

## My Colourful Great-Aunt Dorothy

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“Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.” This was one of my Great-Aunt Dorothy’s first, and best, pieces of advice to me. I was about seven, and had been given a homework assignment to write about a time when I had been naughty. It wasn’t that I had never been naughty (on the contrary, I was a singularly horrid little girl), but I hadn’t been naughty on a grand or amusing enough scale for the kind of piece I wanted to write. Dorothy, with her characteristic indulgent kindness and cheerful disregard for the rules, said I could borrow one of the many occasions *she* had been naughty, and pass it off as my own. So I wrote about the time when Dorothy had covered her big sister Geraldine’s pillow with black pepper, repositioning myself as the protagonist. I was pretty proud of my effort, and read it aloud to my class with what I fancied was excellent comic timing.

Mrs. Scott, my nice Standard Two teacher, upbraided me gently. “Miranda, I happen to know you don’t have any sisters,” she said. But I think she understood my desire to be a storyteller like my colourful Great-Aunt Dorothy, and knew that my own life didn’t yet have enough material to be mined for thrilling tales.

If ever a life was thrillingly lived, it was Dorothy’s. She exceeded society’s modest expectations for women of her generation in every way: a liberated woman before the expression even existed, she tried and rejected the life of a homemaker, seeking a fulfilling career rather than a mere job to pay the bills. Decades before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, she agreed to an open marriage, albeit one that was scarcely egalitarian, and she later elected to leave that marriage at a time when polite New Zealand society frowned upon divorce. Having been forced into independence at a very early age, she was tremendously self-reliant, and, later, adventurous. She never allowed that sexism might have got in the way of her having a full-time career as a composer (“You had to fight hard to get heard, whoever you were”), but was denied valuable scholarships to study abroad because the committee thought her estranged husband should pay for her to go. Dorothy, undefeated, went to England anyway, paying for her studies by working as a school librarian. As we can read in her fascinating autobiography, Dorothy never let anything stop her.

Dorothy was a spellbinding conversationalist, not least because she was so interested in other people of all ages, races and walks of life. She inspired adoration and confidences, and as we can read in her memoirs, she wove many other people’s stories into her own. (“I am a *world-famous raconteuse!*” she once cried indignantly after someone commented that perhaps she talked rather a lot.) I grew up listening to Dorothy’s famous stories. When I was a child, I took the one about Captain Doorly’s remarriage and Dorothy’s subsequent flight from the family home in my stride, since the idea of the

elegant, urbane Dorothy as a frightened child with a wicked stepmother seemed as “made-up” to me as the fairytales of Cinderella and Snow White. But now that I’m the mother of a small daughter, I find myself reading Dorothy’s memories of her childhood with horror. Her parents, Gerald and Ina Doorly, the people who were supposed to take care of her, quite often did not, or could not. Ina, on discovering that a local boy had molested the pre-adolescent Dorothy, handled the situation with what now seems like unbelievable ineptitude, filling her daughter with shame and self-reproach. When, shortly after Ina’s early death, Gerald married the appalling Bea Wildman, he more or less gave up his responsibilities as a parent. Despite his dashing public persona as Captain Doorly the Antarctic explorer, Gerald seems to have been a weak and easily manipulated character. Not only did he allow Bea to bully his sensitive daughter, but he did nothing to prevent Dorothy from running away from home to her sympathetic friends the Hendersons.

Gerald’s actions, or rather his inactions, effectively denied Dorothy the university education for which she was so well suited. In later life, she achieved great success as a mature student at Victoria University’s Music Department, but until then, life was her teacher. Though their marriage was often tempestuous, she credited Bill Freed with filling in gaps in her cultural education. Other “teachers” included her equally colourful cousin, Alison Grant, and her beloved stepfather-in-law, Jakob (Kuba) Scharf.

Dorothy herself was a magnificent teacher. When my brother, Charles, and I were quite little, she taught us her favourite games, canasta and euchre. I can still hear her talking about the cards as if they were people. “The Queen will do what she can, but I’m afraid she’s going to lose.” We never could learn to shuffle the cards as neatly as she did it.

Dorothy also coached us on our Shakespeare recitation and examined things we’d written, often completely rewriting them. Her granddaughter, our cousin Jenny Freed, recalled in her eulogy that Dorothy had written every one of her school English projects and music compositions. She bossed us around with equal parts annoyance and affection: “You *are* a snotty little bitch,” she told me on more than one occasion. But she also came to every recital I gave and listened attentively to my progress on the cello. “You can play that at my funeral,” she once said, as I laboured through the Sarabande of a Bach suite. In the end, I wasn’t at her funeral, so it had to be played on the church sound system instead.

When we were little, Charles and I had to share Dorothy with our parents, as evil little eavesdroppers on their grown-up conversations. But as we grew older and more independent, we started seeking out her company by ourselves. On the day Charles passed his driving licence test, he celebrated by taking himself to Dorothy’s house in Standen Street, Karori for an uninvited visit. If I was visiting a friend in the area, I also made a point of dropping in.

It was relatively rare to find the gregarious Dorothy alone, since her entertaining company tended to attract friends and admirers of all ages. Sometimes she was there playing Scrabble or cards with elderly Eastern European Jewish friends who, like most of the Freed family, had fled fascist Europe in the 1930s and 40s. Many of them were musicians, like Dorothy, and pioneers in New Zealand’s

cultural life. One old lady was very kind to Charles and me, giving us Instant Kiwi scratch cards and pinching our cheeks. “Hrumph,” said Dorothy, “I don’t think much of *her*. She cheats at Scrabble!” Another time it was Geoffrey Potocki de Montalk, a New Zealand poet and eccentric who insisted that he was a member of the Polish royal family. Dorothy, who loved name-dropping, was heard more than once to complain “I’ve just had lunch with the uncrowned king of Poland. My dear, what a *bore!*” She also had a succession of lodgers and young women who helped her with the housework after her eyesight started to weaken. All of them adored her for her rare gift of being able to make everyone she met feel interesting and important. Once we arrived to find the current cleaner, a young Maori woman, teaching Dorothy how to make mayonnaise. “There’s nothing this girl can’t do!” exclaimed Dorothy. The woman beamed with shy pride. After she’d gone, Dorothy explained that she’d left school with no qualifications and was embarrassed about it, suffering badly from low self-confidence. No doubt Dorothy, whose own schooldays had been cut short by her stepmother’s machinations, greatly sympathized.

When we arrived at Standen Street, we’d typically find Dorothy attending to her garden, either the perilously steep lawn in front of the house, the scarlet geraniums in terracotta pots, or the damp, fern-filled area behind, which backed onto the Karori Cemetery. On sunny days, she sat outside in a deck chair—even a few brushes with skin cancer didn’t dim her love of sunbathing. She always seemed delighted to see us, ushering us inside the house to her drawing room with the grand piano (a family heirloom now in the possession of my father) and the bamboo-patterned brown curtains, or to the creamy yellow kitchen with its antique appliances. She paid us the compliment of offering us grown-up coffee, which she brewed in a terrifying, hissing stovetop espresso pot that always seemed to be about to explode. Into this murky brew she dropped two or three of her artificial sweetener pills, the doctor having forbidden sugar since her diagnosis with diabetes in 1985. Afterwards, she’d offer to drive us home in her little Honda City. We always declined, claiming we loved to take the bus. Dorothy was an alarming driver—the accident chronicled in “Are You Alright, Love?” had been far from uncharacteristic. (“I don’t drive, I hurtle,” she crowed, gleefully convinced that she had a guardian angel protecting her from injury. I always wondered uneasily whether the angel also protected the other people on the road.)

It was on one of these occasions, when I was about sixteen, that Dorothy started telling me about her cousin Alison, she of the two lovers known as the Body and the Brain. Alison had, Dorothy explained, met the Brain outside the British Library during a freak rainstorm in the middle of summer. Alison’s soaked dress had become completely transparent, and the Brain had rescued her from this humiliation with the gentlemanly offer of his sports coat. A bookish, primly introverted teenager, I found this information wildly romantic. Noticing my reaction, Dorothy evidently decided that I was old enough to hear about the time she took the virginity of a seventeen-year-old boy who became New Zealand’s most celebrated poet. “My dear, it was the first time I had seen an uncircumcised penis,” she observed, enjoying my scandalized expression. Once I’d recovered some composure, I asked Dorothy why she had never asked the poet to write a text for one of the art songs for which she was famous. “Oh, he would have written ‘fuck’, and I couldn’t set that to music,” was her very proper reply. For all her bohemian

past, there was something eminently respectable about Mrs. Freed, the distinguished Karori librarian (“The *right end* of Karori,” she always pointed out).

Dorothy waited another year or so until I had left home for the University of Canterbury before she told me the story of her own defloration by the Belgian wool-merchant. She was visiting her daughter Anna in Christchurch, and wanted to come to my cold little flat on Puriri Street to see how the “snotty little bitch” was doing. I was aware that by speaking to me candidly about her coming-of-age, she was inviting me to share a tale of my own, but I was reticent, less afraid of her reporting the information back to my mother than I was of her finding it tawdrily quotidian. All work and almost no play had, I thought sulkily, made me a dull girl. What I didn’t realize was that Dorothy didn’t find anyone dull: her particular genius was to turn a commonplace incident into a vivid narrative. Some kind of transformative process appeared to occur between an event and her retelling of it, in which her mind edited out the boring bits and replaced them with dramatic asides (“Horrors piled on horrors!” “Like hell!” “My *dear!* The *end!*”).

I tried to make up for my sullenness in my letters to her. Our correspondence started during my student days at Canterbury, and continued after my departure for postgraduate studies in London. I still have the treasured bundle of blue Aerogrammes, some of them haphazardly typewritten, others in her bold, rounded, backwards-sloping handwriting. She distracted me from my homesickness by telling me about a 900-year-old church in the City of London with which she had been much enamoured. She couldn’t remember where it was or what it was called, but “you *must* try to find it.” She sent me a ten-pound note at Christmas with an apology that it was “a bit measly...I’m broke this year.” (In 1999, ten pounds could cover two weeks’ worth of groceries for a single, reasonably frugal person—so it wasn’t measly at all!) She exhorted me to meet my cousin Jenny in London, because she wanted those she loved to love each other. Eager to impress her, I wrote back with a few embroidered tales of my exploits, including a flirtation I’d had with a Russian composer. “I don’t quite believe Miranda’s wild stories,” she wrote to Jenny, but her reply to me was hilarious and utterly typical of her: “Russian men love the wonderful smell of women’s armpits. You should try not wearing deodorant.” Knowing full well that this was a thing this buttoned-up 20-year-old would never do!

I think I knew when I left for London that I would never see Dorothy again. She had a heart condition, and the specialist told her that she could go at any time unless she had an operation that might prolong her life for another year or two. Dorothy wasn’t interested in having her chest cracked open to buy her more time. She was becoming increasingly frustrated with the failing eyesight that prevented her from reading and playing the piano, her two greatest pleasures. The night before I was to leave, my parents and I went to her house for dinner, along with Dorothy’s daughter Jane. It was a painful evening. Dorothy overcooked the lamb, and on her way from the kitchen to the dining room with the ashet, she tripped on the Persian carpet, which she couldn’t see. The carved meat went flying. We scooped it all up as best we could, but Dorothy was mortified. “What’s the point in living like this?” she cried in a voice I’d never heard before. We chewed our way miserably through dinner. I kept thinking of all the things I’d wanted to ask her and tell her that now I couldn’t. At the end of the evening, my father

took a photograph of her and me on the chaise longue in the dining room, but it came out badly and I never had it framed.

On the morning of my departure, I had to take the bus into town to get something, probably anti-jetlag pills, and on my way home, I saw that Dorothy's car was parked in our street. She climbed out, smiling insouciantly as if her frustrated outburst of the previous evening had never happened. "I meant to buy something for you and I forgot," she told me, thrusting a plastic-wrapped package into my hands. "There are these wonderful inflatable neck pillows that you can wear on the plane so that you can get a decent sleep sitting up." I had never been on a long-haul flight, but Dorothy had been on lots and knew how it was done. Good old Dorothy! I wanted to hug and hug and hug her, but all she did was squeeze my hand and say "Well, cheerio then," get into her car, and hurtle off towards Evans Bay Road.

I got the news Dorothy had died early in the morning on the first of April, 2000. Unlike Dorothy, for whom loss and renunciation were familiar shadows, I had never experienced the death of someone I truly loved. From her death, I learned this pain. That night and on many terrible nights afterwards, I went to bed clutching the inflatable neck pillow, the only thing I'd brought that she'd given me. One night it got some kind of puncture and wouldn't inflate any more, but I held it against my face anyway.

A few months later, almost by accident, I found the church Dorothy had mentioned in the letter. On my way to the Barbican Centre for a concert, I saw some signs pointing to "Church of St. Bartholomew the Great, A.D. 1143." "That must be it," I thought, and followed the signs. It took me a while, because none of them pointed in the right direction. Hidden away in an obscure courtyard in the middle of a hospital's grounds, St. Bartholomew the Great (as opposed to the nearby St. Bartholomew the Less, for which I felt very sorry) had somehow evaded the Great Fire of London and the bombs of the Second World War. Shakespeare himself might have been in there. The interior walls were dark black, discoloured no doubt by the accumulated grime of hundreds of years. Just as Dorothy had described in her letter! For the first time since March 31<sup>st</sup>, I found myself grinning. "Hello, Dorothy," I said.



Dorothy Freed, Gillian Bibby, and Miranda Wilson in the 1980s