Past-it Notes

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Extract

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Foreword

It has been nine years since publisher Jeremy Robson and I have brought out a book. Before that I tended to write one every three or four years by combining my regular back page articles from *Good Housekeeping* with a retrospective flip through the intervening work/family/general whinge. A few snaps from the shows, rather too many painful puns, a tortuous title, a sleepless last-minute choice of cover photo and, to the accompaniment of the pop of a few bottles of pop, we'd be on the rocky road to retail. *Lip Reading* was the sixth book of this kind and a quick glance at the cover tells me it was billed in paperback as 'The number one best seller' and who am I to argue with a printed brag?

Blithely, I would then survive the cheerful indifference of Terry Wogan – or the current expletive-strewn model of Sir Tel – and several mud-locked literary festivals later, after signing and smiling fixedly at the 90th person to say 'I bet your wrist gets tired, doesn't it?' I would sign off, go back to the day job, and forget about the whole pantomime until Jeremy rang to say: 'It's number eleven in *The Bookmaker* top ten' or 'There's a lot of competition out there but you're holding your own' or 'Nice weather, isn't it . . . how are the kids?'.

Six years ago, though, something happened which stopped me writing my wry 'everything happens to me' columns. Quite suddenly everything *did* happen to me. And although we laughed through the crisis, sometimes fit to bust, to be honest it wasn't always funny. Between 2004 and 2007 I lost my mother, Zelma, my muse, in a morning, and nursed my husband, my rock of ages, from sickness through remission to the end.

Then came numbness. To relieve it, I finished a book of comic verse called *The Gibbon's in Decline but the Horse is Stable* to raise money for Myeloma UK, completed Jack's autobiography, *By Jack Rosenthal*, and was hypnotised by Paul McKenna not to cry in public whilst talking about them. It worked a treat until on Breakfast TV Fern Britton threw me a googly in the form of 'Do you still hear Jack's voice around the house?', and my subconscious crumpled and took me with it.

In the next three years, I returned to work in children's TV, ventured into pantomime at the Old Vic, did six months in a West End play, took my first holiday alone to a Greek island, wrote a weekly column for the *Guardian* newspaper, saw my son Adam marry his childhood sweetheart

in Mayfair, moved, after thirty years, from a house on a hill in north London to a lower ground flat in the Paddington Basin, and fell in and out of a troubling and somewhat public love affair. Who had time to write? Who knew where there was any paper which wasn't damp?

I'd always been able to make mountains out of molehills. Now the Himalayas had sprung up outside my picket fence and I didn't have the right boots. I knew grief from the inside. I knew what widow stood for and how it made one feel – it even gave me a fresh perspective on Widow Twanky. I wasn't lonely. Lord knows, I could sometimes use a drop of being alone – this apartment teems with Maureen's little female helpers, including the bitch in my life, Diva the beauteous Basenji. The only male about the house is Warren, the apricot velvet rabbit who inhabits the central courtyard of the flat, and inhibited two and a half grand's worth of plants and greets me each morning from a standing position, leaning one elbow on the French windows like Road Runner, pointedly tapping his watch.

I was a bit confused about the rest of my life. Les the Shaman, who came to see me at the behest of Rosie, my secretary, said I must just be patient . . . oh, and I should invoke the spirit of Frog when I bathe at night. I think that was his pagan way of telling me that a girl has to kiss a lot of frogs before her second prince comes along. Apparently this is the year when I'll normalise. I hope he's right. The work is coming in – a Chekhov play, a sit-com, an exciting documentary – taking a piano to as near as I can get to Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi – if it happens. Soon folk will maybe stop saying 'Are you still doing it?' as I walk track-suited and pinched-faced round the park with pockets full of pooh bags and corned beef, occasionally – which is not a good thing – getting the two confused.

This saturated ('still, it's good for the gardens') summer Adam and I travelled to Preston, Lancashire, to give the first Jack Rosenthal Award for screenwriting to a young graduate. These ceremonies always move me by the sheer overwhelming presence of so many hope-filled lads and lasses. I love the way you can tell a student's character from the way they traverse the six yards between mounting the stage and shaking the hand of the Chancellor. The cries of 'Yeah, go Louise/Tom!' for the popular ones and the filled silences for the ones who follow the popular ones. The trademark rebellion shoes and the graceless trudge they enforce. The open-faced, uncool choir and the hot fanfare of trumpets. Frankly, I'm in need of a hypnosis top-up before I step up onto the dais. On this occasion the eulogy about Jack's work was eloquent and I could feel the lump rising in my throat and the tell-tale signs of wobble attending my lips. I spoke sternly to myself in a low, internal growl – 'Stop it! *Stoppit*!' – but my self wasn't listening and as I heard my name announced, my eyes

were a blur and I hadn't got a thought in my head other than 'Please don't let me blub in front of several hundred graduates and their Mums and Dads and Aunties.'

I stood blinking and breathing for just long enough to be a worry, then, taking the lectern stand I said in tremulous but trumpet-like tones: 'We all of us, in this room, have one thing in common.' I paused again. 'We none of us have the slightest idea what I'm going to say next.'

There was a delayed laugh which I used to steady myself, then I proceeded loudly and dramatically (mostly in order to harness the emotions coursing through me) to give the most rousing address I've ever given – maybe *anyone's* ever given, including Henry IV, both parts. Afterwards, when I took my seat, my face was scarlet – as I might add was the face of the 'signing for the deaf' presenter. My ceremonial robes were sliding off me and the blood was pounding so hard in my veins that I could hear it.

In short, it's not over yet. I'm still the same woman who was shaped by my life alongside Jack Rosenthal, and I'm still being influenced by his memory four years after his death. He peppers my thoughts and my conversation and it is not easy, nor will it ever be, to have a relationship with another man which doesn't somehow include him. I'm trying though, and slowly and softly, with the help of a real gentleman, I might just be getting there.

This book is therefore a compilation of the best of the old Maureen and some of the current working model. There's nothing in it that hasn't actually happened, although people often tell me they laughed like a canned audience when reading one of my books but didn't believe a word of it. When someone asked me if I would give my permission for them to write a biography I hooted and told them there was absolutely nothing that had happened to me which hadn't already been milked to a peaceful death. Of course there is, but that's between me and my diary and I haven't kept one of those since I got *Bunty* on a Thursday and was waiting for my braces to come off and my breasts to come up.

Talking of which, it goes without saying that Jordan, aka Katie Price, *actually* wrote this book and Lynne Truss checked the punctuation. I've left out, after some consideration, the magical realism, the abused childhood – especially the part where I was kept in a tin of Tuxon shoe polish (oxtail hue) for a week – and my great-grandmother's recipe for tempura schmaltz-herring in a lokshen velouté.

I trust most of my readers are old enough to have forgotten they have read some chapters before, in another life, whilst waiting for the podiatrist to remove the hard skin from their fallen arches. I trust, too, that they will find the new material controversial enough to alert their fellow residents

to picket individual branches of Waterstone's to remove this book immediately from its position in 'Obscure Jewish Humour' and place it in the front window under a banner saying 'Buy *Past-it Notes* and get all you can eat, FREE, at any Turks and Caicos bistrasserie of your choice!'

I would like to dedicate this comp-elation to my friend Jeremy Robson of JR Books. It has been a long and lovely journey. PS You were right not to let me have one past-it note which read: 'After fifty, only wear plum lipstick if you actually *want* your lips to resemble an anus.'

My thanks go to *Good Housekeeping* and *The Guardian* for the sneak previews. To Liz Rose for patient optimism in the face of impatient procrastination and Lesley Wilson for always sounding so cheery.

Thanks to Rosie Heaphy, my secretary, and Natalie Percy in to whom the words 'Has anybody seen my . . .?' strike mortal terror; and to Adam, Taina and Amy for the unconditional love.

Band Box

I awoke to the sound of the *Today* programme where an elderly brass band player from Derby was telling Sarah Montague that his beloved band, which he had joined in 1947, was about to be . . . disbanded. In desperation he'd appealed for help from the local paper, which ran the story. It was taken up by local television and soon the band, which had been whittled down by time and circumstance to two instrumentalists, received eleven young applicants. Thirteen players to date, then. Lucky for some.

By now, it was two minutes to nine, so Sarah rapidly announced the names of *Today*'s editors and told listeners that the re-formed band would play us out. I expected them to sound like a braking milk float. Instead, the first notes of those bright, yearning horns made tears hurtle from my eyes to the pillow. I phoned my daughter, who is too young to be a Radio 4 listener but does it to keep me company, fully expecting her, too, to be in mid-blub.

Hearing my adenoidal tones she said, worriedly, 'Are you alright, Mod?

I asked her if she'd been listening to the brass band. She hadn't and, what's more, she wasn't too sure that she believed my rationale of my early morning lachrimosity.

'Are you really alright?' she enquired. 'Honestly?'

'Yes, I'm fine, it was just that sound,' I warbled snottily.

'No, but are you OK though, *really*?' she persisted. 'You're not depressed are you? Because I had this really *awful* dream about you.'

'Oh, darling, I'm so sorry. What was it?'

'Well, I dreamt you were really unhappy. I mean really *really* unhappy.'

'Oh, darling. Well, I'm not, it was just the brass b . . .'

'No, but you *were* in the dream,' she insisted. 'I mean, you were *soooo* unhappy – and I was so unbelievably worried that I turned turquoise.'

There are many stories in *The Naked City*. This has been one of them. And if you're old enough to remember that reference then you're probably wearing half-glasses to read this and take half an aspirin a day to keep everything thinned out. I am being enigmatic in order to raise several queries:

a) Is it a fact that all first-born children are worriers and is it because we don't have a clue how to cope with them when we bring them

home from the hospital? So that what they read on our faces is worry, which makes them feel there is something *worrying* about them?

b) Isn't it true that journalists get a very bad press in spite of the fact that, just occasionally, they change people's lives for the better?

c) Isn't it true that music has power to move us in a way that cuts through reason and by-passes joined-up thought?

I'll deal with the answers to my questions in order, shall I?

a) Am I concerned about the state of mind of my anxious first-born? Not really. She's pure gold to me and in fairness, with a following wind and the right accessories, turquoise can be a stunning summer colour, though not necessarily for the skin.

b) Journalists, with the highest insurance risk – just below actors – are probably in the bottom league of global popularity stakes, but though I loathe their muck-raking as much as other members of my profession and the good citizens of Tunbridge Wells, I've seldom met one face to face whose company around a clinking table I haven't thoroughly enjoyed.

Which brings me to c):

When I set out for the Barbican and a jazz concert I knew little about except it was in celebration of the 80th birthdays of Cleo Laine and Johnny Dankworth, it was with a heavy heart and a heavier cold. I was expecting traffic, confusion and a late-comer's seat behind a pillar. Instead, the journey was a doddle, the parking and venue-finding likewise, and the concert – well, as I suggested, sometimes music is the only language where you can truly trust the words. The audience became one joyous body and I was the snapping finger on its right hand. Johnny might have looked his years when he came on stage but when he lifted his baton to conduct the London Symphony Orchestra and the jazz combo which included his son Alex on double bass, he became a lithe and springy adolescent.

I like to look at musicians. They seem to fill their skins. Their concentration and their lack of self-consciousness dazzle me, and of course I never get that 'I could have done it better' feeling. As for the Dame herself, splendid in a vibrant gown of – yes – turquoise, she moved me to a quiver with a song, new to me, called 'He was the one', and she and her velour vocals seem to improve like fine Muscat.

With Ken Wheeler skulking on with magic trumpet held in defence of his shyness, two feisty women on trombones, dynamic and dangerous horn players, and the LSO proving that with that kind of keenness 'crossing over' really can work, it brought me back to where I started. Top Brass.

Flat Spin

I suddenly live in Paddington. You might call it Bayswater or even Kensington Gardens if you really wanted to push your luck. After twenty-nine years of North London-living in Muswell Hill and a couple of childless years before that in leafy and liberal Hampstead, when the R word – as in responsibility – was not in our lexicon, I have crossed the house. I've become a West London resident. It feels like a divorce. But an amicable one.

Jack and I talked of moving into town for years and often scoured the Sunday papers for flats in Belsize Park and Maida Vale. Still North – after all, once a professional Northerner, always a professional Northerner – and once or twice we even checked one of them out before scurrying back contentedly to our roomy Edwardian house with its own roomy Edwardian garden. After his death it seemed important to stay where I was, to maintain some sort of security. Sometimes, as I turned into the drive after a spell away or even a night out I would fancy that he'd be there to open the door to shed light on me as I parked the car. One time I came back from a short trip and there were two welcoming sentinels on either side of the steps. They were pink hollyhocks, five foot high, which had forced their way through tiny cracks in the concrete. Such strength of purpose, such tenacity, made me smile and, feel oddly safe.

After eight months of dealing with the practicalities of bereavement, I took a job. It was a kids' series, called *The Fugitive*, well written, to be shot at Three Mile Studios in the East End of London, and my part was an old eco-warrior/former scientist, holed up for years in the woods, who befriends the young hero and helps him save the world from untold horror. To be honest, I think I did the whole thing in a daze. I was often tearful and occasionally in the world of the blurred and bewildered, but I got through the six-week shoot with my dignity intact and with a new colleague who would shape the next phase of my life.

Natalie (Nats) Percy was a spiky-haired kid – or so I thought, although she's actually Adam's age – who seemed to be in charge of props. She was short and square with a pretty, gamine face, bright green eyes and jeans cut well below the builder's plumb line. Occasionally she would bring a bag or a torch or a dog to my trailer, always cheerful and with a kind word or a cuppa. One day she, or someone on the set, told me that she was living

and sleeping in her van because the commute to her home in Rye was impossible. Later I found out that the home in Rye was upstairs in a pub and that she had been living off her wits since she was twelve. Without forward thinking of any kind, entirely on an instinct, one day I asked her if she wanted to take Amy's old room up in the attic for the duration of the film. She thought about it for a day and said, 'Yeah, that would be great.'

It was a daring proposition, but almost three years later she is still with me and both she and her business cards convey that she is The Angel in the Attic. She became an invaluable assistant. I gave her a home and a family – her parents had six marriages between them and none of them seemed to include her – and she gave me a pair of capable hands, care, foresight and practical assistance. She had her own drill, for heaven's sake! She could mend a computer, paint a wall, cook a Guinness and beef pie, get under a car with a bag of chisels and some Swarfega and make it go vroom-vroom.

She also found the flat I'm now living in, after months of trawling through property sites on the Internet.

'It's in Paddington,' she told me guardedly one evening as I came home from a long day of being a mouse in a voice-over studio. 'I know – I *know*, but you ought to see it . . . It's *well*-nice.'

'*Well*-nice?' I repeated. 'Paddington?' I repeated. 'Jack would turn in his grave. No way.'

'Alright, but it's massive and it's been all done up inside and it's in your price range . . . I've got it up on the screen, just have a look.'

'Pointless', I said. 'Thanks anyway, but I used to stay in Paddington years ago and it was an absolute dump . . . Where exactly is it?' She told me. 'That's where Annabel had her flat – top of an old building – good views – dodgy area . . . no, no, no . . . Is it a top floor?'

'Er, no, it's a lower ground.'

'That clinches it! Never!' I hooted. 'Dark and damp and dangerous when you go home late and it's raining and the steps are' – she slid some photos hot off the copier onto the table – 'always slippery. Besides,' I added, 'didn't that psychic in Birmingham tell me I should always live in a high place because my moods will . . .' I looked. 'My moods . . .' I looked again. The pictures showed light, airy, high-ceilinged room after room, arched dining area/kitchen, two walled courtyards, six French windows, guest suite, granny flat, fireplace, steam shower, entry-phone, wooden floors, marble floors, fancy kitchen – even an *ice dispenser*, for heaven's sake.

'Phone up,' I breathed. 'Get me a viewing.'

Forty-three years of living in London and I didn't actually know how to drive to Paddington. With Sat Nav's help I found the flat – took one look

at the glass shelves, underlit between hall and living room, and knew they were exactly the spot for Jack's sculptures. I put in my offer that evening. Paddington it was.

I had recently been to a painting evening at the Westbourne Studios so it had to be somewhere near there. The class was in a nightclub setting but one room off was reserved for Fig 108, a club for closet painters where acrylics and canvases were provided and you could paint till all hours of the night if you liked, with a glass of wine and a bowl of French fries by your easel. My paintings were a shocking revelation. I'd hung up my brush in 1965 after getting an E for 'A' level Art. Suddenly I was painting in authoritative fashion, throwing orange paint at the canvas for all the world like someone who knew what she was doing. Sponge and comb in hand I then started raking through the applied paint and to my delight seemed to uncover on the canvas things that were already under the paint. Sea creatures emerged, crocodiles crept out, weird and winding crustaceans crawled up from the depths. It was consuming.

Young people strolled by, taking respite from the raving outside in the club, and double-took.

'What's it meant to be?' they asked.

'F— knows,' I replied, brush and bit between teeth. They hurried on.

Finally the friend who had taken me to Fig 108 came over. 'Do you want to go on?' she asked, looking sideways in startled fashion at the Hieronymus Bosch landscape seeping out of my hand.

'Why? What's the time?'

'Er, two-thirty in the morning.'

It was a meditation and when I looked at it the next day, my hair stood up on end. I couldn't wait to get back and do another. Strangely, it never occurred to me to set up an easel at home. So back I went the following week and this time a labyrinthine jungle appeared in shades of dark green and violet. 'Annihilating all that's made/to a green thought in a green shade . . .' Why did that quote remind me of Jack? Next time, some months later, a lime-coloured landscape suddenly after four hours and ten minutes transmogrified itself into Burma and the Lady herself hovering over it. I was gobsmacked by it all. Clearly this was cheaper than a psychiatrist and did the same job.

Synchronistically, I was approached by a TV company to contribute a painting, along with six other amateurs, to the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy. They would pitch up on various dates of my theatre tour and film my fulminations. Armed with Diva, a dog-bed, a script, a suitcase, a painting kit and easel, I set off for Oxford. The weather was fine and the delightful Parsonage Hotel welcomed us, crew, canine and all, with gentle goodwill. Sadly, I couldn't paint when being watched. It came out all

wrong – self-conscious and lacking in the spontaneity which had so excited me. But my 'Four Seasons' painting was on celluloid now, and so I kept going at it, murdering it more and more after each show and sleeping fitfully amidst the smell of acrylic paint and dog.

By the time the day arrived when the crew came to film me loading the complete works into a cab and heading for the RA, 'The Four Seasons' was a disaster. Two of the sections, 'Summer' and 'Winter' were OK if you like hell horses with burning eyes and strange, shrouded, golden monk-like figures, but the other two were overlaid with bits of collage and spattered with paint, card and even bunched Kleenex. When I took the four paintings into Eastbourne Terrace to hail a cab, the driver leaned out and scratched his head like Sid James in *Taxi*.

'I want to take these to the Royal Academy,' I said.

He looked from me to the camera crew and back to the paintings and said, 'Are you *sure*?'

The Academy rejected my offerings, but was I down-hearted? No – not at all. I've auctioned the jungle for £250 to fund a new roof at the King's Head – yes, alright, it was bought by my friend Valerie Grove, and no, I don't see it on her wall, but still it's a sale! And I've made three new painting friends through the programme and been told by total strangers that I wuz robbed, so I should be (and am) grateful. And I have a new painting case standing unused in my dazzling vaulted kitchen/diner and, although I no longer take a newspaper or watch TV, I don't have a single moment, do I, to do the one thing which makes me the happiest.

As Christmas approached I was offered a pantomime at the Old Vic. I was in no state for pantomime, which is three shows a day of high octane energy and audience participation, and actors only do it for the sensational wages (except for Christopher Biggins and Lesley Joseph who *love* it and would do it for a year's supply of knicker elastic and a frozen fisherman's pie). Along with commercials, it is one of the few ways that an actor can earn a decent living. Bobby Davro and the big boys can get over £100,000. I was tempted.

This was slightly different, said my agent. This was *classical* pantomime, with a script written by a RSC writer and directed by Sean Mathias, with proper actors in key roles and Sir Ian McKellen playing Widow Twanky, and not nearly so many jokes about Simon Cowell, and fewer performances in Xmas week.

'What's the part?'

'Well, it's Wishee Washee, but –'

'Oh, Twanky's sidekick. Good.'

'But in the adaptation he's called Dim Sum.'

'That's not incredibly funny.'

'It made *me* laugh.'

'Exactly.'

'They'll write it around you if you say yes, and you'll have input into the scenes.' He was winning.

'Right . . . sounds interesting enough. What's the catch?'

'All the cast are on the same whack.'

'And the whack would be?

Silence.

'Is it a Bobby Davro whack?' I knew the answer even as I asked the question.

The sum he mentioned was £500 per week for rehearsals and two thousand for ten or twelve and in Xmas week fourteen performances a week. Bit of a Gwyneth, really – as in 'paltry'.

Every bone in my body screamed 'No!' I was a widow myself of only ten months' standing. Wouldn't it look a bit undignified? Apparently Dim Sum wore tweed plus fours and a moustache. Would I cope? I was a bit frail, trying to finish the autobiography that Jack had started, prone to night frets and sudden unstoppable tears. Widow Hanky.

'Don't read it, don't read it, don't read it,' drummed the mantra in my head.

'Sorry,' I sighed. 'Tell them . . . I . . . I . . . I'll have a look at the script.' I was beaten already.

Now, I'm a girl who likes a spot of improvisation. This time, though, we had three weeks to mount an unfinished script and I was in no mood to stand in a circle every morning with other actors throwing a ball to one another. My nerves were taut and I wanted to run miles away. After rehearsing each scene we then sat around a table with the writer, Billie Brown, and picked the scene apart and put it back together with more jokes. Since my idea of heaven is being in the room on the twenty-third floor where Larry Gelbiert, Woody Allen, the Simon brothers and others wrote *The Sid Caesar Show*, this should have appealed. It didn't. The show was limping and Ian was worrying away at the thin material like a Staffordshire bull terrier with a venison ear.

'But Shawnie,' he would moan, 'I can't understand Twanky's reasoning here.'

Sean, a loving ex-partner of Ian's, would roll his eyes to the ceiling.

'Reasoning? Reasoning? Ian dear, it's *panto*, for Christ's sake! Reason doesn't come into it.'

'Yes, but darling boy, if I was a mother and my son came home pursued by the police, I wouldn't hide him by hanging him on the washing line!'

Sean would trawl his hands through his hair and, becoming increasingly Welsh by the second, would bleat, 'You're a man, Ian! Your

breasts are balloons, for God's sake! The fucking policemen are wearing striped socks and running on the spot in unison! *King Lear* it's not!'

'Yes, I know that, Shawnie, but wouldn't it be better if I shopped him for not telling the truth?'

'No, it fucking wouldn't because that would be the end of the show and the kids haven't even shouted "It's behind you!" yet!'

During the technical rehearsal, the princess, several chorus girls and I stand in line to kow-tow to Sam Kelly's dozy Emperor. 'Go in the middle,' calls Sean from the darkened stalls. I do, and feel a sharp pain in my hip at the same moment as everyone else emits shrill cries. A nine-foot plank, not nailed in properly, had fallen on four of us, hitting my hip, Julia's ear, Cat's foot and Leah's back. Arnica and ice packs appeared but since we'd dispersed the weight of the blow between us we were all OK and limped on. Later Ian sweetly joined me in turning on the Christmas lights in The Cut in Waterloo and we returned to the rehearsals bearing flowers which I donated to Roger Allam, our Abbanazar, on the grounds that so far he was Best in Show.

At one low point in the rehearsals I quit the show twice in the same day. The second time, in the middle of some weird choreography involving a different hand gesture for every word of the song, I murmured 'I'm out of here' and jumped into my car. I got as far as the Aldwych Theatre and phoned Sean to tell him I'd left and he should replace me.

'Oh, turn the car round and get back here, you daft tart,' he said. I did.

The company were very dubious about the show. Nobody thought it would work. Before we opened I asked Sean if he thought Ian was going to be funny. I really wasn't sure. He looked at me and smiled. 'Oh, ye of little faith. He'll take one look at that audience and you won't know what's hit you.'

And he did. Costumed and wigged he burst out of his dressing-room and onto that stage like Les Dawson on amphetamines. It was quite extraordinary. I've never seen such a transformation. The rest of the company stood back in awe and the reviews said it all. They raved about Ian's Twanky, Roger Allam's fruity and dastardly Abbanazar, and the wit of the production. As for me and my moustachioed Dim, I seemed to puzzle the critics. What was I doing in it? *Underused*, was the phrase I most remember seeing. Funnily enough though, as the kids poured in, I began to enjoy myself, and that, of course, was the secret. For the next six weeks I was contentedly in the hottest ticket in town. A year later, they repeated the whole exercise, but by then I was rehearsing another play and threw over my plus fours to Frances Barber with some regret and some relief.

By now, I had put in my bid for the flat, but only two couples had looked around my house and no one had made an offer. My bid was accepted. I

stayed calm. My accountant, Raymond, came round and we were sitting in the dining-room talking about the heinous nature of bridging loans when the phone rang. The second couple wanted my house for the asking price. It was, as my late father would have said, *beshert* – destiny.

About this time, I had 'destined' myself into a new and rather public relationship with lets call him Mr Energy, a Glasgow businessman. The period just before I moved house, was when our flurry of fascination with one another was at its height. I was wild again. Beguiled again. And unaware that the whimpering, simpering child again element was much more in the foreground than I realised. I was rehearsing in the American Church in Tottenham Court Road. It was a comedy revival – *Martha, Josie and the Chinese Elvis* by Charlotte Jones – for a pre-West End tour. It was 23rd January, the day before the move. Nats had taken twenty car loads of ephemera to the local tip, the house was stripped of *chatchkas* (knick-knacks). I had been given one day off to leave 30 years behind me.

Waiting to enter the scene, I got a goalpost moving text from Mr E: 'I'm coming through from a meeting in the City. Meet me.'

'You're in London?'

'I am. Can you meet me?'

'I'm in rehearsal.'

'Can you not get out for a minute?'

'No. You don't do things like that – it's not –'

'Five minutes. Just tell them you –'

'It doesn't work that way, you can't just –'

'You can't? I bet you can.'

'Er – I – I'll –'

'I'll walk up, you walk down. Five minutes . . .'

In a trance I tapped Rachel, my director, on the arm and said, 'Sorry, I – er – have to go now . . .'

'Go?' She looked at me askance. 'Go where?'

'Er . . . out.'

I gave her a watery smile and left her staring at my back. Once outside I charged like a Cadbury's Milk Flake advert, past all the homogenised displays of WPCs and Laptops and Printers and DVDs and Mobile Phone Chargers and into the arms of my businessman. In the absence of a station buffet and Rachmaninov, we evaporated into Starbucks and talked and gazed and the rest of it. Twenty-three minutes later than I'd promised to return to my place of work, I stood up to leave, looked for my bag and realised immediately that it, and everything I needed for the next day's move – let alone for the rest of my life – had been stolen.

The next day was moving day. I drove off at the same time as the removal vans with £4.50 in my pocket and a puppy in a sheepskin bed on

the passenger seat. I waved goodbye to the house, my home for twenty-seven years. Goodbye to the telephone box, which had been wheeled two hundred and fifty yards on tracks through the garage by BT, the pillar box which I'd prized out of the post office. Goodbye to the observatory with the electric roof and the eight-inch Newtonian reflector given to me by BT's advertising company, goodbye to the massive wrought iron swinging seat I'd bought in Chalk Farm in lieu of a flat for Amy, painted garden green to match the Victorian garden shed I'd always planned to write in. Goodbye to the twenty-eight flowering yucca plants, Pushkin's grave (marked by a stone cat), the purple clematis, the vine over the front door, the passion flower, the two sentinel hollyhocks, the much-photographed Smallbone kitchen, scene of so many brunches and parties and late night cups of hot milk and cinnamon . . . The wing chair where Jack sat so contentedly, Draft Three on his lap, watching the garden grow or waiting for Zelma to disturb him with a rhetorical question. Goodbye to the past, the oh-so-recent past.

Gentleman's Residence, the advert had said when we first went to view the house in 1980. We were shown around by a charming elderly couple, Mr and Mrs Webb, whose family had grown and flown. Immediately we knew it was a happy house. Almost three decades later, it would be renovated and a nursery added for the young couple who'd bought it from me. Still, it was just a house I was leaving. Not my life with Jack. I wasn't leaving him behind. He was in my heart, my blood, my memory and every look and sound that came out of our kids. So off I went, with not too many backward glances. Moving moment, though, moving out. Moving on.

When I reached the new flat, two over-coated figures stood outside. One was Mr E and the other his financial adviser. Mr E was holding an envelope filled with notes to the tune of a thousand pounds, and the keys to my flat.

'You'll need this,' he said, handing me the envelope. 'The estate agent came by and asked me if I was waiting for Maureen Lipman. I said I was and he gave me the keys.'

We walked into the flat together and he loved it. It was light, clean and funky and a fifteen-minute fast train ride from Heathrow. The future beckoned, but unbeknown to me, with a slightly bent finger. The past was an infinitely easier place to live in. How was it for me?