

Free
to a
Good Home

*with room
for improvement*

JULES TORTI

DAGGER EDITIONS

Praise for *Free to a Good Home*

“Jules Torti takes you on a wild spin of a joy ride through her life as she looks for a place to call home.”

—LAURIE GOUGH, author of *Kiss the Sunset Pig*,
Kite Strings of the Southern Cross and *Stolen Child*

“A walker, a talker and one helluva writer. An avid explorer of this flawed and fabulous world, a fearless and hilarious examiner of the heart’s mysteries, Jules Torti is a brilliant dynamo who reminds us that the optimism of youth and the courage to be true to oneself are shining examples of how to live large, go big *and* find a forever home and true love. Unless you are a terminally timid wannabe writer with envy issues or a judgey prune with a pickle up your bum, you’ll love this wonderful book!”

—CAROLINE WOODWARD, author of *Singing Away the Dark* and
Light Years: Memoir of a Modern Lighthouse Keeper

“As a touring musician, I thought I had a flurry of road stories to tell, but Jules must have lived five lives before she was twenty-nine to have experienced all this so far. Her story is one that will resonate with anyone with the taste for travel but a longing for home. Wherever and whomever that may be.”

—LISA MACISAAC, Madison Violet

“A must read for anyone wanting to say *Yes!* to life.

In *Free to a Good Home*, Jules Torti tells the tall story of her life, her work with chimps at the Jane Goodall Institute and in the Congo, and her pursuit for a perfect home and partner. Her chapters on Africa will resonate with anyone in love with the continent or travel. Torti brilliantly captures the sights, sounds and tastes of Uganda and readers will be moved by the personalities, and sometimes heartbreaking pasts, of these unforgettable chimps.”

—TERESA O’KANE, author of *Safari Jema: A Journey of Love and Adventure from Casablanca to Cape Town*



Foreword *by Jann Arden*

JULES TORTI HAS A MUCH BETTER memory than I do. She can recall our very first shreds of correspondence like it was yesterday. It's all pretty vague to me, the dates and the places, the starts and stops of all the wonderful words that have flown between us these past...well, it's seeping well into the second decade as I write this.

What I do remember, vividly, is Jules herself. The impact her meanderings had on my heart and mind. She never ceased to amaze, entertain and dazzle me with her tall but very true tales about where in the heck she was and what in the heck she was seeing, feeling, eating, drinking and dreaming. I was always transported through time and space, finding myself sitting right beside her as I pored over her letters. I was dumbfounded by the incredible vulnerability she showed and how completely transparent she was with her heart and soul.

I loved her writing. I did from the very beginning. And I love this book.

Free to a Good Home, for me, is the absolute best part of Jules Torti. This book is so damn funny and so damn real. Her descriptions of the people she knows well, or even the ones who are but brief encounters, always reel you in. The places she has travelled to come to life in a way that I've never quite experienced before in the written word. Quirky comes to mind—original, one of a kind. Jules is—well, Jules. She somehow manages to describe things in an unexpected fashion and in a language that is truly original and welcoming.

I want to jump into this book every few pages and wander around with a flashlight just to get a better look. I WANT to be THERE.

Her recurring theme of home resonates with me at every turn. I have travelled all my life with my work, and my idea of home has changed throughout the years—as many times as my hairstyles. Jules's search for the meaning of home and the value of home and the essence of home stretches my heart out into places I've not yet been. We spend our lives looking for whatever that is, and I think eventually we all realize that it's not a place at all, but a state of mind.

Free to a Good Home is one of those books you want to eat. You want to crawl inside of it and live there and not come out for weeks on end. I know you'll enjoy it as much as I did, and if you don't, well, I don't think we could ever be friends.

Home is...well, you'll figure out just like Jules did, and you'll keep figuring it out for the rest of your life.



7.

Bohemian Rhapsody

I HAD WANTED TO LIVE somewhere different, where I didn't know a soul, and I could write about it all. Embracing my dumpster-diving lifestyle, I adopted an appropriate "uniform," giving up on my hippie haute couture. In a nearby dumpster, I found a pair of bleached-out Levi's jeans with a big Budweiser patch sewn in the crotch. Awesome. Shannon gave me one of her old Indian motorcycle T-shirts, and I found a new-to-me pair of nine-hole scuffed army boots. I was as gay as could be.

When I moved to Vancouver, I thought a new address and new province also warranted a new handle. I tried "J.T." on for size. (A high school bud called me this.) Nobody else really picked up on it, but I wanted it to catch. How did k.d. pull it off? In lower case, no less! I was heavily into J.D. Salinger at this point too, so initials were necessary, as I was a writer and making my mark at *Cockroach*. Shannon saw through the transparency of my name immediately. On the first day I met her in the backyard, she said flatly,

“J.T.? What’s your real name?” She pressed until I caved, and I was never J.T. again with her. It was a cornball thing to do, but I was really working that Douglas Coupland theory that everything was waiting to be written. Not even rewritten, just written for the first time. *Choose Your Own Adventure*: blank page, not yet numbered.

Shannon proved my fraudulence a few times, not with a mean intention—more so out of her sage experience with strife. When she let me tag along to a sweat lodge with her, it became clear that I was some eighteen-year-old rather privileged schmuck, dumpster diving for fun, sitting in a sweat lodge with a group of women who were faced with real demons, addictions and loss. I was shiny and unscathed. It was a precious moment for me, being invited to that sweat lodge. Shannon would become my “older sister” in a sense—free to tell me where and when I was going wrong and being a dork. On the flip side, she guided me to a place she had already discovered years ago and took me to my first gay bar, the Lotus Club. Shannon introduced me to real live gays, lent me her book of poetry by Chrystos and asked me, kindly, to keep my hand out of my pants while I read it. When I returned it (after two engrossed sessions of reading and extracurricular activity), we exchanged knowing smiles.

I was embarrassed to admit to Shannon, however, that I had sold dream catchers in high school as part of a fundraiser for a Native Club trip to Albuquerque, New Mexico. When I did eventually confess to the dream catcher fundraiser, she was disappointed in me. She gave me a sharp elbow and a singsong “J.T.” whenever I came off as a phony. And selling dream catchers as a white person? Definitely phony.

Still, she introduced me to her pack of friends at the Lotus, a warehouse where they had lesbian dances every Friday. It was like I had to earn my stripes with Shannon, and I was willing.

We drank Okanagan pear ciders and took in the crowd. Although I was taking it all in, in huge gulps, I played it cool with Shannon at my side, and I expressed interest in a woman with kinky hair and a laugh that boomed over the music. She was all muscle; her white T-shirt was tucked into her Levi's and revealed dedication to some kind of physical discipline. Her skin was like coffee with just enough cream. She smoked, which should have been a deterrent, but she could pull it off—and she looked dead sexy exhaling with an eye on the thumping room. Shannon said her name was Cherry and she was a carpenter or something. And Shannon assured me, “She’ll never be interested in you. You’re just a pup.”

Shannon turned her attention to Angelina, a femme she’d been chasing for months, who wore spurs on her cowboy boots. I was left nursing the last of my cider and decided to chat up this Cherry. I said really doorknob things like, “If you married Don Cherry, you’d be Cherry Cherry. Or, if you married right fielder Darryl Strawberry, you’d be Cherry Strawberry.” Yeah, pathetic! But Cherry made eye contact, drank her Bud and politely blew smoke over my head.

“You’re Shannon’s roommate?” she asked me.

“Yeah. Shannon says you’d never sleep with me because I’m just some young pup.”

Cherry smiled. “Well, Shannon doesn’t know everything.”

We obviously talked longer than that, but I have no idea about what. Salt-N-Pepa were drowning out most of our yelled words to each other, which was probably a good thing for me and my conversation starters. Cherry bought me a Bud, and I took that as a good sign. I was ready for anything. Angelina and her spurs left the bar early, Shannon pouted, and I told Shannon I was going home with Cherry, for sure. Shannon didn’t believe it (nor did I), but it happened.

In her grass-green Fiat Spider with the top down, Cherry and I cruised through Vancouver's East Side. The September air was clean and electric, but the car was so tiny I felt like there wasn't enough space for my beating heart. Her hand slid between my legs, and I reciprocated. We drank more beer at her house, a spartan rental with creaky wood floors and limited decor. I didn't care—I wasn't there for decor. Her cat Jade had giant chartreuse eyes that followed my every move. Cherry put on groovy mood music, just like they do in the movies (Natalie Merchant, I think?). We picked the labels off of our bottles and shared sloppy kisses, with the cat's tail curling under our chins.

She had been up since six that morning and was ready for the sack. I had been ready for the sack for years! I think I borrowed her toothbrush, or maybe we didn't even bother with teeth brushing at all. Her lips and hips were brushing up against mine instead. Cherry's mattress was on the floor, and our doubly smoky bar clothes were piled in a quick heap. I felt her up and down, bones, skin, kinky hair—it was happening. I had moved from a dormant gay to *Yes I Am!* This was better than a silly high school diploma; I had graduated into a real, practicing lesbian. (I won't expand on the details, because my parents will be reading this and, while I know "they" say "Dance like nobody is watching," you can fill in the dance moves from here.)

Cherry and I didn't become an item. This was okay with me, though; a one-night heavy-petting session fulfilled our needs. After half a dozen beers, sure, we were connected, but I didn't want to be with a smoker on a daily basis. I was undeniably grateful for that one smouldering night, and every time I saw Cherry at the Lotus (where she was a fixture), I'd quiver a little, remembering those bony hips and her experienced tongue. Shannon didn't let me hear the end of it, and I razzed her back about her girl with spurs.

I was authentic now, walking around the Lotus with some chutzpah. I lived for the weekends and became a fixture myself. During the week, I frequented Little Sister's Book & Art Emporium (the lesbian bookstore) on Davie, hoping to find a woman or a good book to distract me.

Work at *Cockroach* didn't exactly fill my days. I had two assigned stories to research, one of which involved collaboration with Severn Suzuki, David Suzuki's daughter. It was an article on body image and eating disorders, and I needed Barbie dolls for photos. Enter Severn. She was the only kid any of us knew who had a Barbie collection we could use for photo ops. (My Spirograph moment here was interviewing her dad for *Harrowsmith* magazine in Toronto twenty-four years later and recounting this Barbie connection to Dr. Suzuki during my hurried fifteen-minute time slot with him at his downtown institute.)

My other groundbreaking *Cockroach* story was on the bear bile industry and underground Asian markets for such aphrodisiacs. Big, weighty stuff. I'd spent a few weeks sitting around the *Cockroach* headquarters, mostly starry-eyed that it was all happening. This was my life! I was working in Vancouver, as a journalist, just like I said I would. The *Cockroach* office (production, distribution, circulation desk, flop zone) was housed in an old, siding-clad two-storey near the beach, smack dab in the groovy Kitsilano 'hood. I didn't have much of a skill set to offer, beyond writing and doodling. When my idle days moved from starry-eyed enthusiasm to the height of boredom, I announced that I was going to go to the library to conduct research and would report back. Sam shrugged and said I could come and go as I pleased.

En route to the library, I was sidetracked by a lineup for a Vancouver International Film Fest matinee. Research was

postponed—hey, I was freelance. Later that day I blew seventy-five dollars on a purple Mountain Equipment Co-op jacket (another Vancouver rite of passage) to endure the soggy days. I was really making it—job, jacket, interest in sophisticated films. When I returned to work the next day, Sam asked if a \$350 a month wage was acceptable. I was ecstatic! I had received paycheques before, but this was different. I was doing exactly what I had wanted: I was a struggling writer, sleeping on a couch with a papier mâché penis within reach.

Luckily my parents and grandmothers were sending regular care packages as though I were at summer camp. (Most days, I felt like I was.) The packages contained boxes of tea, tins of International Café powdered coffees—always French Vanilla—and various treats. Sometimes they'd contain a cheque for fifty dollars for a birthday or a twenty-dollar bill. This rounded out my *Cockroach* salary perfectly. Initially. I soon learned that when you earn \$350 and your rent is \$350 or \$425 (because someone didn't pony up or moved out at the last minute), \$1,000 is really chump change.

I became keenly aware that while my roommates were also living the dream and pursuing creative lives, they were also flat broke. They shared beds, not just bedrooms, in order to save money. As an employed BMX stunt biker, Steve survived on jars of greasy oolichan from home. (Also known as candlefish, these fish contain so much grease that they can be burned like candles when dried. Regrettably, Steve and I never shared a candlefish-lit dinner.)

A newer roomie, Rick, was on a student budget, with even skinnier cheques from his band council in Stoney Nation, Alberta. He was attending the Emily Carr University of Art and Design, and we somehow ended up sharing a room—mostly because he had a mattress, and I was happy to upgrade from the couch. Trust me—this was

a platonic move. Rick was gayer than Liberace. Also sharing our eight-by-eight-foot room were Rick's "kids," Sushi and Cypress. Sushi was the most cross-eyed Siamese I had ever seen. Cypress was a gorgeous longhair who took to sleeping in one of Rick's shoeboxes.

Our house was mostly empty during the day, until the magazine ceased production and I no longer had to report to work by my goal time of noon(ish). I took "Come and go as you please" at face value—and then the magazine itself did the same, after the bank account became empty and there was no new grant money. This was just a few months after I'd started. What followed was an odd, soul-satisfying but suspended time of true unemployment that I viewed as a necessary time for exploration, immersion and research of some sort. My new occupation was walking, all day long. I walked around the verdant University Endowment Lands in woods that sounded like construction sites because of all the pileated woodpecker activity. Everything was triple-sized compared to the boreal forests in Ontario, from the umbrella ferns to the fat banana slugs and mile-high Douglas firs. It was the kind of place you expected Ewoks to emerge from. I rewarded myself with toasted Montreal-style garlic bagels from Siegel's or a pricey slice of veggie "Aphrodite" at the Flying Wedge, a pizza joint owned by three University of British Columbia art grads. I walked around the Seawall with briny sea in my nose, circling the fabled Stanley Park countless times. I walked seedy Granville Street with all its dumps and dives and landed a one-day job selling silver rings with skull heads and howling wolves on them. I didn't pan out as a vendor. My first sale was accidentally and grossly underpriced and whatever income I was supposed to make for the day was owed back to the guy who owned the stall.

I walked Davie Street, of course. This was the whole point of transplanting myself out west—to find the big missing chunk that

I couldn't pinpoint. It was just like the documentary I'd seen back in Brantford, complete with flapping rainbow flags, hookers and all the stereotypical buff guys with little dogs and baseball teams of lesbians drinking beer. Dax would later inform me that this was called "cruising," not walking.

I walked to (clothing optional) Wreck Beach with a copy of Tom Robbins's *Still Life with Woodpecker*. During the days that followed, I went back to the beach with *Jitterbug Perfume*, *Skinny Legs and All* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. Although I didn't opt out of all my clothes, I took it all in like a sponge. This was everything my sheltered self had imagined as gay utopia. There was a permanent skunky haze in the air, along with tequila shots, moose meat burgers and banana muffins.

One of the first letters my mom sent me in Vancouver was her assurance that she understood my need to get away. She had read a book about "emotional geography" and knew I was keen to explore mine. Of course, she would have preferred me carrying out this exploration closer to home, but it was better than me walking across Canada or joining that cult planting trees in California. Or baking ciabattas in Australia.

I was designing my own university experience, field trips and curricula. The program included these electives, in no particular order:

- Clayoquot Sound Civil Disobedience
- Dumpster Diving
- The Philosophy behind Clothing-Optional Beaches
- How to Make Stuff out of Found Feathers and Sand Dollars and Spend All Day Doing It
- The Literature of Robbins and Salinger
- The Deep Ecology of Vargas Island, BC (where a roomie

named Liz and I spent a week eating wet rice cakes and watching orcas, thanks to a guy named Gus who dropped us off for ten bucks and came back a week later to pick us up)

• *How to Live on Nothing*

Rick soon joined me in my roaming. He had dropped out of his program at Emily Carr, frustrated and overwhelmed by the demands, but he continued to paint in his own time. We built roaring fires with scraps of wood from nearby construction sites. When our wood source became scarce, we turned the oven on to broil and heated the kitchen that way. Was hydro included in the rent? Must have been. Fleetwood Mac was a constant. Rick smoked, he painted, I made stuff out of sand dollars (which has its limits, as you can imagine). He made his half-dozen hot dogs and we drank care-package powdered coffee further sweetened with our creative/semi-broke budget idea: melted cinnamon hearts in lieu of sugar.

Then one day, Daniel's penis was gone. When *Cockroach* fizzled, he moved back to Ottawa with Liz and Toumbi. An architect from Guelph (also named Rick) moved in for less than a month. Rick (my Rick, who I shared a room and shoebox cat with) invited his cousin Curtis to move in. And then Dan
(the movie extra/perogy fiend) moved out, and Alex from Quebec moved in with "Replay." The dog's name was really Ripley, but with Alex's accent, we thought it was Replay. I'm probably missing a few roomies in the mix there. It was a true revolving door.

To boot, the little house was haunted, and the cats and dog were well aware of this. They would "watch"

Remember that classic Edward Packard *Choose Your Own Adventure* series? As the reader, you had all the power of the book's protagonist and determined the character's actions and outcome. Over and over. The books were marvellous—you could flip to any page of your choosing and end every story differently. At age eighteen, I had become that *Choose Your Own Adventure* main character. •

something move about the room, fur all hacked up. Replay would snarl while the cats would get their haunches up, as we did. I felt like a jittery horror film character trapped in one of those tingly scenes with a pounding heart in surround sound. The furniture in our house would start moving around spontaneously and almost always at night. Eventually, we became accustomed to this other-worldly disruption—but Shannon still wanted someone to “clean” our house. Not Molly Maid-style: our house needed to be cleansed with a smudging ceremony (Shannon was Cree, while Rick and Curtis were both Blackfoot), and all the mirrors in the house were covered. There was talk of someone being murdered upstairs in the 1940s. We were told to leave an offering outside the back door—fruit, bread, tobacco—whatever we deemed suitable.

It should come as no surprise that keeping tabs on ghosts and reading all of Tom Robbins’s books didn’t amount to any sort of income. So I did puppet shows at a local nature centre, but that didn’t pay either. I thought about tree planting in northern BC, but who could I meet in the woods? I made another cinnamon-heart-sweetened coffee instead and pressed Play on Fleetwood Mac’s “Everywhere.” I was truly everywhere and all over the map again.

I applied to Canada World Youth for a nine-month exchange program to a developing country. I had met two guys who were in the program. Half of the exchange was spent doing meaningful volunteer work in Canada (I was really good at doing things for free) and the other half in a developing country such as Ecuador, digging pit toilets or wells. On the selection weekend, a hundred other candidates and I made a communal lunch of stir-fry with bok choy (which I’d never seen or heard of), demonstrating our co-operative skills and talking about issues that might arise in a developing country. There was a hot debate over how the queer

candidates would react to an anti-gay parade in our host country. I was a little too rigid in my gayness and was willing to overshadow the religion, beliefs and friendship of my host family in Ecuador, or wherever, for my cause and equality. I felt safe and gay in Canada, and I was teenybopper unaware of the tragic consequences that gender preference caused in other countries. There was no negotiating my loud and proud stance. And no, I wouldn't remove my nose ring or stop wearing my camouflage pants if either were deemed offensive to the host family. I wasn't that "Yes, man!" Canada World Youth was looking for. Other candidates proved they would be better at digging pit toilets in Cuenca or Guayaquil than me. So I walked out, my nose-ringed head held high, naively waving my invisible rainbow flag.

I tried to hold my head even higher when I returned home to visit my family nine months later. Especially when Ivan, my landlord in Vancouver, called my parents to say that he was sorry, but he was evicting me and all my misfit roomies. Ivan was kind enough to send my worldly belongings back "home" in one single box: my Crayola pencil crayons, my sketchbook, some English Bay sand dollars and, accidentally, a pair of Rick's Nikes.

My Bohemian Rhapsody had come to an end—but with a Cherry on top.