

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

30. THE BODY AND THE BRAIN

(Alison)

My cousin Alison was an important part of my life in London in the 60s.

"Poor Alison!" my mother used to say when I was a small child. "So pretty, and so talented. And with that terrible mother of hers, and no father, and a brother who isn't quite right in the head."

Alison was the daughter of my mother's Uncle Tom. She was much younger than my mother. Tom Grant, an engineer, had died in a mining accident on the West Coast when Alison was a child. A photograph from those Dunedin days when she stayed with us shows an extremely beautiful dark girl of about 18.

I did not actually meet her until the beginning of 1939, when she was 38 and I was 20. She was married to Hugh Robinson, a Scotsman who was said to have had a distinguished war career. They had a little boy of seven called John, and I met the family on a ship Alison's family had travelled out from England, and I was returning to New Zealand from a holiday in Australia.

When we met she impressed me by ordering Irish whisky at the bar, something then almost unheard-of in New Zealand. How sophisticated she seemed!

I decided to live in Wellington. I found a job as a secretary, Alison joined the reporting staff of the Listener. Hugh did nothing. He seemed averse to work.

Alison, being the breadwinner, established her husband and child in a sub-standard cottage, little more than a shed with no plumbing, which was attached to a farm in a rural area outside Wellington, and John was sent to the country school there. Alison believed in the wholesomeness of country life and values. Almost immediately John caught impetigo from some of the grubby local kids.

Alison needed to live in town during the week. She suggested we share "digs". We took a double attic room in a bed-and-breakfast house close to the city. I had a fantastic six months living there with my fantastic cousin.

Alison was a poet, a journalist and a commercial artist. She had gone to live in London when she was 30. Most of the work she did there seems to have been spasmodic, free-lance and varied, but somehow, to me, vaguely glamorous. It included interior decorating old London houses for rich Americans. Always in navy and white.

Alison enchanted me. She was beautiful, eccentric, imaginative, dramatic, wayward, outrageous, romantic, vivacious, witty and exciting. This was strong beer indeed for me, after the past two years of tight Dunedin values I had just experienced.

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Alison drew men to her like moths to a candle. Women, too, fell under her spell. We were all doing things for Alison she should have been doing for herself, like paying her rent, shouting her meals, writing her copy when she was exhausted, buying her cigarettes. She was an appalling sponger, but such was her charisma and style that she left us feeling privileged to be allowed to help her. And she was indeed wildly generous when she did have anything to spend or give.

In London, she told me, she had had two lovers before her marriage to Hugh. One was The Brain, a distinguished Englishman on the fringe, at least, of the Bloomsbury Set, who made no physical demands on her. The other was The Body, a "white" Russian, who did. I imagined her dashing from one to the other according to her urge. She married Hugh after three weeks with him on the Balearic Islands. John was born in a wholesome country cottage hospital in England, delivered by a drunken doctor who somehow managed to wreck Alison's inside. For this misadventure she always blamed Hugh, though I could never quite work out why. Otherwise they seemed to get on, though it seemed she had always been the breadwinner.

Alison over-dramatised all her stories, but one about Hugh's past was corroborated by Hugh himself. At one stage in his career he had been sent to the Solomon Islands to manage a copra plantation in Malaita. He got on well with the natives. But when his term was up and his successor arrived from Britain, he was not so successful. The natives murdered, cooked and ate him. Cannibal stew!

Romantic Alison would have married a man for a story like that. It is possible she did.

In our beds at night with the light switched off Alison would talk. I learned from her about Van Gogh, Picasso, the Spanish civil war with its refugees and atrocities, the Bloomsbury Set personalities she had met in London through The brain. I learned about people having the right, even the duty, to be "different": about love, and respect for other people's privacy about the social acceptability or otherwise of sexual deviations, about books and writers, poetry and what it was all about. She had known many famous people, and she astounded me with details about their personalities and sex lives.

Alison did not believe people ever ought to be asked to explain themselves.

One day, lying flat on the floor with one of her chronic backaches, she confessed to me she felt unable to carry on with her work on the Listener.

"Why doesn't Hugh work, Alison?" I asked.

"I've no idea. I never asked him."

"Well," I retorted, "I think it's because you have always done the

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breadwinning, and at rather exciting jobs, and Hugh feels he can't compete. If he thought you had no job I bet he'd get off his chump and find one for himself. Then you could have a rest!"

"Do you really think so?" said Alison thoughtfully.

"Yes, I do. When you go out to the country this weekend, why don't you pretend you have lost your job? Just try it, and see what happens."

She did. She went even further. She actually gave notice (as she told me) at the Listener office. She really had no job. That sure made me nervous.

We went out to the country as usual the next Friday night.

"I've given up my job, Hugh!" drawled Alison casually.

"Oh?" said Hugh.

On Monday morning he got up very early, hitch-hiked over the mountain to Wellington and ended up at the Central Railway Station. By lunchtime he was employed as a cleaner on the long distance trains.

Now it was Alison who stayed in the country while Hugh commuted to town.

Alison could only stand it for about three weeks. She nearly died of boredom living in the clean, wholesome country alone with John. She moved back into town, but no longer with me. The family stayed with a friend nearby.

She found work, this time in a photographer's studio. (I later discovered that when she was pretending she had resigned from the Listener, she had already actually been sacked, for being too unreliable in meeting their deadlines. My proposed plan had helped her to save face.)

When Alison went back to work, Hugh gave up his job. I had been right.

I married, the War came, I had a baby and we moved down to Dunedin to live. Alison and her family achieved the difficult task, in 1942, of travelling back to London by sea in wartime. Alison could always pull strings. She knew lots of important people in Wellington, from the Prime Minister down. I heard nothing of her for over 20 years.

By this time I had parted from my husband, left my three virtually grown-up children and taken off for London, to live there for a while at least. I was 45 years old and poor, but by now experienced in several professions. I landed on my feet, and stayed in London for nearly three years.

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By the time I arrived Alison had left Hugh and was living with The Brain. John was now a trained economist, married to the charming Antonia, with three small children. Alison lived in Bloomsbury with The Brain, officially as his housekeeper-cum-chauffeur. She had her own studio flat nearby in Handel Street, in a lovely, shabby and decrepit old house reputed to be on the site of Handel's own house. My daughter Anna and I often borrowed Alison's flat in Handel Street during my sojourn in London, and adored it, substandard or not. The Brain (Arthur Waley, a specialist in Chinese poetry and himself a distinguished poet and writer) then bought a lovely 18th century terrace house at the top of Highgate Village, from where one could look down at night on to the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral far below, lit up in a golden halo. Arthur and Alison moved there from Bloomsbury and Anna and I helped move over a vast collection of wonderful books in many languages, the lifetime collection of a world-famous scholar now in his 70s.

Arthur and Alison had a terrible car accident. Alison, the driver, was unhurt, but Arthur was thrown on to the road and his back broken. he was never to walk again.

Alison was demented with grief. She pleaded and bullied Arthur's doctor until he agreed to let Arthur be nursed by her at home. She was completely wonderful, all love and devotion. So attentive to his needs was she that she hardly slept. Some of this selflessness came out in a book she later published about her life with Arthur, and some critics called it a truly great love story.

Literally on his death-bed, Arthur proposed marriage to Alison. "I want to make an honest man of myself before I die!" he explained.

They had managed pretty well maintaining an intense and remarkable relationship for 35 years without marriage, but Arthur's "Establishment" family neither approved of Alison nor liked her. His marriage to her appalled them, especially as he was more than passing rich. Depriving his detested relatives of his fortune was one of Arthur's aims in marrying Alison. Arthur was carried in a home-made hammock to the Registry Office, escorted by Alison's son John and my daughter Anna, and the marriage took place.

A few weeks later Arthur died.

The amount of his fortune, published in the Times, surprised many. But Alison finally inherited only a part. The Family contested the will on the grounds that the marriage could not possibly have been consummated. She used her share to acquire the beautiful house in Highgate — plus its contents. These included Arthur's books.

Apart from bringing in royalties for Alison, the scholarly collection is very valuable. Within ten years of Arthur Waley's death, three felonious attempts were made on the collection. It remains to this day in Alison's house in Highgate Village,

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safe from burglars behind barred windows, but already rotting away with deterioration and neglect.

The first attempt was made actually before Arthur's death. A number of very rare and valuable items were taken. Arthur suspected a member of his own family was involved. The culprit was never caught.

The other two occurred after his death. Alison could not read the titles of many of the books on her shelves, as they were in Asian languages. The only way she knew that certain books had been extracted was by spaces which mysteriously appeared which had not been there before. Again, the culprits were never caught.

Alison tried to sell the collection. She needed the money. This should have been easy, but strange things happened.

She offered the collection to each of the three major national institutions in England where Arthur had taught or researched. In each case great enthusiasm was shown, initially. And in each case, after a week or so Alison received a letter from the librarian declining to continue with the negotiations. No reason was ever given.

An agent from a wealthy and important American research library turned up. He, too, made an offer which Alison accepted. And what happened? After the return to the States of the negotiator, and before anything final had been signed, he mysteriously died.

What to make of these strange happenings? Alison believes that members of Arthur's family, some of whom also work in important British research institutions, have managed in some way to poison every deal.

I tend to believe her. Some sort of dirty work has been going on at the crossroads, and perhaps still is, but I find it hard to believe anyone from the Old Boys network, however much they hated Alison or coveted Arthur's books, would stretch things to the point of actual murder. The death of the American agent must surely have been accidental.

But the library which he represented made no further approach to Alison.

I returned to New Zealand to live in the late 60s, leaving my two daughters behind me in London. But over the next 25 years I took every opportunity to make a number of visits to London, twice making my home base Alison's beautiful but chaotic house in Highgate.

As Alison has grown older she has lost none of her spellbinding charisma, her enthusiasm, her infectious love of life, her propensity for dramatic and often outrageous behaviour. I have always had adventures with Alison, and now that she is 94 and I am 75 I see no reason why I should not still do so.

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During our long talks under the summer trees in her charming, overgrown walled back garden, she told me many tales of long ago. There was the story of her adored father dying in his child's arms; the story of her difficult adolescent years in Wellington ostracised by parents of school friends because her mother was considered socially "unacceptable"; of the pride with which she learned to hold up her head, already secure in the knowledge of her ultimate superiority. Alison's first love was her father, Tom Grant. Her second was Arthur Waley, the Brain; and her third was her son John. As her stories unfolded that magical summer in Highgate it was obvious that the power of her love for these people had dominated her whole life. She would have fought like a tigress for each one of them.

I arrived at her door in 1980 shaking at the knees, having just recovered (still clutching my duty-free whisky intact for Alison) from falling down an ascending escalator, plus my tumbled luggage, at Archway tube station. The door was locked and the bell did not ring. (Ten years later it still didn't ring.) I shouted through the slot in the door for the mail, and at last Alison called out gaily from on high: "Darling, is it today you're coming! Sorry, can't let you in — grandson has just gone off with the key!"

"Well, bring a jug of water and two glasses to the door, then!" I shouted back. "You can pass the glasses through to me. I must have my whisky."

Laughing merrily she finally appeared with our needments, plus a spare key she had unearthed from under the marmalade on the kitchen table, and we both sat down on the doorstep to celebrate my arrival.

Taking Alison out to a neighbourhood restaurant was mind-boggling. Once she insisted on taking off her singlet at our window table, because she was hot. People at the next table stared fascinated — and delighted. The English, I remembered, love eccentrics. And on another occasion, at a particularly smart and expensive restaurant, she bewitched a fascinated French waiter for two hours. Against my stern orders she demanded a doggy-bag for her roast duck left-overs. ("Cat loves duck!" she remarked cryptically to the waiter). She demanded desserts which were neither on the trolley nor on the menu and got them, she really behaved quite badly, probably partly to show her provincial cousin from New Zealand what she could get away with. And she did. That waiter adored her. I had to admire her aplomb, and sheer cheek. Here was that little socially ostracised adolescent still showing her disdain for the conventions, after seventy years.

One night I took Alison to the theatre. Another adventure.

Alison hates travelling by tube. She does not mind buses, but there is no direct bus route from her part of Highgate into the West End. She insisted on paying for a taxi for us to get to the theatre. I was determined that for the trip home I would get her on to the tube at Charing Cross station. I would smuggle her over the road

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and into the crowds before she realised what she was doing.

We came out of the theatre at 11 p.m., on to the Strand. Buses were passing us going towards Kingsway. Suddenly the wily Alison shouted:

"Look, darling! There's a no. 68 bus. That will take us half way home. Quick, quick, let's jump on board!"

She grabbed me by the arm and we both leaped on to the back platform of the temporarily-stopped bus, practically into the arms of an agitated conductor.

"You can't board the bus here, ladies!" he protested,

"We just have!" cried Alison with a disarming smile. "You must let us stay on!"

Of course the conductor just scratched his head, threw his eyes to the skies and let us take our seats.

The no. 68 bus does indeed go northwest. but towards Hampstead, not Highgate. The breadth of Hampstead Heath lies between. But it was going somewhere in the right direction, and would certainly reduce a future taxi fare.

Near Camden Town the bus stopped at a major roundabout with several turn-offs.

"Look darling — look!" yelled Alison. "That bus over there! It's going to Archway! Quick, get down the stairs, we've got to catch it!"

We hurtled down and threw ourselves off our already moving bus, to the consternation of the conductor.

"Careful, ladies!" he shouted. "You'll kill yourselves!"

We saw Alison's bus turning to go off on one of the radial roads, but had no time to reach it. However, that was its route and another would come. We were going to have to work our way round that roundabout on foot, to get to the right radial.

What a performance! Elderly me and my ancient cousin, white hair flying around, dashed over three radial roads, each with protecting wire fences to stop people doing just what we were doing, bumper-to-bumper traffic literally streaming round us, half London shouting and shrieking horns at us from all directions. Alison, bravely to the fore, dragged me after her while we did this crazy bunny-hop round the circle of the roundabout to get to our road. Motorists slowed down, looking unbelieving. At every safe point of arrival we fell into each other's arms, collapsing with hysterical laughter. Puffing and panting, we finally made it. A new bus with the right number arrived, and we fell into it, tears of laughter still streaming down our

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cheeks.

Never shall I forget taking my 80-year-old cousin to the theatre!

Sly grand-daughter Shanti turned up in London recently and visited 93-year-old Alison. It took no more than five minutes for Alison to captivate this new cousin. Shanti went to Japan on a working holiday and spent her first earned money there on a video camera. She wanted to return to London with it so that she could put our Cousin Alison and her amazing home firmly on to celluloid, for posterity — for ever. She quickly realised that not many people were fortunate enough to have such astounding relatives.

Alison knows something most of us never learn, perhaps don't want to learn. She knows how to laugh, how to weep, and how to love. Perhaps she is also one of the few who know how to live.