

ABOARD THE SUNSHINE EXPRESS

The unhappiest period of my life began not long after returning from a very successful trip to Indonesia on behalf of an international charity when, for no good reason I could see, everything went horribly wrong. Within a year I was divorced, lost my home and family, together with a great teaching job. To cap it all, I then smashed my car into a tree in a freak accident skidding on autumn leaves (not speeding or driving dangerously). Finally, I wound up living in a tiny bedsit, alone and broke, wondering what the hell I'd done to deserve all these misfortunes.

At first though, I was too depressed and traumatized to act positively, especially as every effort to find another job fell flat (I'd been made redundant). Also, fatalistically, I was too proud or stupid to sign on the dole and claim benefits and so eventually, when my savings ran out, I was literally penniless.

Eventually, in a kind of desperate daze, I went for a long walk and ended up on the Norfolk coast near Cromer - I was living in Norwich at the time. The beach was long, wide, empty and, with a seemingly endless doom-laden sky, felt like Armageddon. I trudged along the sand mulling over all the many injustices and misfortunes suffered – none of which, of course, were my fault. The world was against me. It wasn't fair. Suddenly, I exploded, venting all my anger in a screaming torrent of abuse at God, Life, the Universe and, of course, all those so-called friends and family I perceived had done me wrong. Even the seagulls cried out, angrily, as they flew away from this madman.

The following day, out of the blue, an acquaintance called Duncan rang me (he was not a close friend, which is probably why it stuck in my mind) and said he'd heard about my situation and wanted to let me know everything would be all right. 'Just hang in there and be patient', he said. 'Thanks mate, that's very kind,' I replied, but was thinking: 'What a patronising idiot.'

Soon after this, when the larder was empty and I didn't know how to pay the rent, I ran into an old work colleague in the street who asked me how I was doing. Too depressed to lie, I just blurted out the truth. He told me he had some DIY jobs around his house that needed doing and would pay the going rate if I was interested. Reluctantly, I said yes and soon completed the tasks together with others he'd forgotten about. I guess this chap passed the word on that I was a competent worker because before long other people began offering me jobs too. Cash did not come pouring in but at least I was solvent again and, more importantly, had some pride back.

Though I was quite good at practical tasks, carpentry, building and decorating, etc, I couldn't help feeling like a failure, that the teaching career I'd trained for and worked so hard at had slipped through my fingers. I felt the same about the marriage too and, though my ex-wife didn't object to me having access to the kids later, when I was living over a hundred miles away, visits became infrequent. Why had all this happened? How come I spent long hours doing other people's dirty work?

There was one compensation. On arrival back in London, with the offer of a friend's sofa for the night, I went out for a meal and bumped into Stefan, an old musician pal. When I mentioned my predicament, he said he was looking for someone to take over house-sitting a flat he'd been in for the past year but was now keen to move on from. The only catch was it was out in the sticks, on a council estate near Watford. The other snag was that the owner's pet, an enormous old English sheepdog, came with the deal – rent-free accommodation for the next year or so. The animal who, despite a terrifying bark (emitted any time of day or night for the most insignificant reasons), was a big softy whose only requirements were hearty meals and long walks.

This need to care for the incongruously named Elf turned out to be a blessing in disguise as he provided not only warm and loyal company, but his boundless energy forced me to get out, wandering miles in the surrounding woods and fields. Thus, I had a roof over my head, companionship and a reason to get regular fresh air and exercise, all in one go. Most importantly, someone other than me to worry about.

At the same time, I offered Stefan something in return. As a self-employed musician, he was only just scraping by and looking for a way to make extra money. He played melodeon (among many instruments) and sometimes gigged with dance bands as well as giving music lessons, but these efforts weren't bringing in enough cash. I suggested we team up to offer concerts and workshops for schools which, after some discussion, he agreed to. For years I'd been writing songs, poems, plays and stories for pupils and my own kids and often thought about expanding into the community but had been wary on my own. Now it seemed possible.

Over the next few weeks, we put together an interactive music show involving lots of wacky percussion I made from junk materials like old carpet-roll tubes, vacuum cleaner parts, broom handles, bottle tops, kitchen implements and other household oddments. We also acquired African drums, Asian flutes, Chinese bells, etc, and even several orthodox instruments including guitar, banjo, ukulele, penny whistle, dulcimer and

keyboards. We trialled our act in an accommodating teacher's classroom and then, once honed to a professional level, advertised around South London schools.

We found the most effective strategy for stumping up business was to pay people (mostly students or unemployed friends) a commission to ring up Head Teachers and persuade them of our great educational and entertainment value. To be honest, Stefan and I shied away from self-promotion, and in any case, it sounded more convincing from a 'marketing director'. We called ourselves Sunshine Express – corny but catchy – and soon began extensive tours around London and beyond.

Though we became quite successful, the constant travelling was a hard slog, loading and unloading my vehicle with dozens of instruments several times a day became stressful. Also, Stefan wanted to set up his own dance business (still going strong). By the time we ceased touring, after three or four years, we'd given hundreds of concerts and workshops, and produced two albums of original children's material (some bought by the BBC). Sunshine Express, on top of giving hundreds of kids an enjoyable time, had helped lift me out of depression and gave my life a boost. From Stefan's side, I recently got this endorsement: 'I feel proud of the creative work we did together recording and performing in schools and theatres.' He went on to say how working together helped him develop confidence for the future.

My property renovation business was getting to be fulltime, and I was even taking on extra staff for larger projects. Nevertheless, I squeezed in odd gigs plus a nice musical job supporting puppet workshops at the Polka Theatre in Wimbledon. These were mainly for adults with physical and mental disabilities and was something I'd return to years later. I also gained valuable experience with shadow puppets that would stand me in good stead.

During this period, I moved from Watford to a bedsit in West London. If building work dried up, I did supply teaching jobs but never for very long. My heart wasn't in it. Maybe contact with all those kids reminded me of my own family I was parted from.

Around then I took on my biggest project to date – the conversion of an old Welsh chapel in Maida Vale to a rehearsal and events venue – which I worked on for several months. Near completion, one evening when I was the only workman left on site, an elegantly dressed woman entered asking about meetings at the so-called Amadeus Centre. I told her all I knew and was pleased to hear she intended returning a week later when I made sure I was around.

These 'accidental' meetings continued as Sofie and I became friends and started dating. A year later we were married (and remain so), moved out of London and bought a charming cottage in Northamptonshire where I returned to fulltime teaching. Here, the skills I'd acquired in the building trade enabled me to renovate our property and the Sunshine Express experience was great training for putting on music and drama productions at the school.

Eventually, after years of painful struggle, I began to feel happy and fulfilled with my life, especially after we moved to Newcastle – but that's another story. Duncan had been right – but how did he know?

Maurice Baker – Newcastle u3a