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EMILY LLOYD

Wish I Was There

I WAS THE GOLDEN GIRL OF BRITISH CINEMA...
THEN MY LIFE FELL TO PIECES. THIS IS MY STORY.

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JOHN BLAKE

CHAPTER
ONE

While Mum was pontificating to a group of bemused infants and bellowing, 'Don't put your back to the audience,' à la Peter Hall, one boy was swinging from a coat hook just moments before we were due on stage. My nerves were jangling.

Before I get round to telling you all my adventures and adversities I thought if you got to know where I came from it might explain a lot.

My dad is Roger Lloyd Pack, an actor of some renown, but you might know him best for the role for which he was most famous – playing Trigger in *Only Fools and Horses*. Sometimes you'd be forgiven for thinking that's the only role he's ever had – certainly that's all anyone reminds me of these days – but since he left RADA, the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, he's enjoyed a rich and varied career. He's been Owen Newitt, the lonesome and slightly scary farmer in *The Vicar of Dibley*, but kids the world over will probably recognise him as Barty Crouch Senior in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*.

My mother is Sheila Hughes, a former theatre agent and one-time secretary to the legendary playwright and Nobel Prize winner Harold Pinter.

Before they met, my Dad was a bit of a hippy, sporting a Zapata moustache and flared trousers, while Mum was a Biba-loving babe who didn't go anywhere without a spring in her step and showing off with something by Jean-Paul Sartre in her back pocket. I guess they thought they looked cool.

Their planets collided when Dad was working for the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Aldwych Theatre in London's West End. He had landed a minor part in a production of *The Staircase*, by Charles Dyer, and then was asked to stay on in the company for its Christmas show of *The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew*, with Roy Kinnear.

At the time Mum was employed at the theatre as a dresser and was working on the same production. They say love is blind, and it maybe had to be on this occasion for it's hard to see what first attracted my mother to my father when she first clapped eyes on him. Dad was playing a jester in the story of the brave knight sent off to slay a fearsome dragon and was therefore kitted out in a skin-tight leotard, very long, severely pointed shoes and a nightcap with a bobble on the end. As he waited to go on stage, Mum studied him from the wings. She first thought what a ridiculous costume he had on. But then what struck her was his shy smile.

According to my Dad, one evening he and another actor, Ray Callaghan, went out dancing on a double date with Mum and another dresser, Annie Prior Palmer. Dad was supposed to be partnering Annie, but somewhere along the way he and Mum ended up together. By then Mum was finding him rather attractive and was drawn to his sense of humour and his interest in theatre and politics – not to mention his long legs.

They went back to her flat in Clifton Road, in Maida Vale, and, as Dad puts it, he never moved out. They hit it off despite being from

vastly different backgrounds. He had been educated at the renowned Bedales private school in Steep, Hampshire. Although it was famous for its liberal approach to education, the school was attended by well-heeled, middle-class pupils. Mum felt Dad had had an altogether more sheltered upbringing, whereas her experience of life so far had been more varied.

When the London season finished, Dad stayed with the company for the summer at Stratford and moved up there into a rather miserable-sounding caravan, where he stayed on his own for a few weeks. Mum then went up and joined him and they found what seemed to be a very romantic house in the woods, by the Avon, about four miles out of the town, at a place called Welford. It was during this time together that they decided to get married.

While they were in Stratford, Mum had dressed Vivien Merchant, by then a big star for a performance in *Alfie* that earned her both an Academy Award and Golden Globe nomination. Vivien thought that Mum would make a good secretary for her husband Harold Pinter, and so when the season was over she started working for him. However, Mum and Dad were now homeless, because Mum had given up her room in the London flat when she'd gone to join Dad in Stratford. So Harold and Vivien let them stay in their mews house at the bottom of their garden in Hanover Terrace, near Regent's Park, until they could find somewhere of their own to live.

Back in London, they set about planning their wedding and tackled the daunting task of meeting their respective parents. Mum says Dad's mother was quite aghast at meeting her for the first time, particularly appalled by her false lashes and mini-skirted attire.

A wedding led to a home in Islington and it was there where Mum fell pregnant with me. She recalls being slightly shocked when

she found out. She was a little older than he was, and for both of them having children wasn't exactly a priority.

Health-wise, Mum was in good shape and she continued to work for Harold. In fact, during this time he had written the film script for *The Go Between* and began shooting in the summer of 1970 in Norfolk. Dominic Guard, Julie Christie, Alan Bates and Edward Fox were the leads in the adaptation of LP Hartley's novel, but Dad also had a cameo role. I guess you could say I got my first taste of a movie set there, not that I knew much about it. Mum was still working for Harold so she helped out on the set.

Joe Losey was directing and he asked Mum to be in one scene. She was reluctantly propped against a tree, wearing a Laura Ashley smock while I apparently kicked away in her tummy in sympathy. Losey handed my Mum a pad and pen and in his American drawl asked her to do some sketching. Even to this day Mum is hopeless at drawing but, not thinking it was vital, scribbled some matchstick men. However, she can still recall Julie Christie and Edward Fox looking to see what she had done and turning their noses up at her artful attempt. Sadly the drawings – and the scene – ended up on the cutting room floor.

I made my grand entrance on 29 September 1970 in the Royal Free Hospital, in Liverpool Road, Islington, without too much fuss it seems. The only thing my Dad can recall was that he had to put on a green smock for the occasion. Mum, on the other hand, remembers him mucking about while she was in the middle of the contractions, dislodging a seat and spinning around the room.

Mum embraced motherhood completely but, looking back now, she says she feels Dad was perhaps too young and not yet ready for the responsibilities of having a child. Within months of my birth, cracks were beginning to appear in their relationship but Mum was so busy

caring for me, rushing through days and continuing to work, that she wasn't conscious of Dad growing unhappy and them drifting apart.

It's sad for me to hear how their relationship floundered. They split for good when I was 18 months old. It means I don't know a life other than one where they are living apart and I have no memories of them being together (the flipside though is that it did mean two sets of Christmas presents!).

Instead, my earliest memories are a snapshot of strange days and odd occurrences. One involves the concrete playground in the square outside the Victorian house where we lived on Milner Square. I remember playing in the park. One of the children, I'm sure unprovoked, said: 'You have a dirty face.'

Her derisive intonation – she would have been only two or three – was enough to cut right through me and I remember being quite hurt and embarrassed. I so desperately wanted to retaliate, as children do, but couldn't think of a suitably witty retort (I was equally only about three) and so I ran home to my mother and cried. It sticks in my mind because it was one of the few times I cried as a child.

I wasn't a baby. My sister, on the other hand, who was to come along shortly, would cry at pretty much anything.

I don't seem to have been one of those kids who make a fuss for no reason and got on with my lot. My Mum thinks I was quite a brave child but that's a hard thing to say about myself. Having said that, I can't really remember the tears coming that often. I liked playing football in the playground and was a bit of a tomboy, kicking around with a local boy and quite liking it.

It's funny the images that stay in your mind but another of my earliest memories is the time I was skipping along holding my mother's hand. I remember I couldn't have been much older than five and was wearing scuffed, red Clarks shoes and didn't seem to

have a care in the world until I came across a small snail right in my path. I hesitated for only a brief moment and then stamped on the poor creature with all the force I could muster. I've no idea what I was thinking. Maybe I didn't realise a tiny life was hiding inside that shell. All I know is that my mother shouted at me, tugged my arm and pulled me away. That memory still haunts me to this day (but not half as much as I imagine it haunts the snail!).

Mum and Dad might have divorced but I still saw him and from the age of three I used to go and stay with his parents, Charles and Ulrike, who we always called Uli. They had a lovely house in South Kensington. It was always first names with them, never Gran and Grandfather.

Uli was from Vienna and had come over to England in 1938 as a refugee with, my Dad says, nothing but endless envelopes full of photographs. She used to tell him stories about what life was like for her when she was a child in school, at the time Germany was annexing her country. There were poorer people in her class that she used to give her milk to, but literally the day after the Anschluss in 1938, when Austria was annexed into Nazi Germany, a girl took it and spat in it, saying, 'I'm not going to drink a glass of milk from a Jew'. Attitudes changed overnight for her. Soon her family had no option but to flee.

She was from a rather upper class background in Vienna, whereas Charles was very much of working class stock from Wapping, in east London. Charlie Pack, as he was in the early days, was an actor. As most of the plays of the time had a very middle-class theme and every actor possessed a double-barrelled name, he thought he needed a name change to fit in. He added the 'Lloyd' and it's a name that's remained in the family ever since. It's been passed down the generations like a family heirloom.

Uli first caught sight of Charlie in a theatre in Windsor where he was appearing with a local repertory company. She didn't speak much English and actually thought Charlie was rather posh. She might not have realised what she was getting herself into. Neither, for that matter, did he.

Uli was very strict and formal and quite intimidating, but she was kind-hearted and loved having her grandchild to stay. As soon as I arrived for weekend visits she'd have me out of the clothes Mum had dressed me in and into garments of her choosing.

She was strict about everything being in its place and set the table meticulously for dinner. One day I tried to test her powers of observation by deliberately moving a salad leaf while she was fetching more plates from the kitchen. On her return she took one look at the salad and froze.

'Have you touched that?' she asked. I shuddered.

Charles had a great pedigree from Hammer horror films like *Dracula* and *The Revenge of Frankenstein* and appearances in hit TV series' like *The Avengers* and *The Prisoner*. But in those days he was around the house a lot and was forever playing chess on a little electronic set. I would sit on his knee and he would recite William Blake's *The Tyger* poem. I miss him.

Mum might have been raising me by herself but I never felt like I was missing out. Her mother, who we've always affectionately called by her last name Mackie, had moved from Brighton to London to help with childcare, while Mum went back to work for Harold Pinter and was having to pick her way through the minefield that was his acrimonious marriage split from Vivien. Pinter had been having an affair with Lady Antonia Fraser and when he moved out Mum found herself caught in the middle, with divided loyalties. Eventually she felt she was nothing more than a messenger, passing

on nuggets of information increasingly vitriolic in nature. On one occasion Vivien was at the end of her tether and threatened to kill herself. Harold's caustic response will live with Mum forever.

His only reply was: 'Just tell me where and when.'

She carried on working for Harold for six months but eventually he let her go. Then, with Vivien barely working, there was little point helping her out either.

The bitter collapse of their relationship must have placed a huge emotional strain on Mum but she rarely let it show and had problems of her own. It's impossible to overestimate how difficult it was for single mothers back in the early 1970s.

Cultural diversity wasn't a philosophy widely practised in Islington then but our little quarter in Milner Square had more than most. A mixture of homeowners and council tenants meant married middle-class families rubbed shoulders with working-class families, ethnic minorities and so-called broken homes like ours. That said, people generally stuck to their own and some neighbours looked down their noses at a single parent struggling to make ends meet.

I don't know whether Mum strived to have a male influence in my life but she met and fell for a telephone engineer called Martin Ball. They got married fairly swiftly and Mum fell pregnant but the relationship was floundering even before she was ready to give birth.

I was five when my little sister Charlotte arrived. Her birth sticks in my mind mostly because of the toy Mum bought me – a little sweet shop – to make sure I didn't feel left out. I was quite proud of our new addition to the family, at least, I certainly don't remember being jealous.

Two months after Charlotte's birth, Mum and Martin split up. Mum said it was a mistake and it was over before it began. If people had been snooty about a single mother with one child to support, it

was nothing compared to how they reacted when they had a twice-divorced mother of two living in their midst.

Mum wasn't immune to the local condescension but didn't let it bother her. In fact, despite our economically challenged situation, she was determined to give me the best start in life. We might have lacked a father figure but we were not short of eclectic influences. Mum's friends ranged from theatre chums, gay friends, artists and writers. The house always seemed to be buzzing with people, with music and laughter a seemingly constant soundtrack. She practically operated an open door policy and kids from all over the square were encouraged to play in our house, which wasn't always the case with other families, with some parents of white kids not keen on their children mixing with black children.

It was great for us as youngsters because it meant we had lots of playmates but my grandmother Mackie despaired when she came to look after us. She would literally sweep the kids who'd gathered on our front steps off into the street with a broom. In some ways she invoked the same fear in youngsters as the Child Catcher in *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, only Mackie repelled kids rather than enticed them.

While aspects of our upbringing might have seemed unconventional it was also enriching. Although like many kids I loved TV favourites like *Andy Pandy*, *Bagpuss*, *Snoopy*, *Hong Kong Phooey*, *Scooby Doo* and *Top Cat*, Mum also introduced me, from a young age, to classic films and musicals. In some ways, having actors for a dad and grandfather removed the mystery of movies, but at the same time sparked an early interest in the performing arts. I remember seeing Elizabeth Taylor – who would go on to star with my grandfather in *The Mirror Crack'd* – in *National Velvet* when I was still five. She was so captivating and radiant that I decided there and then that I wanted to be an actor. The fact that Charlie also managed

to acquire Elizabeth's autograph for me only served to show that her impossible glamour was attainable.

Those dreams would have to remain on hold. I still had nursery to navigate. Being able to interact with other kids from a young age was good grounding for nursery and that was put to the test not long after Charlotte's birth, when I attended my first school. It was a Montessori Children's House in Islington, which focused on giving children a strong start in life, even though we were still only five and just wanting to play.

I enjoyed being there but we were frequently given assignments to do. Very quickly I developed a habit of going round the class checking all the children were doing their work. I was so preoccupied with this task that I failed to remember I too had work to do. On many occasions I was not allowed out to play because I hadn't finished my assignments.

It took me a while to grasp the structure of school life. To be honest I'm not sure I ever did and it was almost a shock to my system when I started at primary school. Our local, Thornhill, had adopted the controversial Initial Teaching Alphabet system of teaching, where words were spelled phonetically – *wot woz thay thinkin?*

The highlight of my time there, however, was definitely Mum's drama production. The school asked her to write and direct the school play because of her theatre connections. She took it incredibly seriously. The school told her 'no favouritism', so naturally she cast me in the lead role of the princess in the production of *Arabian Nights*.

When the big night came round, there was chaos backstage. Whilst Mum was pontificating to a group of bemused infants and bellowing, 'Don't put your back to the audience', a la Peter Hall, one boy, Nicholas, the son of Labour MP and future government minister

Margaret Hodge, was swinging from a coat hook, proclaiming, 'Look what I can do!' just moments before we were due on stage. Needless to say my nerves were jangling.

Before long it was my turn to come on stage and I appeared in a white chiffon dress, my two front teeth missing. Mum said even at that age when I opened my mouth I had presence. A talent for acting, it seems, was something latent in me, waiting to be nurtured.

What I didn't realise was that soon I'd be performing the role of my life – trying to convince people I was a normal, happy child.