's house. I was clearly beyond the pale.

When I returned to New Zealand I met a friend whom I knew came originally from the Barbados. She was with her husband.

"Hello, Dorothy!" she said. "I haven't seen you for ages. Where have you been?"

"In the West Indies!" I replied.

"Oh, did you go to the Barbados?" cried Ann.

"Certainly NOT!" I replied, drawing myself up with dignity.

She looked bewildered, so I told her the story. She laughed. but I could see by her face, she knew exactly how Cousin Edie felt about her new relation.

"It's the educated blacks they resent," said her husband. "They are still quite happy with the simple, older people who still seem to know their place!"

Several years later my son Stephen went to Bermuda, where he found in a grog shop a bottle of rum which he brought home for me. The label reads:

DOORLY'S RUM
Barbados

I keep it on a shelf as a curiosity. But every time I look at that label I hear in my head my Cousin Edie's classic remark:

"Not my cousin, you aren't: I choose my relations carefully!"