

Zuckerman: A Life – Part 2
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Spring and summer passed in a now-familiar manner, tortoise-wise. Zucky, once more, climbed, ran and stole next-door's lettuce. Then came the autumn.

This time Zucky obliged us by hibernating at the right time in the right way. You know, like he was a tortoise. Then the dumb cluck went and woke up in February.

Jack was sent to a Reptile Expert, who was alarmed by Zucky's appearance. In the course of his examination, he weighed him, took his temperature and revealed, almost en passant that Zuckerman was Greek, probably about thirty-nine years old, and not surprisingly when you think about it - a female! Then, he added,

'And she's dying.'

Madame Zuckerman had one week to live. During that time she had to be bathed as before and kept under a 300-watt infra-red lamp, placed exactly eighteen inches above her head. And she couldn't eat until her body temperature reached a certain heat.

An infra-red lamp was installed in the study on a piece of hardboard, which was liberally strewn with Iceberg lettuce, two or three herrings and the odd apricot. Impassive and headless as ever, Zuckerman sat, and no doubt somewhere in those semi-frozen brains, awaited the next set of inexplicable indignities.

Every day the ritual continued...the twice-daily bath in a deep tray, the deep all-over tanning. Meanwhile Jack's behaviour grew more and more suspicious. I even caught him playing thirty-nine-year-old band tunes to that tortoise on his violin one day. Actually thumbing through FAVOURITES FROM THE WAR YEARS, looking for a jolly, rejuvenating, hopefully Greek ditty, no doubt. The nearest he came was 'Kiss Me Goodnight, Sergeant Major' - I tell you I was shocked.

Matters came to a head, as matters and pimples always do, on the Friday when Jack was still working on YENTL with Barbra Streisand. With only one day left of Zuckerman's life expectancy, he was called in urgently to discuss Draft Eleven with herself and the Heads of United Artists. I was asked to Zuckerman-sit.

Jack left the phone number of the hotel, where they were 'taking meeting', and clear instructions to check on Zucky's condition every half hour.

I sat by the phone in Jack's study. The smell was rich and the vegetation on the floor somewhat noxious. I placed her under the lamp, put a fresh apricot by her nose, and rang my friend, Lizzy. We'd been chatting for some time, a long time when I come to think about it, about Life and Art and the price of rawlplugs, when my attention was caught and the words dried up in my throat. Zuckerman's head was out.

'Zuckerman's head's out, Lizzy!'. I crept towards the floodlit animal, and pushed more apricot towards her nose,

'It's the tortoise,' I whispered, 'she's....arrh!!'

Even as I spoke, her snake-like head came forward another inch revealing much-gnarled neck. Then, as if by divine command, her head twisted on its axis, her jaws parted and she sank her teeth into half an apricot. I began to cry.

I put the phone down on a confused Lizzy and phoned the Berkeley Hotel.

'Miss Streisand's suite,' I tried to sound authoritative.

'Who are you calling?' came back the regulation bark.

'Mr Jack Rosenthal...it's his wife...it's important...' I petered out. Relieved I heard Jack's voice,

'Yes, love?'

'OK,' I whispered, 'show no reaction. It's just that Zuckerman's eaten half an apricot and I thought you'd...'

Show no reaction! The man was beside himself...

'She ate a half?? Will she eat the other half? Look...Oh, God, that's wonderful! Try her on the herring! Oh, love, that's fantastic...Oh, well done! Listen, I'll be home in an hour - just keep her...'

He faded out a bit and his voice took on a slightly more formal note. I knew what had happened. In his ecstasy, he'd glanced up at a sea of Californian faces, gold pens airborne, glossed lips open, gazing at their deranged screenwriter with a mixture of pity and despair.

'Everything okay, Jack?'. Finally the Megastar spoke.

'Oh, yes, thanks,' he wiped his brow and grinned.

'It was the tortoise...er, Zuckerman...she was dying...today was her deadline...and that was Maureen...telling me she's just had a bit of...er...apricot...and...'

The room was rife with lack of interest.

'A tortoise?'

'Well, er, yes,' said Jack. 'You see, she was too cold to know she was alive and I've been bathing her and...'. The ground failed to open for him, but the mouth of the head of scripts did.

'Great, OK, fine, well now...page 43, Draft Eleven, you know when Yentl says to Avigdor...'. So ended United Artists' part in Zuckerman's life.

Meanwhile, back in Muswell Hill, Zucky regained her strength, and, after a long convalescence, much helped by songs from ZORBA THE GREEK and the BEST OF NANA MOUSKOURI, played by her loving benefactor, she grew strong enough to venture outside for increasingly longer spells, and ultimately to play her old part of the Lettuce-Kleptomaniac again. At last the day came when, confronted by iceberg lettuce and wild strawberries, Zuckerman gave in; he opened one eye, raised his upper jaw and clamped it firmly on the lettuce. The old, evolutionary instincts came surging back, and within a few weeks it was midnight feasts for the two of them in the study...Jack eating his herring chopped, and Zucky raw.

A life had been saved and a bond strengthened.