

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

29 Jane's Luck

When my first child was born a good fairy smiled on her. Blonde like her Polish father, she enchanted us both. Like every new young mother I played with this cute-looking little paragon and wondered. Would she be clever, rich? Would she be beautiful? Maybe not — better call her a plain name like Jane. But Jane became a raving beauty.

Whether the beauty brought the luck or the luck the beauty, I don't know. But she seemed early to have a talent for being in the right place at the right time.

Jane learned to play the violin, and soon played well. Her ambition was to play with the National Orchestra. This seemed unlikely at the time, because there was no Conservatorium of Music in New Zealand to take her beyond private teaching, scholarships for study overseas were hard to get, nobody seemed to be taken on in New Zealand's only first-class orchestra without conservatorium background, and we had no money to pay for her study abroad. She left school, kept up the music and learned to type.

An unexpected audition was called for the inaugural class of orchestral trainees to train young people like Jane as future orchestral players — a year's course probably unique in the world at the time. Jane was chosen in the first intake of seven players, and what with her unusually good sightreading skills, her beauty and her luck, she did end up playing with the National Orchestra the following year.

The family split up in the mid-60s. I went to London to seek my fortune, soon followed by my younger daughter Anna. Jane went to Australia to freelance, ending up a permanent member of the Brisbane Symphony Orchestra.

One day the orchestra had a picnic at an isolated beach. The wind was high and the picnickers did not realise that the surf was dangerous. Only a few ventured into the sea, including Jane with another ex-New Zealand violinist. Both good swimmers. they found themselves being dragged relentlessly out to sea. Each oncoming roller totally submerged them. On shore panic-stricken watchers hauled some life-saving gear down to the water's edge, but in the sea nobody knew how to work it properly. Jane's companion was towed in on the rope, but underwater and half drowned. Jane waved rescuers away from her, preferring to drown unaided. At last a local life-saver appeared who swam out for her. Jane, certain that rescue was impossible, went on fighting in spite of a longing to just sink beneath the waves and stay there. She was finally brought in on the rope conscious, but only just, held upside down by her feet on the beach and drained, and rushed to the local cottage hospital where she was treated for shock and kept for two days to recover.

The orchestral player who first tried to rescue her was drowned in the attempt.

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The doctors told her she was very lucky to be alive. Only her driving will-power had kept her fighting on. Our Jane, it seems, was not destined to drown in the sea, or be eaten by sharks.

Two years later Jane arrived in London to join Anna and me. She wanted a job as a professional violinist. She had no connections in London and knew nobody influential. But it had been arranged for her to apply for a job with the B.B.C. orchestra at Bristol.

"What do you think of my chances here, Mum?" she asked. "London is marvellous, I love it. I don't really want to go to the provinces. But do you think I'll even get a job with an orchestra at all?"

"There are lots of orchestras here," I said, "but there must be hundreds of violinists wanting work. I just have no idea. But I do know one thing. You'll have to join the Musicians' Union before you even start looking."

She found the Union's office and joined up.

The following evening there was a telephone call for her at our flat. A man.

"Who on earth can that be?" mused Jane. "I don't know anyone here."

"Do you want a freelance job playing for three weeks in a couple of operas in Newcastle?" said the unknown voice. "If so, I can arrange for you to be taken up by car with two or three others from London."

"How much?" said Jane, astonished.

The sum offered staggered her.

"O.K., count me in!" said Jane. "But who are you? How do you know about me? And how do you know I can do the job?"

"I'm a fixer," said the man. "I got your name today at the Musicians' Union. And I know you can do the job because I have my sources of information."

When Jane came back from her first "gig" she was radiant.

"Mum, I had a marvellous time!" she said. "And all this money, too! I made wonderful friends. Everyone was great to me, Gosh, I don't want to go to Bristol to audition — I just want to keep on doing this for ever, here in London!"

But Bristol was expecting her. She came back two days later, downcast.

"I got the job, Mum!" she wailed.

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So it was an embarrassment of riches. And all within 3 weeks of her arrival.

Lucky Jane!

I stayed a weekend with her at Bristol for her birthday. We went to the zoo there, and took our place at the back of a crowd standing on a knoll by the gorillas' cage. The big father gorilla climbed the bars and eyed Jane in her new white dress with a beady, fascinated stare. Then he climbed down, took a mouthful of water from his bucket and returned to his perch, took careful aim and spewed about a pint, in a graceful arch, right into her face! The crowd loved it, and even poor Jane, wiping down her pretty dress, had to laugh.

"You won't forget your 25th. birthday in a hurry!" I laughed. "Fancy being courted by a gorilla!"

A week later I left Britain to return permanently to New Zealand.

Over the next ten years Jane did very well indeed with her violin. She moved from Bristol to Bournemouth, then on to London, ending up with the First Violins in Covent Garden's opera orchestra playing for opera and ballet. She loved her life and had no plans to return to New Zealand.

Five years after the Bristol incident I returned to Britain for a holiday. By this time Jane was living in Hampstead and Anna, now a hippy solo Mum with a baby girl, was living in Wales.

Jane and I decided to do a trip to Greece during her orchestra's summer break. We went with the Club Med to their camp at Aegeon on the Peloponnese peninsula.

At this idyllic seaside camp Jane was a great success, especially with the unaccompanied males. One of the handsome Greek boys took her to his mountain village for a rural birthday party which delighted her. She also had a devoted French admirer, a young Parisian architect called Jean-Claude.

A party from the camp signed up to go to the last night's performance of the Greek play at Epidaurus. It was "Orestes". Jane, Jean-Claude and I went together..

In the afternoon the bus took our group from the camp on a four hour drive to the small town of Nauplion. We had a meal there, and were then transported by bus the three or four miles up into the hills to the Greek open theatre at Epidaurus. We disembarked at the big car park and walked up a long, wide, tree-lined path through a beautiful park for about a quarter of a mile to the theatre itself. From the theatre site in a hollow, the mountains rose around us.

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There were lots of people climbing this path with us, but we were far from prepared for the vast crowd inside the theatre itself. We were told there were 12,000 people there.

To enter the theatre one uses one of two archways which lead right on to the stage. One crosses this, descends a couple of steps, and then climbs up through the auditorium via one of the aisles. We three were given seats on the steps of the aisle itself.

The play was quite marvellous. Discreet spotlights round the circular stage threw up the shadows of the black-robed, static Greek chorus performers. Their slow, graceful movements showed them to be as much dancers as singers (or chanters), and the musical intonation of their poetic story-telling was enchanting. Without understanding a word, we were all riveted to the spot. Halfway through the play a huge full moon rose over the mountains, the lights dimmed and the deep shadows of those chorus figures were thrown forward by the moonlight. It was a magical moment. In fact, the whole evening was a visual knock-out.

Little did we know that drama was about to happen to us personally.

At the end of the play all 12,000 of us tried to leave at once, through those two arches at the back of the stage. Outside, once we were jostled through, it was pure chaos. Yelling crowds were streaming all over the path, not seeing where they were going in the dark, falling over the drop on the far side of that path. It was not deep enough to do much damage beyond a broken ankle, but people were screaming and panic set in.

"Hold on to me. you two!" cried Jean-Claude. "And whatever you do, don't let go!"

So Jane and I grabbed an arm each and we stumbled ahead three abreast, resisting the onslaught of people trying to hurtle through our linked arms to get ahead. Suddenly it had all become frightening. It was not that drop. It was now the fear of separation and being actually trampled underfoot. The press and screaming around us was incredible, terrifying.

We stumbled into a tree, Jean-Claude was pressed against the trunk, Jane and I slung to each side hanging on to him, making a human necklace round the tree trunk.

We glued ourselves to that tree, petrified.

In a few moments the crowd pressing round us mysteriously eased and we were able to unchain ourselves. But we did not let each other go until we reached the carpark.

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I always felt Jane's Jean-Claude possibly saved our lives that night. Perhaps, though, it was just Jane's luck. and I just happened to be in on the deal. Anyway it was a memorable evening.

On our last day at the camp I suggested to Jane that we leave our luggage to be transported to the Athens air terminal at midnight, along with everyone returning to Britain on the plane, catch a local bus into Athens and spend the afternoon and evening visiting the Acropolis, the Plaka and whatever. We could surely fill in the time happily till 4 a.m. when the bus left for the Airport, Jane was keen, and an English journalist girl called Alison said she would like to come too.

We had a wonderful few hours until midnight wandering around the Plaka shops, the Parthenon, attending a son et lumière performance on the slopes of Capitol Hill just on dusk, and spinning out an entertaining meal in the Plaka until about 11.30. Then we set off for yet another exploring walk in that fascinating area. All of Athens was milling around, dancing and singing, bouzouka strings twanging noisily everywhere. Under the wall of the Acropolis where it was dark and quiet I saw through an open doorway a small taverna with nobody in it except a middle-aged blind guitarist playing Bach.

"Let's have a brandy and coffee here, girls!" I said.

We had four more hours to fill in. We sat down and ordered our coffee and brandies. Soon three middle-aged people entered and took a nearby table.

After we had dawdled over our drinks and finished the brandies, three more glasses appeared. This was Greece, and perhaps I should have made it clear we did not want repeats. But there was enough money left — just and we were enjoying the beautiful guitar music, the guitarist playing our requests. But when a third round of brandies appeared mysteriously, this was all a bit much and I tried to wave the waiter away and ask for the bill, please. He explained that our drinks had all been paid for.

"Who has been paying?" I asked, astonished.

"That gentleman over there!" replied the waiter, pointing to the group at the other occupied table. The man indicated caught my eye, gave me a dignified bow, and I smiled and nodded our acceptance. A few minutes later the party rose to leave, and he came over.

"I have been listening to you talking," he said. "You are New Zealanders, are you not?"

"Yes, my daughter and I are."

"I fought alongside New Zealanders in Crete during the war. I liked them very,

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very much. It is a pleasure to be able to do some little favour for New Zealanders!"

This was a very pleasant Greek experience.

By this time another table was occupied, with an animated party of University. Students, three young men and a young pregnant wife. One of the young men came over.

"You are tourists, aren't you?" he asked me in good English. "Why don't you all join us? We don't like to see you on your own, not being looked after!"

The girls were enthusiastic, so we joined them. Our new friend was the only English-speaking one, but he acted as interpreter for the others, and a hilarious coffee-drinking hour was had by all. One of the other boys, it seems, had fallen for Jane and had sent his friend over to inveigle us to join them. He gazed at her fascinated and engaged in cryptic but obviously "come hither" talk with her through the interpreter, much to the amusement of the rest of us.

We must be shown more of Athens, they said. Arm in arm we all strolled down Capitol Hill into the city, laughing and singing, stopping at each café with outside tables for coffee before passing on. Jane's admirer became more extravagantly importunate, and we all laughed a lot. He said something.

"Dmitros wants to show Jane his castle!" said our interpreter.

"His castle?" I cried. "There aren't any castles in Athens."

"Well, he does live in a castle, actually. But it's a very little one."

The prospect of there being a nearby castle in one of the main streets of Athens, even a very little one, seemed remote, and we had a plane to catch. So we eschewed the invitation. I'm not even sure we were all invited. But I was quite disappointed that there was no time to see Dmitros's castle, even if it was a very little one.

They walked us to the air terminal where we were reunited with the others, and our luggage, and taken to our plane for London. Alison, who was plain, carrot-haired and spotty, if pleasant, sank into her seat in a euphoria.

"I've never had such a wonderful night in my whole life!" she breathed.

"Just stick around the Freed's, girl." I laughed. "Just stick around — especially if Jane is with us!"

Another five years later I returned to London again. By this time Anna had come back to New Zealand with her baby. Nobody had ever thought Jane herself

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would end up a solo Mum with a baby too, but this she had done. After a romantic affair with an American filmstar during a music tour in California, she had had a baby. Marriage was not being considered.

The baby was born in London. Jane had to give up her work, and went to live with friends in Hamburg for six months, baby and all. After her father's death she had inherited the family home in Wellington, so she decided to return to bring up little Jenny in New Zealand. But how to manage the trip? Baby, violin, ten years' possessions, all had to be considered. I was to attend a conference in Norway, so I agreed to come down to Hamburg from there to pick her up and help her with the trip to New Zealand.

She booked on the same Pan-Am flight from London to Auckland via San Francisco, where we both planned to stay overnight.

We met, as arranged, at the Victoria Station air terminal at the appointed time, to catch the bus to Heathrow. It was a busy Friday morning. When our turn came our luggage was taken over and our documents examined.

"Where is the American visa for your baby?' the clerk asked Jane.

"The Hamburg agent said a 6 months old baby doesn't need a visa."

"That's not correct, actually," said the girl. "She does need a visa."

Jane and I looked at each other in horror. I waved my arms around, demanding to see the manager, while Jane burst into tears. The baby smiled sweetly, unfazed.

"I'm sorry, Madam," said the Manager "The baby must have a visa. You'll have to go to the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square to get one."

"Oh, no! It's not possible to do that in time, Mum!" cried Jane. "I've sat there for hours, just waiting, each time I've travelled to the States. We won't be able to catch the plane — no way!"

A friend who had driven me to the terminal was still there.

"I'll drive you all over to Grosvenor Square," she offered.

So we did a dash through rush-hour traffic, and she left us at the Embassy. It certainly looked like Goodbye, plane to San Francisco that day. The other passengers were well on their way already to Heathrow.

We saw a roomful of waiting clients reading books to pass the time. Jane was crying, the baby was all round-eyed interest, I was doing the desperate grandmother

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act, trying to throw my weight around. Drama, drama! The others looked fascinated.

Jane was handed a seemingly endless sheaf of documents to fill in. I grabbed baby and violin, straddled luggage, and Jane wrote like mad, After about 15 minutes we returned to the waiting room. Everyone looked up with interest.

A middle-aged woman mysteriously appeared, probably the Consul. (This had all started to feel like the hopeless scene in Menotti's opera "The Consul", anyway.)

"Where is the girl with the baby?" she said.

"Here! Here she is!" I cried.

Jane handed her the document. She gave it the briefest glance through, signed it, and handed over a visa for wee Jenny.

It was thirty minutes to boarding time for our plane at Heathrow. But the incredible had already happened. We had been "processed" at the American Embassy in absolutely unheard-of record time. Perhaps Jane's luck would hold. Or was it perhaps now Jenny's luck?

We flagged down a passing cab.

"Can you make Heathrow in twenty minutes?"

"I can try, Madam!" said a bemused driver. And off we went, hurtling round busy intersection corners practically on two wheels,

At Heathrow strong men rushed to assist the pretty lady with her pretty baby, but nobody tried to help me, the old packhorse with all the luggage. Never mind, we made the flight to San Francisco.

Since then Jane seems to have transferred much of her luck to her beautiful daughter. At 18 Jenny is the one who now seems to lead a charmed life.

Perhaps it is all very simple, really, Not a question of luck at all — just a question of beauty.