

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

32. LINDA'S WISHES

Linda's daughter Amanda did not turn up at her funeral. Her first husband Colin, Amanda's father, did, mainly due to my exhortations to him to do so via long-distance telephone calls. Her second husband, the American, was far away on his home territory and had not yet heard Linda had died. Her parents were there, and me — an aunt by marriage — with my daughter Jane. And there were lots of beautiful people aged between 25 and 35, full of spiritual thoughts, song, love, love, love and marijuana. The coffin, with huge pink and blue sausage balloons in barley-sugar twists dancing around it, was carried into the chapel by mantra-chanting friends from the Wellington Food Co-operative where Linda had worked. Linda, it seems, was getting the send-off from this mortal coil she had wished for.

The celebrant gathered us together and suggested that those who felt like it should tell something of their experience with Linda. I told of the time I first got to know her.

One day about twenty years before, I received a message from Wellington Hospital's psychiatric unit that one of their patients wished to see me. Linda was then 16. Because of unusual family circumstances I hardly knew her, but I did know she was a schoolgirl still, pretty and clever.

Linda had tried to take her life. She had emptied the contents of her parents' medicine cabinet into a paper bag and swallowed the lot. She had been found, in the bush behind their home, before the worst happened, stomach pumped and taken to hospital. When I asked why she had done this she said, "I was bored."

Linda had a boyfriend, Colin, whom she had met through a local drama club. He was 17, and he worked as a printer's apprentice.

When she was discharged from hospital she refused to go home. She and Colin set up house in a ratbag room somewhere in the seedy end of Wellington. She rang me to ask if she could bring him up to see me in my Kelburn flat where I lived alone. I invited them both for a Saturday dinner.

At the time I enjoyed playing card games. I taught these two children canasta, and they took to it like ducks to water. Linda was clever and could always win where strategy was concerned. Colin was uneducated, but full of enthusiasm, and he found trying to beat Linda a tremendous challenge. I was the sort of cathartic midwife for these mismatched Babes in the Weed. They came up to me nearly every Saturday for that year, for cards, a good meal and plenty of laughs.

Colin was a vulgar ignoramus, but I couldn't help liking him. There was something disarmingly attractive about his enthusiasm, his Cockney style wit and acumen, his slightly awed devotion to Linda. He was not of Linda's class, but I felt she could do worse.

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Linda became pregnant. She told her parents, as did Colin. A marriage was arranged.

The baby, when it arrived, was a bonny bouncing girl who was brought up to Aunty Dorothy's place when they visited. She was propped up on my divan with pillows stacked around her. She was a model of placidity, and quickly became fat.

Colin and Linda, now established in a State house, found it necessary to take a boarder to help pay the rent.

One day I received a phone call from a pub, from a workmate of Colin's. He told me Linda had dumped her baby in the Barnado Home and taken off for unknown parts — with the boarder. Colin was in hysterics. Would I please come down and rescue him?

I picked him up, took him home and sobered him up. I felt very sorry for poor abandoned Colin. I was angry with Linda. She was an unnatural mother. Linda, I decided, was Out.

About a year later there was a tap on my door one night. I was having a dinner party, and the rain was bucketing down outside. There was a sodden Linda on my porch, with an equally sodden, unprepossessing male skulking behind her.

"Please can we come in. Dorothy?" she cried. "We've just hitched down from Auckland and we've nowhere to go! I've brought our dinner."

She waved a paper bag of brown rice at me, Some dinner.

As I opened the door, with the greatest reluctance, to admit them, another shadowy male figure appeared, plus a large, wet dog.

This unattractive group, once inside, had to be fed, and with more than brown rice. It was two hours or more before that rainstorm cleared up and I could get rid of them. My party was ruined. I was furious with Linda. I decided that if she ever gatecrashed my home again I would threaten to send for the police.

Except for a brief encounter some years later, I did not see or hear of Linda until about 18 months before her death, when she returned from foreign parts to live in Wellington once more. She was now a tall, skinny, frail girl looking twenty years older than her 34 years, with her past good looks quite gone. But she still had her lovely mellow voice, and a certain ladylike dignity of carriage and demeanour. She was preparing food for the delicatessens counter of the Wellington Food Co-op in Arthur Street.

I was by now quite happy to pick up with Linda where we had left off before

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she abandoned her baby and took off with the boarder. She seemed more than a little chastened by the failure of her subsequent life. But I had no plan to go to any great trouble for her. Linda, I felt, was too tricky. And in spite of a neat wit she was now pretty negative as a companion. She was anorexic, and drinking too much.

She told me Colin had married the baby minder who had given up on Amanda when she got her own baby. Amanda had been adopted out. Nobody knew where she was now. Linda wished she could find out. She would be about 16. Linda had had a second marriage in Australia, to an American drug addict, which had been childless. This, too, had been a disaster.

Linda now lived near me and wanted to visit me to play Scrabble. It was like turning the clock back. She read intelligently, and we discussed books. I enjoyed her company on an intellectual level, but found it disconcerting to be powerless to influence her attitude on her anorexia, or to be able to kindle in her any enthusiasm about anything very much. She seemed like a zombie when it came to emotions and feelings — hopeless. It was a challenge.

One day she told me about horses she had owned and ridden in Australia. Her face lit up. So Linda did love something — she loved horses. I decided to work on it. I wished I could offer to keep one, should she buy one, in my garden.

She claimed her father was responsible for her failed marriages and her other personal woes. During her early adolescence she said he had betrayed her trust in him in some way, and she had felt emotionally abused. All her human relationships had been unsatisfactory, and for this she blamed and now hated him. I tried to talk her out of this without success.

One day she told me she had had tests for cancer which were positive, and was told that she must have a cervical operation or die within the year. She had asked for time to think before deciding.

"What do you have to think about, Linda?" I cried. "For heaven's sake!"

"I've decided. I'm not having the operation," she said.

"Why on earth not?"

"I'm bored, and I haven't got anything to live for. I may as well die. Don't worry, Dorothy, I'm quite happy about it!"

Horses, horses! Why couldn't someone suddenly give Linda a horse?

Counsellors, psychiatrists, Aunt Dorothy, nobody could budge her. She seemed perfectly happy and resigned about it all.

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She decided to stage a vendetta against her father before she died. She would tell me with glee the tricks she would play when, in her father's absence, she visited the family home. He had a prized collection of soft-porn videos with which he entertained his elderly dirty old menfriends. These she ruined by systematically dripping water on them. No-one ever knew if her father discovered about this, but after his death the tapes were sold to his friends who complained that their video players were now kaput.

During that year Jane and I always included Linda in our family festivities, to which Linda contributed wonderful food which she herself did not eat. She appreciated this. She also hed her own circle of friends at the Food Co-op, and still seemed to be a hippy at heart. She grew more skinny and gaunt, but she never complained, never looked for pity or even sympathy. She knew she was responsible for her misfortunes and was prepared to pay the ultimate price. One could do nothing,

except accept Linda on her own terms. And she was, in fact, still witty and amusing, intelligent and usually good company.

She took herself away for several overseas holidays to spend what money she had. The last was to Brisbane where she suddenly collapsed and had to be flown home. She was in Wellington Hospital on the Sunday, in the Hospice on the Monday and she died on the following Saturday morning, early on her 36th birthday. She appeared to die happy.

We all visited her at the Hospice — her parents, Jane and I, and her Food Co-op. friends. She asked me to knit her a gay bedjacket. I did not finish it in time, but she enjoyed watching me knit it. Her father sat with her, silent as a statue, day and night, which was courageous of him. It seemed that it was the anorexia which was about to carry her off, not the cancer.

A strange women appeared called Marjorie. She seemed to want to take charge and was, in fact, a well-meaning but irritating boss. She was the mother of one of Linda's Food Co-op. friends. She considered herself an expert on Linda's wishes.

A semi-trained social worker, Marjorie managed to locate Linda's daughter. She rang the family who had adopted her, and Amanda, now 16, was brought down from the country. She was a beautiful, relaxed girl, a credit to her adoptive parents. It seems she had been a difficult child until she was four years old, and bandied around from pillar to post; but since then she had found the perfect family to be adopted into, and had forgotten her unhappy early childhood.

I was never alone with Linda after Amanda's arrival, so I was not able to discover just how thrilled she was. But I am sure she was as excited and happy about this as her poor wasted frame and fading mind would allow. It was sad, though, that Amanda had to look on such a pathetic sight for future memories.

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Producing Amanda at the last minute was Marjorie's trump card. None of the rest of us could compete with that dramatic gesture!

Linda was determined to celebrate her birthday on the Saturday, at the Food Co-op. She had given her pals there their orders, and a big party was being planned. Everyone was invited. Even her parents were to attend. Linda said she knew she was a goner but she was determined to attend her own birthday party.

On the Friday night the gang all appeared — Food Co-op. friends, relatives, Amanda with her adoptive mother, Marjorie trying to organise everyone — and we all sat round Linda's bed for hours. The young ones brought out guitars and sang to her softly. She looked happy, but irritated with Marjorie.

When everyone was sleeping, Linda died. She lived to see the dawn of her birthday. And indeed, she was to appear at her birthday party.

Marjorie took over. Linda was to be given a wonderful send-off. The Saturday party was indeed off, but there was to be a wake on the Sunday at her Co-op friend's house in Tonks Avenue near the store, at the top of Cuba Street. We were all ordered to attend, bearing food and drink. And Linda would be there! The undertaker was to deliver Linda's body, in an open coffin, to this cottage. On the Tuesday Linda was to be cremated, but only after a ritual procession escorting Linda, in her coffin, to her beloved Food Co-op. for the last time. She would be carried round the building in state. Flowers, flags, streamers, songs and mantras would not be spared. This, according to Marjorie, was Linda's wish.

We turned up at Tonks Avenue on Sunday with the necessary food and drink. Marjorie escorted us through the open-doored garage which was set up with a trestle table bearing food, through the kitchen, up to the sittingroom, and introduced to Linda's corpse. There she was, half propped up in her coffin so that she could see everything going on, her reddish blonde hair neatly plaited in its usual style, her body encased in one of her gayest hand-knitted jerseys and her legs in her favourite bedraggled jeans. Her face had been attended to and she looked pretty good — filled out and attractive again. After the first shock one sort of got used to Linda being there. She just seemed to be one of the crowd. That, it seems, had been her wish.

People came and went. A girl sang a plaintive song to a guitar. We all laughed and talked, ate and drank. All rooms were decked with flowers, balloons and streamers. It was a gay, animated party.

I noticed an elderly man mooching around in the garage, stuffing himself full of food. As he was the only older person present apart from Linda's parents and me, and seemed not to know anyone, I decided to befriend him.

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"Hello!" I said. "I'm Linda's aunt. "Won't you join us in our corner?"

"Alright," he muttered doubtfully. "But I'll get myself some more grub first."

"And how do you come to know Linda?" I asked innocently.

"Linda? Who's she?" he replied. "I saw the notice for this party in the paper last night. Free grub, see? I live in the Council flats round the corner, so I thought I'd just drop over."

"Oh, do help yourself!" I said sweetly. "And if you go inside, do go up to the sitting room. You'll find even more interesting things there!"

"Alright. See ya later!" he said as he ambled off into the house.

A few minutes later he emerged, rather shaken. Without a word he pushed past us all into the street and vanished.

"Ah!" I thought smugly. "Now you know who Linda is!"

Marjorie wanted to have the procession round the Food Co-op. next day video'd. A friend of Jane's agreed to do it. I am pretty sure a video had not been one of Linda's wishes, but we were led to believe by Marjorie that it would have been had she thought of it.

It was late when Jane and I parked our car in neighbouring Webb Street next day. Half way along the short block in Upper Cuba Street we were stopped dead in our tracks. Passing before our eyes was a scene reminiscent of these dramatic finales in some Ingmar Bergman film, where silhouettes of grotesque figures dance a macabre ballet along a lonely skyline against the setting sun.

First came six-foot-four friend Norbert, video camera on shoulder, dancing backwards out of Tonks Avenue into Cube Street itself, obviously photographing an advancing object. Then came the open coffin, Linda — looking a little rigid by now — still sitting up observing the proceedings, borne by chanting singing acolytes, also dancing. Streamers, sausage balloons, flowers, home made banners, bright scarves were being waved round and hung from the coffin. After the beautiful guitar-playing girl — not a bad stand-in for an angel — came the rest of the motley crew, dressed in all the colours of the rainbow, laughing as they danced and sang.

We stood and stared, hypnotised, as the bizarre procession crossed the road, a reasonably major highway. Cars slowed down, almost stopped, astonished faces looked out of drivers' seats, mouths dropped. The procession, led by the Pied Piper weaving backwards with his camera, crossed Cuba Street into Arthur Street with the family tagging on behind.

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The hearse was waiting outside the Food Co-op. The procession stopped. But by now Marjorie had discovered that Linda was not to be allowed to enter a food shop. The Health Department had decreed on dead bodies in the presence of food being sold. This was something Linda had definitely not checked up on, whatever her wish.

So we all escorted Linda to the doorway, just to let her have a peep. Before the customers had time to do more than register astonishment we took her out again, back to the hearse which drove her fast out of Cuba Street.

At the crematorium the celebrant from the hospice conducted an informal, friendly service. Most of us repaired later to Linda's old flat where marvellous food appeared and a good time was had by all. Marjorie hadn't found a horse to join us there, which I'm sure would have been Linda's wish. But it was a good party and Linda — in spirit — doubtless enjoyed it.

A day or two later a very respectable-looking elderly lady accosted me in the local grocer's shop.

"Were you not at Linda Freed's funeral?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed!" I replied. "Were you a friend of Linda's?"

"No, I never met her," replied the lady. "My husband is a Freemason and Linda's father is one, too. So he went along to support his friend, and I went too. Wasn't it a nice funeral!"

"Did you enjoy it?" I laughed.

"Yes, I did!" she said. "And, do you know what my husband said when we got home? He said 'My dear, when I die I want to have a funeral just like that!' What do you think of that?"

"Jolly good!" I replied.

"And so do I!" she cried. "I want one like that, too!"