



**Another Life**  
**by Sue Rickard**

**Prologue**

Today I am going to meet some people from another life, one that I lived long ago. We shared a house beside the sea with a troupe of monkeys and an extraordinary man: egotistical, (that type always is), charming, clever and a bit rough around the edges, a dangerous creature in many ways, to whom May, one of the people I will meet, was married. The man, Jack, captivated me when I was a rather damaged, lonely teenager in need of some attention, any attention. He gave me that all right but I gave him too much in return. I was in his power intellectually, emotionally and physically; my mind was his toy. I was disturbingly naïve.

*It doesn't matter now; you've been dead for twenty-five years. You said sorry – a deathbed apology that's not worth having. I held your hand with its long, bony fingers and dark veins – rivers of barely flowing blood about to silt up. Death stood behind the curtains waiting for me to go, - you knew that it was your time; you were scared of what was to come.*

*You didn't say what you were sorry for, but we both knew.*

*Later, your coffin was laid out on the lawn overlooking the sea, and all the people you'd known came and talked about you.*

*'He was a character – a bit of a rogue – but by God he was clever.'*

*Diabolically clever is what you were. The origins of music, primate evolution, philosophy, politics, you could talk about anything and you could make us laugh, laugh until we had to crawl away and nurse our aching ribs.*

*So, today I am to see your wife.*

She gets out of the car. She's older and is wearing a colourful sun hat. The skin on her face is wrinkled but I would know her anywhere. She hasn't changed that much.

Despite everything we embrace, tentatively. It feels OK. There's a strong sense of shared history. We're like estranged sisters with lots of baggage and experiences in common. We won't touch the really painful places today. The sudden shock of it could send us off again circling in long orbits for another twentyfive years. This is tentative – an experiment. But so far it's ok.

Two other people get out of the car. I haven't seen John for thirty years. He was thirtytwo when I saw him last. His son, James, is beside him; a beautiful child, now a stunningly good-looking man. I embrace each of them. I see them as they are now but feel them as they were then, the child and the friend of thirty years ago.

The four of us drive for an hour to the scene of our shared past. We walk around feeling like ghosts revisiting a previous life. For twenty-two years this was my home, place of work and the centre of my social, spiritual and intellectual life. I arrived at seventeen and left, burnt out and exhausted at forty.

This place is too poignant. Bits of it are just the same and other things have changed.

The people running the sanctuary now are young and clever. We meet an education officer called Max. He hasn't much time – he's very busy. The room where once we celebrated Christmas with music and party games is now a shop full of ethically screened books on conservation.

The monkey lounge where once we played with the monkeys, hiding treats for them to find, is now an information centre, and Donkey Cottage houses a bat colony.

But there are still monkeys here. They are beautiful, as always, but no longer a breeding colony. Now the emphasis is on conservation in the wild, not in captivity.

I suddenly see my life, our lives, not in linear, stretched out time, but as an eternity, a moment in which then and now are one and the same thing. The

vividness of all that living feels contained in this place and our presence has awoken it. It was wonderful, painful and unique.

## **Chapter one**

### **The Beginning**

I was thirteen when I enrolled at the small classical guitar school in Chislehurst. I had gone there with my mother and met May at the big, detached Edwardian house that was both home and school.

'It could do with a lick of paint and some decent wallpaper,' my mother reported back to my father that evening.

'And her clothes!' (scandalised voice), 'a bit too casual, if you ask me.'

I, on the other hand, liked the idea of having a tutor with long, wayward hair and bare feet. She was young and quite friendly but clearly not someone with whom you could take liberties. She had held up my cheap, metal-stringed guitar that sported an over-varnished sunburst finish.

'This will have to be replaced'. A slight severity in her manner seemed to reassure my mother and despite the necessity of changing my guitar, it was agreed that I should begin lessons as soon as possible.

I adored the guitar – in fact, playing it became an obsession.

The particular hand positions required to play classical guitar came easily to me and my young fingers seemed flexible and quick to pick up techniques and patterns of playing. I couldn't wait for Saturday morning to come around for my class and would go home afterwards fired with enthusiasm and ready to sit up all night, if allowed, practicing until my blistered fingers forced me to stop. Even holidays abroad I saw as an interruption and couldn't wait to get home so that I could resume playing.

It was the timing of all this that was so crucial. Years where school had been such a place of struggle and humiliation would come to an end in a year or so. I was determined to leave as soon as I could. My lack of success there was partly due to a long period of ill health and frequent absenteeism, but also a two-year period when the whole family had gone to live in Myanmar (Burma).

Perhaps being an only child made it worse but I had been agonisingly homesick for the life I'd had in England but then when I had finally settled down and begun to enjoy Burma, we returned to a life that was much changed from what I remembered – friends had moved, cousins had grown and we were to live in a different town. The post-war sense of community that I remembered on our little housing estate was replaced by a sense of isolation and loneliness in our smart, new detached home.

My school had the prim starchiness of a 1950s girls high school. I was badly out of touch academically and finding myself in a freezing cold classroom and faced with work that I didn't understand, the situation and style of teaching felt harsh and incomprehensible.

It wasn't that I didn't want to learn, I spent hours after school in the library that I walked past on my way home, trying to find the source of all that exciting knowledge that I knew was in there somewhere. I would follow intelligent looking adults around so that I could find out what books interested them. Probably, I needed more help to catch up – and I would undoubtedly have got on much better if I had been in good health.

But here, in this little guitar school, I gradually recovered some of the self-belief that I'd lost, I was made to feel special. It was like an unexpected gift: suddenly life held promise. Instead of being somewhere near the bottom of the class I was a bit of a star.

Apart from the guitar, there were other attractions. The household itself felt different from anything that I had experienced in my conventional, middleclass upbringing and I developed a real curiosity about everything and everyone there. I had seen Jack, May's husband, who was considerably older than his wife, lecturing the gardener on how to sweep leaves in the most efficient manner – he looked intimidating but interesting. I knew also that somewhere in the inner sanctum of the house and the large back garden there lived some very beautiful and exotic monkeys. I regularly glimpsed them from the train, which passed at the bottom of the back garden, and longed to find out more.

My first meeting with everyone came one Saturday when I was invited to stay on after my guitar class and have lunch with the family.

As I followed May down the long, dimly lit corridor that separated the public teaching areas from the private section of the house, thoughts and feelings tumbled around inside me. It was exciting to be visiting a group of adults on my own and to have made the connection through my own interests and efforts. Although May was the only member of the household whom I'd met up to that point, I sensed a freedom about the place and in the attitudes I had heard or seen expressed; in their style of dress and the way that they wore their hair; the stacks of interesting books around the house and, of course, there were the mysterious monkeys that lived somewhere at the back of the house.

The corridor we were walking down suddenly became light as May opened the door at the end of the passage into a large kitchen and living area. To the left I glimpsed Jack, lean and bespectacled, seated at a big refectory table tapping away at a typewriter. To the right there were several elderly but comfortable-looking sofas and chairs around a well-guarded open fire. Nearby there were two very young children playing on the carpeted floor who immediately claimed May's attention. As she moved out of my direct line of vision I saw another woman, May's sister, Laura, standing at the stove stirring a large pot. She looked up and smiled shyly but then returned to her cooking. Jack continued writing without even glancing up. I stood there feeling awkward. The anticipated pleasure of the meeting began to evaporate. This wasn't what I had expected.

Later I realised that this situation was typical. A studied casualness where conventional manners might be expected was part of the explanation but another, and this applied to Jack in particular, was to do with power. He would try to establish control by discomfiting someone and once that had been achieved he would turn on his considerable charm, which is what happened on this occasion.

'So you're the girl they're all talking about,' he said, still without looking at me.

'Am I? I don't know'. Embarrassed but with confidence beginning to return, I blushed, stammered and felt flattered all at once.

'Yes, we'll have to do something about you,' he continued.

'Oh, really,' I wasn't sure how I was supposed to respond.

'You're alarming the teachers – getting through their material so quickly.'

Lunch was served and despite my stomach being in a knot I managed to eat a small amount while listening to Jack. He talked a lot about his own life – growing up in London's East End and fighting Mosley's Black Shirts alongside the Jewish community; working for Boosey & Hawkes, the big music shop and delivering instruments to people like Louis Armstrong, (who, apparently, could spit right across a large room and out of a narrow sash window, a testament to his world-class embouchure), and working at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Melbourne.

Jack's life sounded wonderfully exciting to me, interspersed, as the telling of it was, with historical anecdotes and philosophical concepts. I was rapt, and he knew it. As the meal ended he stood up and went over to a bookcase. Pulling out half a dozen books he brought them back to the table.

'Here, see what you make of these. We'll have chat about them next week.'

This was the Holy Grail for me. Not only was I being entrusted with his books, I was tacitly being invited back to discuss them.

'Thank you'. I made as if to get up, feeling that this was probably the end of our meeting.

'You're not going without seeing the monkeys, are you?'

'Oh, no', I sat down again quickly. Jack went over to a hatch in the corner of the room and unwound a rope that hung down beside it. He then unlocked the hatch itself and pinned it up leaving an open space through which I could see a wooden and mesh corridor. There was a soft padding sound and then suddenly one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen appeared.

Unlike any monkey that I had previously encountered her face was more like that of a miniature gorilla with the same sweetness and obvious intelligence. Her coat was silver-grey and her movements, as she let herself down the rope into the living room, were controlled and relaxed. This was clearly a regular occurrence. A moment later another little face appeared at the hatchway, then

another and another until there were five or six of these magical creatures in the room with us. The children continued to play on the floor and Max, an enormous German Shepherd, stretched out in front of the fire contentedly. 'Samba's not too keen on some of the toys,' said Jack as one of the monkeys eyed up a painted wooden giraffe. I watched, fascinated as Samba fetched a tea towel from the kitchen area and carefully placed it over the offending toy, chirruping happily once it was out of sight. Meanwhile, another of the visitors, Lulu, edged around Max towards the fire. The big dog lifted his head to see what was happening and then flopped it down again. Lulu, who was now in front of the fire sat with her legs outstretched towards the heat while leaning back against Max as one might use a large cushion or bean-bag. Jimmy, a young male in the group sat nearby holding a tepid cup of tea that he'd found under one of the chairs. Carefully, so as not to spill any, he held the cup with both hands and slowly sipped the tea. Having taken enough, he placed the cup back down on the floor where Lulu retrieved it and took it over to her spot by the fire.

While all this was going on, the monkeys 'spoke' to one another making sweet, almost bird-like sounds that communicated pleasure, reassurance, concern or occasionally annoyance, as when Jimmy tried to take over Lulu's patch by the fire and she pinched his ear. At one point Jack silently pointed to Samba who was just then disappearing around behind the sofa to where she could reach some low cupboards set in the dresser, one of which, after a moment or two, was quietly opened. There was a small clinking sound of glass and then a soft pop of a cork. Peering over the back of the sofa we saw Samba balancing a bottle of Harvey's Bristol Cream between a foot, which held the bottom of the bottle, and her two hands, which were firmly clasped around the neck. She tilted the bottle a little further clearly anticipating the 'nip' of sherry that was heading her way by pursing her lips and blinking rapidly. As the amber liquid reached her tongue she smacked her lips and shook her head.

'Samba!' said Jack archly, 'what are you doing?'

Replacing the bottle carefully, Samba looked up at Jack. She'd been caught red-handed, there was nothing else to do but try to brazen it out. A big grin

appeared on her face and, totally unrepentant, she started to 'chuckle', a blatant diversionary tactic. Jack wagged his finger at her and the chuckling increased. Samba climbed onto the sofa and then onto Jack's lap, putting her arm around his neck as she went. Once there she switched tactics and covering her mouth with her other hand, she began to 'snuffle', by making little puffs of air through pursed lips. It was clearly an emotional gesture, and, as I was to learn, often used in greeting or, as in this case, to make the peace. Samba knew exactly how to manage Jack, probably better than anyone, and her tactic worked perfectly.

'Oh Samba, how can I resist you?' Jack responded by also snuffling and this continued for a minute or so until Samba concluded that she was forgiven and moved over to join Lulu by the fire.

I was entranced; monkeys, music and philosophy all in one afternoon. It was a heady brew.

## **Chapter Two**

That was the beginning of my – what? Seduction? No, not really, not at that stage, although I think there was something of that going on, even then, but what was undoubtedly true was that over the following eighteen months I became more and more involved, not just with playing and then teaching the guitar, but also with social, political and cultural ideas that constituted a completely different way of life to anything that I'd encountered before. Many more Saturday lunches followed after that initial introduction, and I became increasingly involved with the family, sometimes staying all afternoon to help with the monkeys or to work on some duets with May. I loved all this but most of all I enjoyed it when Jack engaged me in conversation.

'How did you get on with that book I lent you last week?' he'd say casually over a cup of tea. I would anticipate his query and try desperately to say something that might sound remotely intelligent. Not easy when you're only fourteen and have been up until the small hours wrestling with Karl Marx's *Das Capital*.

'Karl Marx certainly seems to know what he's talking about', I'd say, inanely. Jack would smile to himself,

'It'll take you years to really understand Marxist philosophy, but it won't hurt for you to start reading about it now.'

I immediately felt like the absolute novice that I was, but these small humiliations were tolerable in the context of the intellectual flattery involved in being noticed and cultivated in such a way. I became all the more determined to prove that I could understand these heavy tomes with which Jack kept me well supplied, and his good opinion and acceptance of me as a potential, if not actual kindred spirit, became ever more important.

Time passed and another set of disastrous exam results at school sealed my intention to ditch any attempt at academia and focus entirely on the guitar. I had begun to teach one or two beginners and develop some rudimentary teaching skills. It took a while to learn how to tutor effectively, but I gradually got the hang of not expecting too much too soon and began to enjoy the often small but real progress made by those who found the time to practice.

While gaining a little more confidence I was vaguely aware that things seemed unsettled in the household. I was still joining them for Saturday lunches but somehow I didn't feel as included in things as once I had. On walking into the living room one day, I had the distinct impression that my presence changed the course of a conversation, which was taking place between Jack and May. Was it something that I'd done? Was my teaching so bad that they were trying to find a way of telling me that I'd have to stop? I started to feel paranoid and awkward about being there. A week later the bombshell dropped.

'We're moving to Cornwall to start a monkey sanctuary'.

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The Sanctuary was actually an old Victorian mansion built on a cliff and surrounded by enormous beech trees and mature gardens gone partly wild. The view from the lawn in front of the house stretched out across the bay and the sound of the sea in all its moods became a much-loved background to life both day and night. There was a stream running through the garden and beyond that were numerous little paths down to the beach. In the summer,

we were visited by clouds of butterflies attracted by the huge bushes of buddleia and heavily scented golden azalea.

This was all wonderful but an even greater attraction for me was intellectual: the books, the music and the lively conversations that took place, often through most of the night. Interesting people would come to stay: old friends of Jack's, mostly, musicians, journalists and media-types.

A regular visitor was Ken Macloed, a presenter on Westward TV, who was an old guitar pupil of Jack's. At some point during the evening instruments would appear and a jam session would get under way. Occasionally I would be asked to play rhythm guitar while someone extemporised on an old jazz number. Pleased and nervous at the same time I would sweat over chord changes for *St. Louis Blues* or *Georgia* as they were called out.

'Start with a bar in G, change to D7, half a bar of C then back to G. I'll tell you the rest as we go along. Okay?'

I'd nod, ever the optimist, and then stumble through a few times until I got it right.

Always, I would stay up late when I was there, rarely getting to bed before two a.m. and would arrive back to work on Monday morning thrilled but exhausted.

After about a year of shuttling back and forth from London to Cornwall, Jack had another suggestion.

'I'm thinking of opening a guitar school in Plymouth and I'd like you to run it for us.'

'Plymouth? This would be another big change. I'd be further away from all my family and the friends whom I'd made in London, but Jack pressed on.

'Yes. It's not far away. You could live here at the Sanctuary and commute. You could learn more about the monkeys too?'

That was definitely an added attraction; I had come to love these beautiful creatures as much as I loved the guitar. I felt that I was learning a great deal just by being there – the access to Jack's library and the chance to discuss what I read was a big draw. I decided to give it a try.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Life at the Sanctuary**

And so my life in Cornwall began – and although I was there to run the guitar school, the longer I stayed, the more involved with the monkeys I became. When I wasn't in Plymouth I would be watching them or, if I got the chance, getting to know them at close quarters. Once accepted I was allowed to enter the monkeys' ground territory, which consisted of several enclosures, outdoor huts and a section of the house all linked together by runways. My favourite spot was in the front enclosure where the south facing slopes offered shelter from offshore breezes as well as a panoramic view of the coast. I was quite happy just to sit there and wait for the monkeys to notice me. I avoided the big alpha male, Jojo, as he was wary of any outsider and very protective of his colony but the younger males, like Jimmy and Django were great fun and almost always ready for a game. Sitting in the sun, gazing out to sea, I would feel the lightest touch on my head. Looking up I'd see Jimmy, dangling by his prehensile tail from a rope or beam so that he could just reach my hair.

'Hello Jimmy!'

As I spoke to him he would chirrup and chuckle, with mouth wide open and head shaking from side to side. I'd reach up and tickle his ribs so that the chuckling became wild and excited. Soon Jimmy's friend Django, attracted by all the excitement, would appear and join in. But Django was also a peacemaker and if he felt that things were getting too hot up he would make efforts to introduce a calmer atmosphere by covering his mouth with a hand and snuffling and sobbing with much emotion. Usually, Jimmy would respond in similar fashion and the two of them would curl up together in a friendly hug. Sometimes Django would include me in this by reaching a little arm around my neck and pulling me into their embrace whereby I would do my best to snuffle and sob in true woolly monkey fashion.

Quite often the monkeys would join us in the big farmhouse-style kitchen, hogging the best spots close to the open fire, or searching for tit-bits, which we would hide around the room. I loved these occasions: there was a sense of intimacy between us and this species who felt so close. They weren't wild

animals but neither were they pets and yet they allowed us into their lives. It felt such a privilege to have access into the complexities of their society. I often had the feeling that I was in the presence of evolution itself.

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## **Chapter Four**

### **The Plymouth Guitar Centre**

The Plymouth guitar school was actually two ground floor rooms in an elegant Edwardian house near the city centre. Jack had stirred up some interest in the local media and I discovered that I was to be interviewed by a young reporter called Angela Rippon who worked on the Western Morning News. Also, the local BBC had asked if I would like to do a piece for their early evening programme, *Spotlight*. Desperate to please and to help publicise the school, I said 'yes' to everything.

'Of course, they'll want you to play something, but you can manage that, can't you?

'Well, I suppose so'. I was beginning to regret the whole venture. 'I suppose if I make mistake they can re-record'?

'I'm afraid not,' said Jack. 'It's live TV and you're booked in for tomorrow.'

I immediately had visions of making a dreadful fool of myself on live television and running out of the studio in tears. But I so wanted Jack to think well of me, to see me as a success. To cover my confusion I picked up a guitar and tried to play a little tune that I knew well but my fingers felt stiff and clumsy.

'You're tired. Go to bed now and we'll work on a piece in the morning' said Jack. He tried to be reassuring but I know that we both had serious doubts.

I lay awake in my little attic room. Why had I agreed to do this? I could have said no. It was unreasonable to expect me to go on live television and play. I started to wish that I'd stayed in London. Miserable and exhausted I eventually fell asleep for an hour or so.

The next morning I awoke with a sickening lurch. Oh God, it wasn't a bad dream. I did have to go on live TV and play something- and I hadn't even decided which piece! Anyway, it was happening and I had to stop being such a wimp and simply do the best that I could.

We settled on a little Spanish piece and I spent the rest of the day playing it over and over until my fingers knew it better than my brain. I tried hard to control my nerves by not dwelling on images of public humiliation, but as the day passed they were hard to suppress.

Eventually it was time to leave for the TV studio, which turned out to be a big old Victorian house that had been adapted for its current use. We went through the front door to a reception area which was buzzing with people. If I had been in a better state of mind I would have found it exciting- especially when I was directed to 'makeup' – which sounded very glamorous. I emerged half an hour later a bright orange.

'The cameras will bleach you, my lover' said the woman who'd done her best with the Max Factor.

I sat in the cafeteria sipping a cup of tea feeling conspicuous, until I saw several other orange people arriving, some of whom I recognised as presenters and regular contributors.

I'd seen *Spotlight* and knew that it was made up with a number of different items but hadn't imagined that they were all in the one room together sat in little partitioned areas. My interview was to come last so I was to sit in a cubicle listening to most of the programme, waiting for my bit. I hoped that they would run out of time, apologising profusely, with me magnanimously saying

'Well, it's a pity – but perhaps another time – do give me a ring,' and then escaping unscathed but untested. But of course no such luck. I sat there trying to breathe deeply, as I'd been instructed, but it just made me feel dizzy. My hands were clammy. I hugged my guitar and pressed sweaty fingers to the strings in an effort to soothe them with the familiar feel.

There was a noticeable 'twang'.

My hands were shaking so much I had inadvertently plucked a string in the middle of someone being interviewed about public litter. I saw the presenter's face freeze.

Suddenly, everything focused on me: the camera, lights and interviewer. He was so close to me in our cubicle that I could count the beads of sweat on his orange brow.

'And now we come to a most interesting development in Plymouth – the start of a new guitar school and here to tell us all about it is Penny'.

There was a short interview when I tried to say interesting things about our guitar studio. I also remember rambling on a bit about Django Rheinhardt, but only because he was someone much admired by Jack.

I then played my little piece and, to my amazement and heady relief, it went well and seemed to be over very quickly. I was even invited back, an offer that I declined as the nerves had been such agony.