

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

### 27 WITH STEPHEN IN THE SOLOMONS

My son Stephen is a journalist. In 1984 he accepted a Volunteer Service Abroad mission from New Zealand to the Solomon Islands for two years, to work in the Prime Minister's Department in Honiara on the communications scene. This combined public relations, politics and journalism.

By the time I turned up to stay two weeks with him he was disillusioned with the frustration of not having achieved as much as he had hoped because of endless difficulties put in his way. It was all, "Yes, yes, a wonderful idea, we'll do that!" and then nothing. It was an eternal "manana, manana!" mentality he was up against, and he was not taking it well.

What he was enjoying very much was scuba diving among the World War II wrecks around Honiara, and the company of excellent friends from among the Australian and New Zealand community living there.

He suggested we take a ten day trip together to the Western Province where we would both be seeing new places, and he would find exciting new venues for his scuba diving while I went sightseeing. This needed to be planned on the cheap because of Stephen's low pay, so it was the ferry, not the plane. I was happy with any arrangement that suited him.

Little did I know what excitements, alarms and excursions would befall me in that Pacific Islands paradise.

I was held up at Customs on my arrival from Brisbane over a misunderstanding concerning tapes in my luggage, and in fact it was only a miracle that I had actually caught the plane as it suddenly left 2 hours early from Australia. But Stephen was not worried at my belated appearance in the concourse. Four people had already told him his Mum was on the plane. I had seen nobody I knew. But Honiara is a very small place.

I liked Stephen's white, spotlessly hygienic flat with its lovely view. It was in a modern concrete block of six apartments set in open ground which was used constantly while I was there by visiting Islanders from Malaita who seemed to be camping outside. They were having a festival of dance over the road, and seemed to spend their nights lying around on the staircase. One just stepped over bodies to go upstairs. They were all smiling, happy people, very relaxed.

Stephen had some of his expatriate friends to dinner to meet me. I nearly poisoned them all with some tinned food which had gone off. One of the guests was one Stewart Addicott. Married to a local girl who had gone "walkabout", leaving him to look after their two children, he was caught in a vulnerable position during the very bad cyclone the islands had just suffered. The water rose so high outside his house that when the family was finally rescued by boat, just in time, Stewart said, "I thought

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

I was dead!" From then he was always known to his friends as Stewart I-thought-I-was-dead Addicott.

Stephen took me for a barbecue picnic on the beach one evenings where I met various black young ladies in modern swimsuits who favoured foreign men, their own being amazingly chauvinistic. We picked up one of the girls from her home on our way. From behind the shabby tin-roofed shack her grandmother appeared. This old girl had not a tooth in her head, her straggly grey hair stuck out like Struwwel Peter's and she wore nothing but a cotton skirt from waist to half way down her legs. Her breasts, like skinny sausages, dangled well below her waist. The toothless grin was endearing.

The day for our trip arrived, and none too soon. Honiara was a hot, dusty, tinpot little Third World town, its wonders and delights soon exhausted. I was excited to get away after three days. We were to travel direct from Honiara to the westernmost point of our trip, the village of Gizo, a trip of about 26 hours.

Hundreds of people were milling around on the wharf. They were relatives and friends, the "wontok" syndrome (meaning "one talk" and whatever that implied), come to farewell their nearest and dearest. And it was here I noticed the women's sorority. I had already been shocked to see how the women were relegated by their men to the company of other women with children while they themselves leaped upon each other shouting, with glee, in their torn but clean Op Shop clothes from Brisbane. Nobody seemed to have a job, but there was no doubt about the local Stag Club. No husband seemed to want to be seen with his wife. The women, however, clearly get support from each other. I saw the most touching farewells as that ferry left Honiara and other ports of call en route, as one piccaninny-surrounded woman on shore held the hand of another on deck, with tears of real love and grief at their parting. Here, then, was how the Solomon Islands women got the affection they craved. It was sad, but lovely to see it.

The ferry's name was Umenow, You-me-now being pidgin English for a ferry. It was only eight years old but looked 80, neglected as the poor thing had been. Half the gadgetry didn't work, portholes refused to open, pullman let-down seats refused to let down, air conditioning was eccentric, waste waterpipes blocked up and so on. Those whites who knew the ropes brought sleeping bags and slept on deck. It was much more comfortable there than in our First Class quarters.

We adopted a Polish Australian girl called Michelle from Sydney who was travelling alone, and met Marlene and Gary Ware from Tauranga, and Stephen's English V. S. A. colleague Bob Kent, an agriculturist travelling back to his island of Munda. He won every game of Scrabble, and we promised each other a challenge match the following week when Stephen and I were to stay a night on Munda.

The company was good. But let a veil be drawn over that night at sea. The wind rose, the sea heaved, the ship rolled and pitched and all we had to eat was my

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

bacon and egg pie which our new tourist friends, not having known what to bring, were glad to share. One cup each of execrable coffee was all that was available on board.

At last we arrived at Gizo, a village of fair size with a vaguely Western style resthouse run by a local member of Parliament called Charlie. Our friends were staying there too, plus two New Zealand girls called Jody and Laurel from Wellington. On our first night they took a walk along the waterfront after dinner and found themselves accosted by an importunate local inhabitant who wanted to sleep with Laurel and tried to push money into her hand for advance payment. Jody rushed back to find Stephen who managed, without too much difficulty, to persuade this character to clear out.

"Don't worry!" said Stephen to Laurel. "He's mad."

"You wrote about another experience like that, in Honiara!" I said "You had to rescue another white girl. You said he was mad, too."

"Oh, yes," said Stephen coolly. "Oh, well, there are a lot of mad chaps in the Solomons."

It was idyllic on Gizo, but our stay was not without incident. Among other things, I lost two pairs of trousers and a bathingsuit I had injudiciously hung outside overnight to dry. Children were the thieving magpies. Western clothing is as good as currency.

Stephen was scuba diving all day, so Charlie suggested the rest of our group take a day's excursion to the island of Simbo. A fibreglass canoe with an outboard motor would be available at a price. Charlie would give us a cut lunch, and we would eat hardboiled eggs laid by certain Simbo birds whose eggs are as big as their own bodies, see a volcano, swim in a hot lake, meet new, unspoilt natives in their villages, and be able to buy their ebony wood carvings. So we went — the Wares, Jody and Laurel, Michelle and me.

What a day! Like Stewart, I thought I was dead — or about to be — more than once.

We all met at the levée at 6.30 for the twelve mile trip. The boat was about five metres long, completely open except for a very small section up forard for lunch boxes and bathingsuits.

We expected to be taken by Danny, the resthouse's watersports man, but to our surprise our two boatmen were a Solomon Islander of about 20 called Absalom and a white boy of 12 called Ben. Ben was the son of the boat's owner, a middle-aged man who merely saw us off, with encouraging words. What we did not know was that that boat was too small for eight people, and it carried no safety gear

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

whatsoever. There were no lifejackets, no spare engine, no spare petrol, no flare, no radio, no drinking water, nothing. Over there all of these things are considered essential for any voyage into the ocean. Danny came down to see us off with Stephen. Appalled, he quietly threw six life jackets aboard.

Later when we thought we needed them we discovered three didn't work.

The trip out was wild and woolly, and Marlene was scared. She and I were up forard. The Pacific Ocean was like a millpond at 7 a.m., but we all got very wet and were apprehensive about the return trip. We knew the wind would rise at midday and the rain would pour down at 4 p.m. because this happened every day. The trip took two hours instead of one. We sat about six inches above the sea.

At last we made the reef of Simbo and found ourselves in the island's lagoon, in calm water. Our past squeamishness was quickly forgotten in the charm of the native villages and the numerous delightful black children lining the shore and waving. After parleying with the local Chief (who had to be bribed to allow us to explore his island) we proceeded up the lagoon where a lowish volcano above us seemed to be slumbering. A hot stream emerged on the boulder beach from a hot lake, and while the others walked round the edge of this through the forest, for a dollar I got a canoe ride in a dug-out treetrunk job, with a young native boy. I lost my hat overboard, but undeterred my young boatman circled it and hooked it on to the end of his paddle.

At the head of this lake we walked up a short but very rough, steep track, a hot half hour climb to a dry crater full of yellow sulphur and the most stupendous view out over the vast Pacific Ocean, with surf creaming over the rocks far below. We climbed down again, hot and exhausted, and had a swim. In the meantime some native boys had boiled the strange birds' eggs for us in the same hot lake. They didn't taste too bad. Michelle joined me for a dugout canoe ride back, and after a swim in the cold lagoon we set off gt about 2.30 for home.

Absalom insisted on calling in at a village before we left. It was beautiful watching him up forard standing on the bowsprit indicating to young Ben how to steer through the hundreds of lethal clumps of coral. His arm and hand movements were like those of a graceful ballet dancer.

We were quietly watched from the dark shadows of the trees by dozens of black faces, only recognisable as people by white teeth and eyeballs. The reason for this diversion was to pick up an extra can of petrol and a wooden soup bowl. Both were to be critical props in the next drama.

We snaked our way out beyond the reef, and whooff! The sea just slammed into us, fanned into angry surf by a strong wind. I had chosen to sit in the stern, beside our two sailors, and soon slipped down into the bottom of the boat, my back propped against my seat. The others, perched on their narrow seats, hung on like

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

grim death, their backs to me. The sights I saw most of for the next few hours were white, taut knuckles dug into those seats, rigid backsides and bent-forward backs. Marlene, up forward, actually bent right over until she got her whole head under the cover of the little locker. She may have had contact lenses to protect. No way could you have safely tucked anything like that away in a pocket. We were simply lashed and buffeted by the high seas the whole way.

Absalom at the tiller was very skillful. Our craft just ripped along the line of each oncoming roller, to take the top of it side on, so to speak, when we popped sweetly over the crest and lurched steeply down the other side. It was like switchback rides at the fun fair. Not only was every successful ascent and descent hair-raising, but the crest of each wave, as it broke over us into the boat, positively lashed our bodies. I got it on the side of my face, lying as I was on the bottom of the boat. I had good reason to thank Marlene for weaving a scarf into my Philippino straw hat to tie it firmly under my chin, as the brim of this could be pulled down to take the brunt of the water's force. But there was still lots of violent hurling of water on to my face, into the boat, and on to the starboard side of everybody's bodies.

At first it was exhilarating, exciting, watching our little boat ride the huge waves so beautifully. I suppose they were only ten to twelve feet high, not the twenty to twenty-five they could have been in a real gale. But watching a twelve-foot high roller approaching you relentlessly, full of dreadful power and boiling surf, rising literally right on top of you like a monster before the magic ascent of our canoe, is certainly not for the timid. I felt for Captain Bligh!

When I saw Ben struggling with that ridiculous soup bowl and realised there was nothing else to bail the boat with, I shouted to him (as casually as I could manage).

"What happens if the boat tips over, Ben?"

"Jump out and hang on to it." he yelled back.

Well, here was some practical news at last, something positive.

Communication with the others had been impossible for the noise and wildness, but I felt they should be told. I leaned forward and dug a finger into Jody's back. She half turned her head.

"If the boat goes over, jump out and hang on to it!" I shouted.

Jody and Laurel nodded. Message received and understood. They dug fingers into other backs and obviously repeated the message.

It was raining by now, cold and miserable. The regular bursts over our boat from the huge rollers were almost welcome, they were at least warm enough to stop

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

our teeth from chattering. I began to ponder, in a vague sort of way, about what I would do when we did tip over. Because by now that seemed almost inevitable, in the course of time. One would not be able to swim anywhere — there was no land in sight. One would just have to tread water and pray for rescue. And those sharks, so many of which we had seen while snorkelling, all lurking well down below the surface! What would I do about them? Then I remembered something Stephen had once said when I expressed horror that he was constantly scuba-diving in the company of sharks.

"If you ever meet a shark while you're swimming, Mum, don't panic," he said. "Just mind your business. And you'll see. The shark will mind its business too."

Yes, I thought as I stared down into that frightening sea. When I get in there, I'm just going to mind my own business. My God, am I going to mind my own business!

This decision was something of a comfort.

When we all get back safely and had a post mortem after dinner that night, it seemed that the others, after receiving my message, were more petrified at the idea of the possible shark confrontation than of drowning.

The next crisis was an obvious difficulty over petrol. Ben and Absalom were exchanging a few shouted words in Absalom's language, but, being so close to them I picked up a few vibes. The extra petrol — very little, I might say — that Absalom had got from the Simbo village had to be dribbled into something, very carefully, by Ben. I don't know now whether or not it was possible we would have run out before making land, but it certainly seemed to me then that it was. This the others did not know. And just as well!

At last as night was falling, near 6 o'clock, after three and a half hours battle, we made port, bashed, battered and bedraggled but intrepid. Stephen and others around were anxiously awaiting us. Danny had alarmed everyone after we took off, and we were so terribly late back he was preparing to go out to search for us after dark. I was first ashore, slipping over the side into knee-deep water, bent almost double, staggering to the stones of our levée-cum-jetty to climb up. Stephen was walking towards me with his usual nonchalant air.

"Hello, Mum!" he said casually. "What's the matter with your eyes? They are all red!"

I stood and stared at him, speechless.

"Listen, mate!" I said. "If you had had a few hundred tons of water hurled into your face for over three hours non-stop, your eyes would jolly well be red too!"

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

They had all been worried out of their tiny minds. But of course my Stephen wouldn't let on.

That night at dinner we were all heroes. The Survivors, they called us. We all felt great after a few gins. To my horror, I heard from Stephen that it is not so very rare for such a trip to finish up minus a tourist. And we heard gruesome tales of drunk locals who drifted with the tide, petrol-less, from one island to another, unable to land because just when they were inshore enough to swim to safety the tide would turn and sweep them out to sea.

Charlie, I noticed, lay low. And next morning when we left for Munda, Stephen found him to pay our bill and was charged a good deal less than we expected.