

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

ARE YOU ALRIGHT, LOVE  
(Daphne and Jim Middleton)

January 1982 was a memorable month of a memorable year.

I had decided to take the ferry from Wellington to Picton, drive my little red Mini from Picton through Kaikoura to Christchurch where my daughter Anna lives, pick up her two daughters Shanti and Ngahua, aged 8 and 11, and take them down for a beach holiday at Taieri Mouth, a small fishing village 25 miles south of Dunedin. My sister Geraldine and her husband Charles Wilson owned a holiday cottage there, and I was sure the girls would love being there too. Both Geraldine and Charles were far from well, and it was unlikely they would be able to go to their beloved beach cottage that summer if somebody like me did not go to look after everyone. I offered to do this.

I set off alone driving from Picton one morning before New Year's Eve, expecting to make Christchurch by about 5 p.m. I stopped at Blenheim to pick some fruit in the hot sun, then went on my way.

A few miles north of Kaikoura, roughly half way to Christchurch, I felt hot and sleepy. It was about 2 p.m., and I promised myself that I would have a little sleep under a tree by the beach at Kaikoura before continuing on. This was not to be.

There was a bridge to cross over a tidal river. Alongside was another bridge which carried the railway line across the river. In between was a triangle of river, and a curve in the road. I turned into the curve, but fell asleep and did not straighten out. The car shot right across the road on to some rough grass. The tyres bounced, and this woke me up with a start.

I saw one thing only — the rapid approach of an iron post bearing a notice CRAYFISH FOR SALE. I wrenched the steering-wheel round, and just missed that post. The car then started to fly in the air! It flew, in a beautiful arc, with me in it, and landed in that triangle of river about fifteen feet below, with a great splash.

During that mad moment or two of flight, I felt completely elated.

"I'm flying! I'm flying!" I cried (inside), with the greatest excitement and joy. I felt no fear — there was no time to have it. It was marvellous!

Then came the crash into the water, and a jolt to my left arm. The tide was out, and the car landed in about three feet of water. A front wheel seemed to have hit something hard. There was a deathly hush. Birds were singing. The water started to creep under the car door, gathering round my feet. My only thought was annoyance that I was now going to be late at Anna's place.

I looked out of my side window and saw several people standing on the

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railway bridge, staring down at me aghast. Some explanation seemed to be called for. I rolled down the window.

"I fell asleep at the wheel!" I called out, shamefacedly.

All of a sudden people were rushing down the steep bank, wading into the water. I tried to open my door but could not because the outgoing current to the sea was pushing against it. Strong young men appeared and forced it open.

I grabbed my handbag and climbed out. I struggled in my long skirt to the bank and scrambled up. Here I was greeted by a marvellous old fisherman, the one who owned the pole with its notice, and the wee shop nearby. He said he was Jim Middleton. He took my arm and gazed at me in astonishment.

"Are you alright, love? You should be dead! I've never seen anything like it, the luck you've just had! I'm taking you up to our house. My wife Daphne saw it all, too. She's making you a good cup of strong tea for shock."

"I don't seem to have any shock, Jim!" I replied.

"Never mind, you'll get it later!" he assured me. Actually I did not.

The young men, all part of Jim and Daphne Middleton's extended family, started to empty out my car and deposit everything, wet and sodden, on the bank, Jim returned from his house where he had been ringing for the towtruck in Kaikoura. It was busy, with a bus accident a few miles away, but would come to us in an hour or so.

Jim took me to his house where I met an unbelieving Daphne, and their daughter, fisherman partner and baby, and many other vague relations of the hospitable Jim and Daphne.

"What will you do now?" said Jim.

"I suppose I'll wait here until the towtruck arrives, then go with it into Kaikoura and find somewhere to stay for the night. Really, it all depends on what the garage can do with my car, doesn't it?"

"Daphne and I would like you to stay here with us."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly put you to that trouble!" I cried.

"But we'd really like you to stay here. Actually, we'd be grateful!"

"What on earth do you mean, Jim?"

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"Daphne and I have had a lot of bad luck this year. It's been a bloody rotten year for us. And we've never seen anything like the luck you had today. So we think that if you stay here, some of your luck might rub off on us!"

After such a proposal how could I refuse? So I spent the rest of the afternoon hanging out my dripping clothes to dry on the Middletons' washing line.

The towtruck did not appear till around 5 o'clock. The tide was now up, and the car was not much more than a patch of red roof sitting on top of the water. The towtruck people climbed down the bank, aided and abetted by all the Middleton family plus many neighbours who had appeared from nowhere, and I certainly made their day. It was exciting, with all the hauling from above and pushing and heaving from below, watching my little car climb up that bank. I took snapshots with which I later enthralled petrol station attendants all over the South Island.

"What a beautiful little car!" they cried. "What a car!"

Because when they got it towed to Kaikoura they worked on it that night to dry it out, and the car went!

The garage people were to ring me at 10 a.m. next morning. I rang Anna, decided to put the whole thing out of my mind till the verdict came through, and had a happy, friendly evening with the Middletons and their crazy family, ironing my library books dry.

Next morning the message came through. The car was fine, it had just been driven round the block, the suspension was OK, and I could come and drive it away. Incredible!

"Will I be able to drive it to Christchurch?"

"Why not? Do it good!"

So Daphne and Jim and the family and I had an early celebration lunch, and they drove me into Kaikoura. There was my dear little car, a bit sick in the front with a groggy-looking front mudguard and bumper bar and a badly cracked front main beam, but otherwise looking bright and fresh and newly washed — as well it might.

"What a car!" they, too, cried.

They had dried out the engine, and the car went. But inside everything was absolutely sopping. When one sat on any seat, it squelched. And when one put one's foot on the floor, that did, too. I can't say it was altogether comfortable to ride in at first, but hot sun in Christchurch next day soon dried everything out.

I said goodbye to the kind Middletons who gave me a great send-off as I

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drove away. I hoped my luck would indeed brush off on them. Unfortunately it did not.

I drove to Christchurch without further mishap — with courageous hitch-hikers as passengers to keep me awake this time.

Anna seemed happy for me to continue the trip down to Dunedin with the children as planned. I say "seemed", because she told me later she was pretty nervous. But the Insurance people in Christchurch approved of the car completing its return South Island trek in the state it was in. They wanted me to take it to my own mechanic back in Wellington.

So away the three of us went from Christchurch, Shanti, Ngahuaia and me, all singing and telling stories.

All went well travelling south until the rain came down at Ashburton and I discovered that the windscreen wiper was kaput. Peering ahead through an open window seemed to work, though it was a strain. It was more scary when we hit the Dunedin motorway at Waitati and started the steep climb up and over because a heavy mist came down. All cars had their main beams turned on full, but mine wouldn't go at all! My electricals were playing up. This was a worry, because now we were going to have to make not only Dunedin, but Taieri Mouth twenty-five miles further on, while it was still daylight.

I was pretty done in by the time I pulled up outside my sister's Dunedin house. Geraldine and Charles were sitting there waiting to be picked up by their son. I felt we had no time to waste, and went straight on with the children to Taieri Mouth, tired and hungry, trying to beat the dark.

Fortunately I knew the Wilson family's regular New Year's Eve routine which included a barbecue and first-footing jaunt among all the family's various holiday cottages until midnight, when the great bonfire would be lit on the beach. The little girls were quickly taken off my hands to join in with the festivities, and I did not have to worry about them for hours.

That holiday, in spite of being packed with drama and adventures from start to finish, was an outstanding success.

A month later I managed to drive the girls back safely to their anxious mother in Christchurch, and continued on my way alone to Picton and the ferry for Wellington.

As my car had no lights I had not driven at night for the past month. My ferry for Wellington left Picton at 10 p.m. and arrived in Wellington at 2 a.m.

I managed to get into the car queue in Picton at about 9 p.m. while it was still

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just daylight, and followed the leader on board. There were so many blazing lights around that nobody noticed anything odd about mine. However, there was the problem of arriving in Wellington to be considered.

Commonsense said drive off in the ship's lights, park the car on the wharf under the motorway for the night, take a taxi home, and return for the car next morning. But I did not want to do this. I wanted to get home safe and sound fast, with my little car and all my luggage, climb into my bed and fall asleep without having to think about complicated treks in the morning. So I decided, when the ferry berthed, to risk it and drive home. With no traffic it was only about a five or six minute drive.

By luck the cars coming off that half empty ferry all seemed to be going north. My car wended its slow, careful and lonely way south, in the dark along the semi-lit waterfront to the Railway Station, meeting nothing at 2 a.m. So far so good.

Past the station I had to turn right across a wide intersection. While doing this I noticed, quite a distance away, an approaching car. I drove on a little, then heard the ominous siren. A police car! What on earth could I do? I was so obviously in the wrong. I could not imagine how I was going to talk my way out of this one.

I stopped. He pulled up. I rolled down my window.

"Why haven't you got your main beam on, lady?" I asked.

He smiled. "Yes, why haven't you got your main beam on, lady?"

"Would you care to have a look at the front of this car?" I asked.

He moved forward, saw the bashed mudguard, bumper bar, headlight, skew-whiff grille. He came back to my window with a most concerned look on his face.

"Have you just come off the ferry?" he asked. "Are you alright, love?"

I smiled and assured him I was fine. I saw no need at this point to tell him the accident had happened a month before.

"Where are you going now?" he asked.

I explained where my house was, quite near, just off The Terrace.

"Well, would you like me to lead you there?"

I laughed.

"That's absolutely sweet of you," I said. "But if you will let me try to make it by

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myself, I'm sure I can!"

So he let me go.

No fine, no slap on the hand, no nothing!

Don't tell me I haven't got a good guardian angel!