

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

28 WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET

(Geraldine)

As I write this my only sibling is 81, severely physically handicapped but still living alone, with the determination for which she has now become famous. Geraldine's obsession with appearances, her lack of imagination for other people's problems and her grim stubbornness have put her in a time warp. But the faults for which some of her relatives have criticised or laughed at her have by some mystery now become virtues. Her complete integrity to herself alone has made her into a legend in the family.

I was six when our family left Dunedin to live in Australia, and can remember little before that of Geraldine, then aged twelve, other than her skillful piano playing and her facility for writing family plays. In these she was always the King, her blonde friend Ena was Queen, I was a page, and my friend Margaret was another one, as far as I can remember. Perhaps one of us was an occasional Prince. Geraldine would write a play, my mother would assemble all her lame duck old lady friends on chairs in our boxroom, the plate would be taken around for threepences and we would perform. Our mother acted quite a bit so we wore her old stage costumes.

At the convent school at Queenscliffe Geraldine first showed the great strength of character for which she has since become renowned. Anything even hinting of papal practices by the nuns who taught us was scornfully rejected by Geraldine.

We moved up to Melbourne where Geraldine, dux of the little convent school by the sea, started college in the city. She drew and painted well. When I followed in her footsteps five years later the Art teacher was pleased to see me, though my art work, original as it may well have been, was not a patch on Geraldine's. I was too slapdash. However, there was one memorable occasion when everyone in the college was expected to produce a poster for the school play. I did one, but it looked rather amateurish. Geraldine, by now an Art School student, grabbed a thick brush, filled it with black paint, twisted the end to a fine point and "edited" my feeble lettering in a beautiful flowing freestyle. Then she spread the brush out and ran a thick black line round the border. My poster suddenly had style, and I won the competition.

Our Art mistress was asked how a little Third Former could possibly have won.

"Ah!" she explained. "That Third Former is Geraldine Doorly's sister!"

Such glory never happened to me again. Or not for art work.

When she started college Geraldine was rather plump. With great strength of will she dieted for two years and ended up with an hourglass figure well suited to her

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elegant height. Her legs were marvellous, her olive skin a glowing miracle, her hair thick and lustrous, her teeth perfect. She always took pains over her appearance. With Geraldine, what you saw was what you got. My sister, though, was really a beauty. Our mother felt she should marry a prince at least.

Just before our mother's premature death Geraldine was being courted by the son of family friends in Dunedin who came over to stay with us in Melbourne.

Charles Wilson was a solicitor. He was shorter than Geraldine and not specially good-looking, but witty and amusing. He asked for Geraldine's hand, and to everyone's surprise, got it. If my mother was disappointed that a prince had not turned up in time, she did not show it. Geraldine was to marry Charles Wilson when she was 21, a year or so later, and go to live with him in Dunedin.

While Geraldine, an expert dressmaker, was sewing her trousseau our father married again. We had had a housekeeper to look after us who would now go. Geraldine had no intention of playing second fiddle in our home. She took off for New Zealand somewhat earlier than planned, to marry her Charles. I, still at school, was left behind to cope with our really nasty new stepmother, but bore Geraldine no resentment for abandoning me. I was too young to take off.

At last I, too, escaped, and it was arranged that I should live with my aunt in Dunedin, with my married sister nearby. By this time Geraldine had had her first child, Gerald, soon to be followed by daughter Elisabeth, and was a happy and successful young mother and fashionable Dunedin matron. Her adoring husband was a professional man so Geraldine had an assured social position as his wife in the Dunedin of the time. The Wilsons bought their own home, and they had a car. Geraldine was radiantly beautiful, though putting on a bit of weight again with her newly acquired cooking skills, and she dressed smartly. She inhabited a teaparty world with other ladies of her social caste. She allowed herself to be completely absorbed in Dunedin social life, her husband's large, well-heeled family, and even in Knox Presbyterian church where her husband was an elder. She had given up painting, devoting herself to housekeeping, entertaining and bringing up her little family. Geraldine had become the perfect wife and mother.

Charles would never have allowed his wife to work, even had Geraldine felt like it. That might reflect on his own capability as the family provider. He worshipped her, and everything she wanted, she got. In return she ran an efficient household. She decorated her house artistically and soon came to look on it, along with her clothes, as an extension of her own personality. What you saw is what you got.

The relationship between Geraldine and Charles was based, in her case at least, on affection rather than passion. They never had arguments because Charles always gave in before the tiff came to anything. If he didn't, Geraldine would sulk and play no speaks for a day or so. This was unthinkable to Charles, and must be avoided at all costs. As the children grew up they understood that they were never,

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but never to disagree in any way with their mother. There were never any fights in the Wilson household. Geraldine was always the queen in that play.

Charles never taught Geraldine anything about money. Money was the man's affair. All Geraldine was expected to do was live within her generous housekeeping allowance, and ask her husband for anything else she wanted. She always got it.

The war came, and Charles was drafted into the Army, leaving his partner to run the law firm's affairs. When he went overseas Geraldine, living in her pretty house with two delightful, well-brought-up children and all creature comforts, was paid a soldier's wife's allowance, plus a regular income Charles had arranged for her to receive from the law firm. All bills went to the office.

One day a stray bank statement arrived in Geraldine's letterbox by mistake. From it she learned that Charles had quite a large overdraft. Geraldine was horrified. Debts!

She decided to pay it off. She took in Training College students as boarders. For the duration of the war she usually had two or even three. The board money she applied to her husband's bank overdraft.

She could play the piano, so she picked up a little job playing for a dancing class once or twice a week. This money also went to the overdraft.

When Charles returned from the war the overdraft was paid off. Geraldine had kept her contributions a secret.

Charles was shocked! There had been a special reason why the overdraft had been arranged so that in some way the affairs of his firm would be advantaged. Knowing nothing of such matters, Geraldine had neatly negated the financial advantage. However, Charles was really proud of Geraldine, as well he might be. Geraldine had been the perfect wife yet again.

I don't think she ever resented the stringent efforts she had made. It was a challenge, she had risen to it and enjoyed it. But I think it affected her children. Elisabeth recalls an occasion at primary school where the children were discussing what they would all do if they suddenly won a thousand pounds. Little Gerald, serious and over-conscientious about his responsibilities (which had been pointed out to him by his father before he left the country) as "the man of the family", said, "I would help Mummy pay off Daddy's debts!"

I have no doubt that the over-zealousness to duty Gerald, from a very tender age, thought was expected of him has affected his life and career ever since.

Geraldine developed to a refined degree the ability to simply refuse to accept unpleasant facts. She found it difficult to comprehend that anything horrific like a

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war, with possibly danger to her own husband's life, ever really existed. She learned to create around herself a perfect dreamworld. She had two — later three, perfect children. They were all expected to be dux of their private schools, and they all were. As well as having a beautiful home and all comforts she had to have a happy, peaceful atmosphere in it, so that she reigned supreme as its queen. She did. If one had ever hinted that the methods she sometimes used to see that certain of these necessities came about smelled a little of moral blackmail ("If you don't do it I won't play speaks!") she would have been horrified. What she was doing was what any sensible woman would do. She was managing her family properly.

Geraldine was of course not perfect. She was extremely irritating in many ways. But the extraordinary thing is that with the passage of time, her sheer strength of character has forced us all, not only to accept her weaknesses, but actually to admire her for them.

Take, for instance, her obsession with tidiness.

When I was about eleven I, busy with a love-hate relationship with my supercilious older sister, realised that the way to really annoy her when she had, for instance, "told on me" to our mother yet again for some misdemeanour like not washing my hands before dinner (Geraldine would check the soap), I would get into her bedroom in her absence and strew her books from the bookcase all over the floor. I was known also to lean through her window from the outside, when she locked her door against me, and scatter pepper on her pillow to make her sneeze all night. But I knew the mess on the floor would have annoyed her more. Geraldine loathed mess.

Many years later during the war when her two older children were about six and eight, our family moved into her house to look after them while Geraldine had a holiday. The day she was to return I slaved all day making the house look spotless and perfect. The children had spent most of that sunny fortnight happily playing in the sandpit, and it never occurred to me to check there. When Geraldine arrived home, to welcoming cries of joy from her children, she looked out of the kitchen window and saw their toys strewn around the sandpit. What a tirade of fury she vented on those poor kids! And how absolutely awful I felt. Geraldine sulked for hours over that little lot, and her children visibly wilted under her accusations.

When Geraldine, in still later years, stayed in the homes of her by now married children, she never failed to infuriate the in-laws by tidying up after everyone. To this day her son-in-law goes to some trouble to snatch to his bosom full ashtrays and dirty coffee mugs as Geraldine passes by, to preserve his comfortable status quo. Geraldine cannot even try to comprehend this, she is so convinced that everyone else in the world is like her, with her standards.

The final outcome is that her little home today, although she is a severely handicapped bestruck old lady, is always neat as a pin, as is Geraldine herself —

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always ready for a rare visitor. Nobody can ever catch Geraldine out, and she is much admired still for her beauty, dignity, charm and quite extraordinary "presence" in a completely perfect environment.

Her children all live in happy but untidy houses.

Allied to this passion for tidiness is the famous lack of imagination, especially as applied to the human condition. Though rarely unkindly critical, Geraldine takes it for granted that everyone else is like her. She does not even try to understand anyone who is not.

"I've heard the Sheens are breaking up!" she would cry. "I wonder what on earth could have happened! I just don't understand it."

This commentary on her view of the world, and her personal ideas of conjugal duty, speak volumes for the sheltered life Charles always saw she had. He treated her as a nightingale in a gilded cage, and her attitude to the outside world, though both friendly and kindly, showed the same lack of comprehension.

The children played their father's game. They would not have dared do otherwise. Their mother was a goddess on a pedestal, "she who must be obeyed", and they love and admire her and always have. But tell her their personal problems? Never. Not only would she not understand, she would not even be interested.

As university students they were expected by Geraldine to be "sociable", every evening. This meant sitting round the fire talking to her, or listening to the radio with her. After Geraldine went to bed (very late, as she often vacuumed at midnight so that the house would be perfect in the morning) they retired to their rooms upstairs to swot or write essays for hours.

"I'm worried about poor Elisabeth!" Geraldine would say to me. "She has to work so hard, she never gets enough sleep!"

One day Gerald, aged about 16, turned up for breakfast ravenous and exhausted after having been lost in the bush with a scout party for several days. Breakfast at Geraldine's was tea and toast.

"What do you think!" Geraldine cried gaily to visitors. "Gerald was so hungry he ate eighteen slices of toast."

Porridge? Bacon and eggs? Don't be silly. Breakfast was tea and toast.

But the end result of this is again a bonus. Here she is today, with that radiant, unlined face, happy, easy to please, laughing at a joke till tears run down her cheeks, still the queen, still dazzling an admiring audience with her style. And this admiring audience includes those who suffered most from her lack of

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imagination.

The third "pillar of wisdom" on which my sister Geraldine has built her life is stubbornness. Having put the clock back — especially since her stroke — to about the mid-1950's, she stays there in a time warp. Dollars? Geraldine still thinks in pounds, shillings and pence. Trouser-suits? Being ashamed of the shape and performance now of her once elegant right leg, you might think she would welcome such a comfortable fashion. Certainly not. Only vulgar women wear trousers. she would rather struggle for half an hour to get on her pantihose each morning, to keep up her image. A wheelchair at the Airport to take her across the tarmac? Never! Never mind those she might be holding up. People might see her and think she was unable to cope. Tell her to leave making the bed to me when I come to stay? I never win. Geraldine will smilingly admit she worked all day at the job. Her grim determination often drives us all crazy.

But this, too, has paid off. Now she is old, often in pain and severely handicapped she is determined to keep on living alone in her dear little house, and does so, against all pleas from family, advice from doctors, in fact all odds. She never complains about anything. And her single-minded courage has so enchanted the staff of a very good old people's rest home nearby that they send someone over for her every day to bring her back for a free dinner, three or four days a week, and even arrange for her to be visited during each night to make sure she has not fallen out of bed.

Geraldine's great interest in food has helped her popularity here.

"The old ladies over there all leave their meat and vegetables" she cries. "I think it's just awful! I eat all of mine, and I often help them clean up their plates. too! I hate seeing mess left on plates for the dishwashing staff."

Naturally the kitchen people think my sister Geraldine is wonderful!

She knows she will have to go over to that rest home for good one day, but she is determined to keep her independence for as long as she can.

"I will do it — I will!" is Geraldine's cry. (Or, "I won't!")

In 1967, when Geraldine was still in her 50s, she had an operation for bowel cancer, and later a severe stroke. She made a wonderful, if slow, recovery from both. Her speech returned, and her lifeless right side regained some movement so that finally she could walk with a stick. Her beautiful face remained the same. So did her character. Her charm and dazzling smiles returned. Her memory became shaky, but here she was, come through death-dealing illnesses with flying colours, still the radiant queen of her family. Her husband was delighted with her strength and determination and made a doormat of himself. Geraldine, albeit slightly battered, was still able to live in her sheltered dream world.

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"But what will I do if anything ever happens to Chas?" she would say wistfully. And indeed, that is what we were all wondering.

Then something unthinkable happened. While on a European holiday with Geraldine Charles had a very slight stroke himself. This was not then recognised for what it was, but in fact poor Charles started to run downhill from that time.

Over the next ten years he became slowly but surely increasingly eccentric, slow, and difficult for Geraldine to "manage". His work became beyond him, but he refused to give up. His son Gerald, now a partner in the law firm, had to work long hours late at night to fix up problems his father had created during the day. And during this time Geraldine became the strong one.

He lived for another ten years, but the last two or three were hideous for poor Geraldine. He should have been in an old people's Home, and I could never understand why Knox Church, who administered a good one in Dunedin, and who owed plenty to Charles Wilson for his unstinting voluntary work for the church during his working life, could not have pulled a few strings and got him in long before they finally did. Because now poor Geraldine was expected by the hospital authorities to look after Charles, with certain outside help from visiting nurses and home aids. For the first time in her life, Geraldine had to face not only the unpleasantnesses of real life, but to cope in circumstances difficult for even an able-bodied person, let alone a paraplegic.

What made this so intensely sad was that Charles, under the influence of a steady brain deterioration, completely changed his character. His former adoration of Geraldine seemed to turn to a hatred and resentment of her. At the table he would sometimes hurl at her the food she had, with such labour, tried to cook for him. We all assured her it was not the real Charles she was seeing, it was a very sick, prematurely aged old man who did not know what he was doing. But this Geraldine could not comprehend, and never accepted.

The other sad thing was that she came in for some flack from family for saying what she thought about the new Charles and how he was behaving to her, expecting understanding if not sympathy. She got neither from some of them, who found her, as they told me, "lacking in compassion". She had forgotten, they said, how good he had been to her when she needed help. This may well have been true, but it was an impossible situation for anyone, and what she really lacked was comprehension. Geraldine never came to terms with her husband's changed attitude, and I found it heart-breaking that she was forced to put up with so much, for two years or more before they found room for Charles at the Presbyterian home. There she dutifully visited him regularly (as a good wife should), only to continue to have things hurled at her from his bed. Poor Geraldine! So much for the sheltered life.

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Charles died. "What will happen to me if anything happens to Chas?" had already been proved a myth. And now my sister Geraldine is alone, with no demanding and difficult husband to try to look after, she has come into her own. She has discovered, during that hard struggle, that she can live perfectly well and very happily by herself — with much help from a loving eldest son. She still does not understand money, she still doesn't want to know about her children's problems. But that magnificent stubbornness keeps her machinery running with amazing success. Geraldine is a survivor.

In the end it is her sheer character that shines out in its full glory. What does it matter that she never understands why her in-laws disapprove of her tidying-up habits, that her priorities are what things look like over what things are? She missed important things in life because of her refusal to face anything unpleasant, but she does not know what she has missed. She is brave and never complains about her aches and pains, never bores people with any woes. And she still loves a joke, and laughs till the tears stream down that smooth, unwrinkled face that shows no sign of pain or anxiety.

Geraldine still lives 'way back in the 1950s. Her standards are rigid. She is a glorious anachronism, drawing admiration from all sides, not least from her adoring family. She will eventually die as she has lived — a brave, unimaginative, handsome woman who loves a laugh and never complains, queen of her family.

Bravo, Geraldine!