

# Not For Sale

Maggie Hickey

*"I have heard of a man who had a mind to sell his house and therefore carried a piece of brick in his pocket, which he showed as a pattern to encourage purchasers."*

Jonathan Swift. *The Draper's Letters No. 2* (1724)

**B**uck Lane, NW9, runs from the top to the base of a very long hill. Number 102 is at the midpoint, so arriving on foot you either have to climb up or down. It is so steep that ascending pedestrians are generally gasping for breath long before they arrive and those approaching from the top are best advised to walk crabwise to avoid tumbling down like Jack, who as we know, broke his crown. Or was it Jill who did the tumbling? Anyway you know what I mean.

Number 102 is on the end of a gloomy Victorian terrace built for factory workers who toiled up and down the hill every day. Buck Lane has become more desirable with better availability of cheap family cars and its modest dwellings are being bought by the middle class and 'done up'. Not so, number 102.

The house is divided into three flats. Vi the landlady occupies the basement. Jamaican couple Hermione and Fred are on the ground floor. Ted and Raj are in the top unit. All the residents apart from Vi will move on in time but for now this place suits them very well. Ted works from home designing websites. His income tends to wax and wane. Raj is studying economics and only works part-time. All in all they are happy with things. They get on well and the rent is affordable, enabling them to spend any spare cash on football and the pub.

Of course the place is pretty shabby. The furnishings are old and white-goods like the fridge and washing machine frequently break down. The saving grace is the roof garden, accessed via a dark, narrow staircase and rickety ladder.

Really, to call it a garden is a joke, the only greenery being weeds emerging from cracked asphalt and sooty moss clinging to the low brick rampart. But on a clear day across the roofs of north London there's a distant view of Wembley Stadium beloved of football

fans like Ted and Raj. It houses a sun umbrella, some tatty deckchairs and a grease splattered barbecue (god knows how they got that up there). In the summer, girlfriends and others join them on the roof where everyone has a good time, drinking and playing loud music.

Vi rarely interferes. She doesn't quibble if the rent is late or there are extra people staying. In return, Ted and Raj don't bother her with minor problems. Hence over time, temporary remedies have become permanent. Broken sash windows are propped open with old paperbacks and hardback books have replaced rotten stairs. The ceiling lights kept blowing so now they just use table lamps. Mood lighting, Ted calls it.

Yet lately, things have changed and not for the better so far as Ted and Raj are concerned. Vi is in hospital unlikely to recover apparently and nephew George has taken charge. He's inspected the upstairs flat and found the tenants' housekeeping and maintenance wanting. A cleaner and a handyman man will be sent around.

"To sort things out," asserts George with a greasy smile, indicating he is doing them a favour. They however, know better.

He's up to something," says Ted. They invite Fred and Hortense to the roof garden for a drink and a conflagration. "Just look at the other houses in this row. All tarted up. Prices sky high."



asserts cadet economist Raj. "George is putting the place on the market and he wants us out."

"We can't leave now," wails Fred. "Hortense is pregnant, her mum's coming over from Kingston to help out but we can't afford anywhere else on my wage."

Gloomily, Hortense points to the brick and rubble strewn yard far below. Its always been fenced off, out of bounds to tenants. Hortense would have liked a garden for the baby she says. A pity it's in such a state.

"Well, old George will have to clear that up or no one will be interested in buying and maybe your baby will have arrived and Fred will have got a better job by then," suggests Ted.

As it turns out they needn't have worried. One morning a fully recovered landlady arrives to see a For Sale sign going up at the front and George taking the fence down at the back.

George is given his marching orders. The sign comes down and the fence goes back up.

"I'm not selling," Vi reassures her tenants, "I was born here and I'll die here. The place can stay the same till then, including that fence."

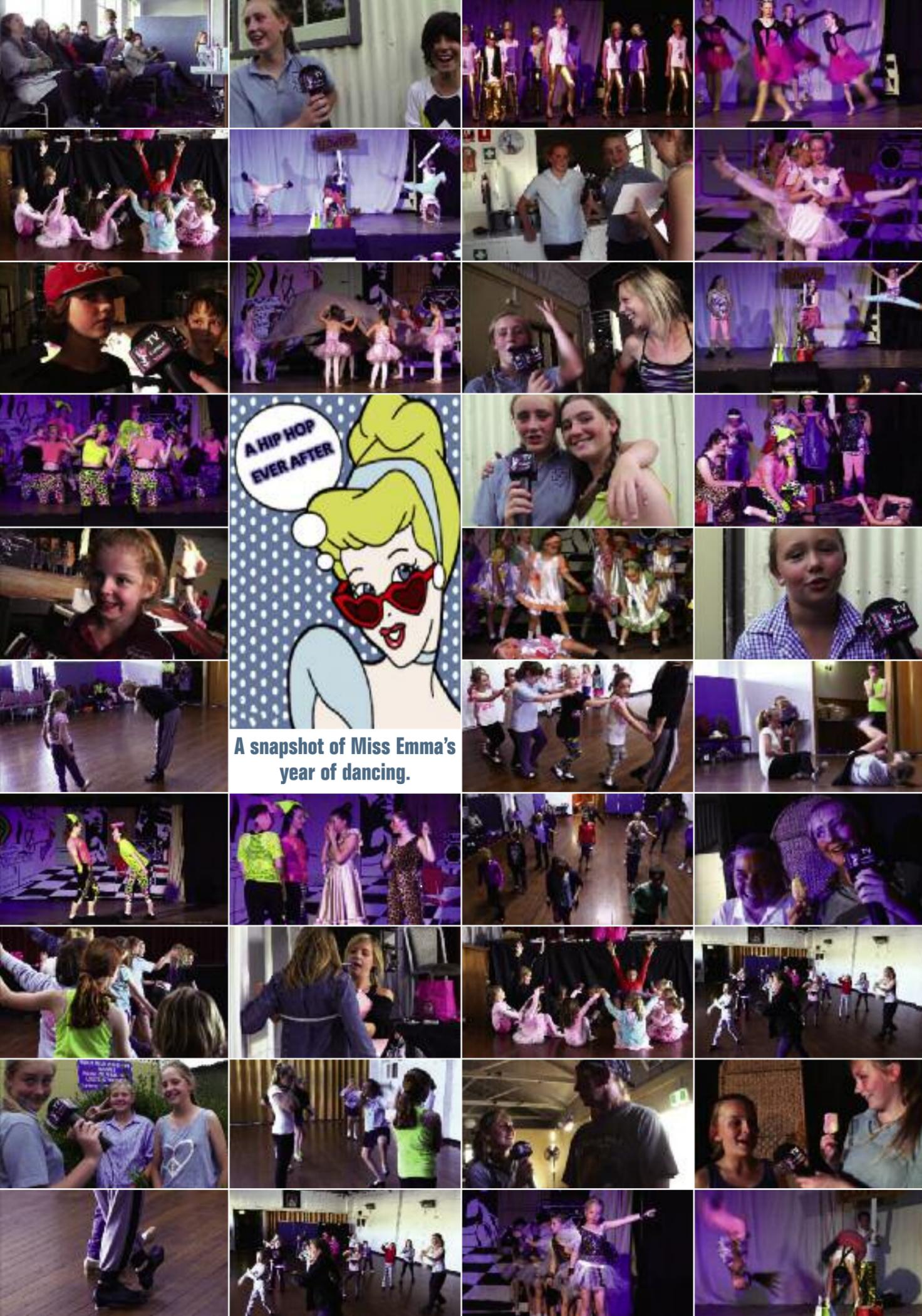
She gazes across at the neglected yard and explains, "Used to look just beautiful, it did. Mum loved her garden but she had a tough life with our Dad. Nasty piece of work he was. He drank and knocked her about. Late one night we heard a terrible row but in the morning Mum was digging over a new garden bed and planting a rose bush there like nothing had happened. We never saw the old bastard again. Ma went a bit funny after that. Had the old dunny demolished and just left the bricks lying about. Wouldn't let us kids play there. Locked the whole yard up. Said it was safer that way."

The tenants celebrate their reprieve on the roof. Vi joins them with an agility surprising for someone her age. Hortense has sublimated her yearning for a garden with colourful pot plants, carpenter Fred has replaced the old deckchairs with comfortable seating and Ted has finally got around to cleaning the barbecue. They sit in a contented row, gazing toward Wembley, an orange juice for Hortense, beer for the others.

"You know Vi," says Raj "those bricks down there are original London stock. Valuable. They'd pay for a new garden."

"I know dear, but maybe its best to leave things as they are. Let sleeping dogs lie, if you get my drift."

Yes, they all agree. Maybe it is.



A snapshot of Miss Emma's year of dancing.