

**Zuckerman: A life – Part One**  
**Maureen Lipman**

Accompany me, if you will, to the Muswell Hill pet-shop, on the occasion of my daughter's sixth birthday and a lip-biting dilemma.

Stand with me, before a shelf of tortoises. See the hope on my face, as I pray that the right reptile for the Family Rosenthal will show, that my choice is inevitable....Nothing. Just a minor shell adjustment. I shut my eyes and chose Zuckerman.

I took him home in a Winalot box, with a Webb's lettuce and no idea what to do with him. I showed him the garden, newly terraced, and put him in a sunny spot with the nice Webb's. Headless, he retained all the appeal of a piece of crazy paving, and showed no interest whatsoever in his dinner.

'He's probably getting his bearings,' said Jack, my husband. 'I'll take the outside leaves off the lettuce for him. He'll soon settle.'

The kids offered some birthday cake to what turned out to be his tail, and that was more or less that. By and large, he was mostly ignored. And the feeling was mutual.

The turning-point came when Zucky began to sprint. It was an astonishing sight. We were sitting at the living-room table, when a flash went past the window. Was it a bird? Was it a plane? No, it was Supershell, actually legging it across the lawn towards the wire fence separating us from next door. You could've knocked me down with a week-old Webb's.

Was this rare streak of tortoise athleticism a flash in the pan? Or was it time for a fast call to Norris McWhirter?

The following day we found out. Enter the man next door, in his hand one tortoise, legs waving sheepishly.

'It was at my lettuces!'

'My goodness, Jim,' I grovelled, 'I am sorry. I can't understand it. It must have dug a hole under the fence. I'll check it and nail it down. The fence I mean.'

We checked the fence. It was secure. Two days later it happened again. Jim's face was even redder,

'I'll have to put it over t'back fence if it does it again.' The death-knell for small, slow creatures of ill-heated brain.

The next day we watched in shifts. During one of mine, I glanced through the window and did a triple-take worthy of Zero Mostel. Zuckerman was halfway up the garden fence. He had climbed roughly two feet up the wire netting, and now hung on with three legs while exploring with the fourth for the next crampon or whatever the word is if you're a tortoise. Tampon, I suppose. Yes, Zucky was now going for the Decathlon.

Then came the winter of our discontent. As the book says, in the winter tortoises stop walking, stop eating and finally - just stop. It soon became clear, however, that although Zuckerman may be Olympic standard in night-time pole-vaulting, he was ignorant of Hibernation. He tried. He would bury his head and front paws, then knock off work for a week, and sit there like a rejected meat pie.

Finally, and well into December - like an overtired and recalcitrant child - he fell into a deep and presumably dreamless sleep, and was put in the garden shed for the duration. For the next couple of months it was as if he'd never been. And had it not been for a friendly gardener popping round to do the 'few bits and pieces that can be done', which obviously included a trip to the shed, we might never have known that Zuckerman was out of his straw. Jack raced to the bedside. The patient, who was alive (but as Dorothy Parker said after Calvin Coolidge's death, 'How could they tell?'), wouldn't eat, move, or bring his head out.

Jack took Zucky to the vet, filled in all the forms....ZUCKERMAN ROSENTHAL (ethnic enough, do you think?), Age - nine months since bought, Past Medical History - none, Complaint - inability on owners' part to know whether animal is dead or not.

‘Oh yes,’ said Mr Hill, ‘common enough’.

It seemed that Zucky had woken up too soon due to a combination of not having eaten enough to feed him during the full hibernation, and the warmish spring. His brain was now too frozen for him to know that he was alive. Jack’s glasses gleamed with attentiveness.

‘He’ll have to be made to eat,’ said Mr Hill briskly, as though it was the easiest task in the world.

When I arrived home, Jack had a syringe in one hand, two cotton buds in the other, and was engaged in the mind-boggling decision of whether to give the patient warmed-up chicken soup or tomato soup. For obvious reasons, that night Zucky ate Jewish.

But first, Jack gently swabbed his crusted eyes, placed him in a bath of lukewarm water, then forced his jammed-up mouth open with tweezers, revealing a sight which made Jaba in RETURN OF THE JEDI look attractive. Finally - the warmed-up chicken soup (minus matzo balls) was syringed in.

Jack gazed up through soup-misted glasses and said,

‘I’ve got to get him some herring. It’s full of iron’.

My nose twitched, and it wasn’t just the mention of herrings. What was occurring was more than duty. It was undoubtedly love.