

# PROLOGUE

MILLENNIUM NIGHT, 31 December 1999: new hope, new expectations, New Labour, new decade for me (I had been fifty on 13 December 1999), new son (Sam, born the month before on 18 November 1999) and great excitement.

I don't like that time of year – I never have. It's just something I feel about New Year's Eve: it is over-hyped and I've always wanted to shy away from the celebrations. I suspect most people feel the same, don't they?

New Year's Eve is a curious mix of nostalgia, a sense of great expectation, and a strong desire to party. But in fact I would much rather sit in my own home and reflect on what has happened to me over the past year. If you have any form of split personality, like me, New Year's Eve is a heady cocktail. I always feel obliged to be merry and celebrate, but invariably I'm reflective and dark. Perhaps this is a 'northern' thing – I've always felt that there is a price to pay for partying; the more fun, the bigger the price. Forget being northern, maybe it's just my age!

Millennium Night was that sort of night. It turned out to be as taxing for me as it seemed to be for the whole nation: the disaster of the Dome, the supposed 'river of fire' on the Thames that was more of a damp squib – it all made me want to sit down and wallow in the nostalgia of my life.

Nostalgia? Baggage more like!

Or so it seemed that night to me: a born-again dad of fifty,



## LETTING GO

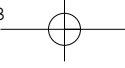
the weekend father to an eleven-year-old daughter, and a man still deeply troubled by the break-up with her mother – a relationship blighted by my reaction to an earlier marriage that hadn't worked out. I was in love with my new partner, but was fearful of yet another mistake and was reluctant to commit myself – an attitude that recurs many times in this book. My career could only be described as a rollercoaster ride – up one minute, down the next, one minute comedy, one minute tragedy, here a Shakespeare, there a sitcom.

My split personality really seemed to collide with the year 2000. I've never kept a diary; I've never really felt the need to. I thought I'd always remember everything, but of course you don't. However, something happened on that Millennium Night that would bring back fragmented memories of childhood that I will try to piece together as a jigsaw of my life.

More importantly, it would make me realise that I had been haunted by one particular incident that would affect not only my career but my personal relationships; something that perhaps gave me the wrong attitude to women and made it difficult for me to trust – not only my partners but myself.

Up until that point, I'd lived a life almost in denial. I was self-obsessed and ambitious to the degree that my career was everything. I assumed that somehow the other parts of my life would take care of themselves. Well, they don't. Life is everything and a good career should only enhance a good life. My parents had been married for over fifty years and I suppose I'd always assumed I would enjoy the same longevity with a partner. Whether my failure to do so is a sign of the times or the result of an all-consuming career is a matter of opinion. Whatever the case, I now see that the two things – relationships and career –





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need exactly the same attention.

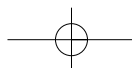
I rang my dad on Millennium Night to celebrate the fact that I was fifty, that he had a new grandson and that it was about to be the next century. “Did you ever imagine that you’d be celebrating the birth of a grandson on the eve of a new century or imagine that you’d have a son of fifty?” I asked. He replied with the immortal line, “Listen, I never imagined I’d be sleeping with a seventy-year-old woman either!..”

It was during the course of the subsequent phone conversation with my mother that she had a heart attack and fell to the ground. I could hear her calling for my dad and I was calling out to her. The phone hit the floor and no one was listening to me. Then the phone went dead. I looked around and my wife Rosie was standing there with a bag saying, “Go now. Just go.”

The journey I set off on was from my home near London to Glenfield Hospital in Leicester, because that’s where I assumed she would be taken from my parents’ home in Stanley Street, Ilkeston. She had been treated at Glenfield Hospital six or seven years before for a bypass operation, which she had miraculously survived. With true Stevenson exaggeration, she had announced to all her friends and family that the doctors had told her she’d had the ‘biggest aneurism in Leicestershire’. Why she should boast about having that condition God only knows, but at least she thought that she was Number One.

It was on the way to the hospital – a ninety-minute, near spiritual journey – that I made some kind of contact with my mother. So many forgotten thoughts came back to me, reminiscences of my life and my career – a real mishmash of events.

When I got to the hospital they said, “Joyce, your son Robert’s here.” She pulled off the oxygen mask, looked deep into my





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eyes, gave us a huge smile – as if embracing the whole family – and died.

The events of that traumatic night acted like a catalyst for writing this book. The car dash with its rush of random memories, the idea of the generation moving on – it all mingled with those thoughts that you start to have as you get older – particularly at New Year – when you begin to reflect on your life. You see pieces of your own life in the context of your parents' lives and belatedly begin to understand them a bit more, especially as you see your own children – the next generation – growing up, moving on, letting go.

*May 2009*

*Robert Lindsay Stevenson*

