

‘I WAS ALMOST STRANGLERED AND SHOT BY MY PSYCHOTIC HOLLYWOOD STAR HUSBAND – BUT I FORGAVE HIM’

Jennifer Lee Pryor tells **REAL** why she remarried the comic genius who repeatedly abused her **FEATURE** Olivia Gordon **PHOTOGRAPH** Wire Image

The year we met, 1977, 36-year old Richard Pryor was one of the most famous stand-up comics in the world and one of Hollywood's biggest movie stars. I was a 27-year-old college graduate living in a bungalow in West Hollywood. Richard was decorating his home, and a friend of mine, who was dating him, was heading up the project. She asked me to help out and I started talking to Richard and got to know him.

My very first impression of him was one of extreme vulnerability. I knew his reputation so I was aware the vulnerability was coupled with machismo. I thought, 'What a stunning combination' – and I think all women would agree – every woman wants both. During those amazing six months I was working on his house, Richard married his third wife, Deborah. But he and I got to know each other slowly and we fell in love.

Our backgrounds – my white privilege, and his upbringing in his grandmother's brothel – were very different. Richard grew up in poverty in Peoria, Illinois. His home was a whorehouse, he was sexually

abused and his mother deserted him at the age of 10. People around him regularly beat women. He was expelled from school at 14 and worked as a janitor in a strip club before his career as a comedian took off.

I grew up in upstate New York in a volatile family. My homemaker mother, who was of blue blood English descent, was mentally ill: vibrant and colourful but unbalanced. My father was an Irish attorney. My parents were very much in love but there were a lot of drunken brawls and heated dinner party discussions which ultimately led to violence. My mother would provoke my father and he would beat her up. But she stayed with him. I later realised that despite the differences between Richard's upbringing and my own, there was a commonality of violence and extreme disfunction.

At the beginning of our relationship Richard would disappear for weeks with prostitutes and drugs. At first it hurt me but then I understood that this was how Richard had grown up, that this behaviour was his way of functioning. I wasn't threatened by it though it certainly didn't fill me with happiness. You have to intellectualise that kind of thing – he's doing cocaine and he's out there with hookers – and say, 'Boys will be boys.'

Richard was so busy doing his work and art as a Hollywood comedian and didn't pay too much attention to other aspects of his life. It's very natural if you love someone to try to keep them out of harm's way, and that was my aim with him. Of course sometimes there was no protecting Richard – he was determined to hurt himself.

In the party Hollywood life we lived, you'd go out for dinner and somebody would say, 'D'ya wanna line?' It was the 70s. Everybody was doing drugs, and I was no stranger to them when I met Richard. Richard and I both took drugs when drugs were still called recreational – but now we know that there's really no benign way of taking drugs. I was never addicted – when it got too much I could make a decision to knock it off and stop. Richard could not do that. It escalated for him – he started freebasing cocaine.

HIS DRUG-INDUCED RAGES

Richard was violent with me. He had a gun and one time he fired three rounds into the bedroom and hall. He then walked into the doorway where I was standing and I saw he had the gun behind his back. He brought it out, pointed it at me and said, 'Get >



RICHARD PRYOR and his wife JENNIFER

out, bitch.' 'No problem,' I said. He cocked the trigger. I knew that there were three bullets left in the chamber. I walked out the door, sat down and had a smoke. 20 minutes later I went back in and said, 'What was that all about?' He said, 'I'm so glad you didn't make me shoot you.' In his eyes, I could be dead and that would be my fault! I emptied the gun immediately. I had this eternal hope that somehow love would conquer all. That is an idealistic dream when drugs and abuse are involved.

He tried to strangle me a couple of times. It was usually drug-induced. I've got quite a mouth on me and I told him where to go a couple of times – and he came after me. Richard had no impulse control. He was so paranoid he thought there were diamonds buried in the back yard and that people were after him. He was clearly psychotic from the drugs and when someone's in drug psychosis you shouldn't even be around them. A couple of times he would have killed me if I hadn't got away.

One time as he strangled me he told me I was going to die. It was very scary. I had a little cross around my neck and I grabbed it and said a prayer. I asked God to put the words in my mouth to calm him down. He was stoned and I wasn't – thank God – because if I had been stoned I might not have had a clear mind. By staying very calm, I coaxed him down. I said: 'You're not going to hurt me, this is gonna pass, you're gonna be alright.' When he let me go I ran out back to my apartment, I didn't wait for him to be sorry.

When Richard started getting into cocaine very heavily that's when I had to move out of his house to my own apartment in Beverly Hills. I never stopped seeing Richard – I would visit him on film sets – but things got increasingly worse and, though I continually urged him to stop taking drugs and get back on track, his drug addiction ended with a horrible fire.

“ I HEARD HIM SCREAMING. HE HAD SET HIMSELF ON FIRE

THE SUICIDE ATTEMPT

One day in 1980 Richard called me saying he was in bad shape and had just walked off a movie set. I drove out to his house. When I arrived he said to me: 'I've made up my mind what I'm going to do,' and I knew he was determined to hurt himself. I went out and told one of his relatives but they just ignored me. I left Richard's house and when I got back to Beverly Hills 20 minutes later I called him.

I heard him screaming. He had set himself on fire with cognac. He then ran down the street and his aunt and bodyguard chased him. Eventually the ambulance picked him up. I got in my car and drove to the hospital and they'd already transferred him to another specialist burns unit. I went down there but nobody was able to see him – he was in surgery for many, many days.

When I finally saw him he had serious wounds. I felt every emotion at once: sorry, angry, confused, guilty. Richard had tried to kill himself – it had been a suicide attempt. Self-immolation is a terrible way to do it.

Dealing with that was a long process. Yet we got married a year later. Not a lot had changed by that time. The only difference was that although Richard was still doing drugs intermittently, he wasn't as strung out and addicted as he had been. We married when both of us were extremely needy – although still very much in love.

A ROCKY RIDE

Our life was a roller-coaster. Richard first proposed to me in Hawaii. A week later we got married and the next day he wanted an annulment. I wasn't surprised.

I always think that Richard got married to end relationships – marriage is the place a relationship must go before divorce.

Our honeymoon was six months after our wedding, on a cruise in the Caribbean. It started off well and then turned bad. He hit me one time and it was the last time he hit me. I said to him, 'You will hit me no more.' I was done. I flew back to LA, got an attorney and we went to the divorce courts.

Things were not good. I moved back to New York – I needed to return to my own life. I still saw Richard here and there. In 1986 we got back together for a little while, then again in 1989. We kept testing the waters and our romance never really ended. I was addicted to him, but he was addicted to drugs.

“ RICHARD WOULD DISAPPEAR FOR WEEKS WITH PROSTITUTES AND DRUGS

During those years I was working on myself. I had to look back and think, 'How did I get into that violent situation?' The decision I came to about the violence was that I was a part of it. The saying goes: Once a victim, twice a volunteer. The fact that I'd stayed after the first time he beat me made me a volunteer for that abuse. I had to ask myself why I had stayed, and concluded it had been my addiction to Richard and to his drama. People who are addicted to drama don't have to look at themselves and lead their own lives. They just stay in the chronic chaos around them. I was drawn to this chaos because I had grown up with it as a child in a violent family. It was ingrained in me. I was great with crisis, I was a great fixer. So Richard's drama was natural for me.

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

Richard was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1986. Getting sick allowed him the opportunity to reflect and process all that had happened in his childhood and our relationship, and he mellowed.

Meanwhile I spent years in AlAnon and psychotherapy. Years reading books on self realisation. Years of distance from the situation with Richard, getting very honest with myself. I dated other guys and had some good boyfriends. Then I realised I was dating a bad guy again. It's something you have to be constantly vigilant about. I went back into therapy recognising I had started the pattern again. I think that psychic blueprint – that tendency to go for bad guys – is very common in women. For me it was an addiction just like Richard was addicted to drugs. On the surface it's exciting. The truth is those bad guys are very boring – though Richard happened to have the whole package – he was a genius.

Women with this tendency can't cut it out like a cancer. What we can do is be incredibly aware. Ultimately, that kind of drama is a distraction.

I wrote a book about my journey, *Tarnished Angel*, which came out in 1992 (it's now out of print). Writing was a great catharsis for me because I got to look at everything in black and white. That book is a story of a woman's survival.

I didn't come back into Richard's life permanently until 1994. In the meantime he'd married his fifth wife Flynn, divorced and then remarried her, and they'd had two kids. I think Flynn was Richard's midlife crisis. She was determined to have his baby, and I didn't want children with Richard. I thought the world didn't need one more screwed up, fatherless child. Although Richard is a wonderful guy, he wasn't a good father to his six children from different wives.

When I re-entered Richard's life, there was a lot of protecting to do. Things had deteriorated terribly. I had to be the heavy and look out for Richard's

“ AS HE STRANGLED ME HE TOLD ME I WAS GOING TO DIE

interests. We had to lower his child support payments and everybody got mad at me. Being a step mother is tough. I now have a relationship with Flynn's children, who are very talented, but I don't see any of his other children. They and their mothers will always harbour resentment. They're angry towards their dad, and I just do what I have to do. Richard doesn't see his ex-wives and ex-girlfriends anymore. There's too much resentment and baggage. I hoped we could all try to get on but it's not possible.

Richard and I remarried in 2001 and we are joined at the hip. Somehow life delivered me to where I am now, 28 years later. It's a place where we can resurrect the good and leave all that other crap behind. I am no longer addicted to Richard in the same way I used to be.

MATURE LOVE

Our relationship now is very different to how it was before. I would call it a mature love. The party's over. The crazed nights of cocaine and drinking, hanging out in nightclubs – all that is over. Richard is ill now and we have a peaceful life. Neither of us do any drugs anymore – that's a distant memory. The abuse is over. The other women are no longer a part of our lives. He sees a shrink once a month and I see a shrink once a week. We all mellow as we grow older and learn to value life and one another and not to abuse.

Not many people get to survive that kind of devastation and come back together. I find it a miracle. The fact that Richard and I were able to get back together and reclaim the good is quite amazing. I'm very proud of that and aware of the gift of it.

People ask me if I don't feel any anger towards

Richard for the way he treated me. I have forgiven him and forgiven myself as well. I couldn't imagine walking through life being bitter and angry. When you're bitter and angry – who's getting hurt? That's not to say I don't have distant memories of the hard times, but I process those now from a distance. Love did conquer all – with a lot of work.

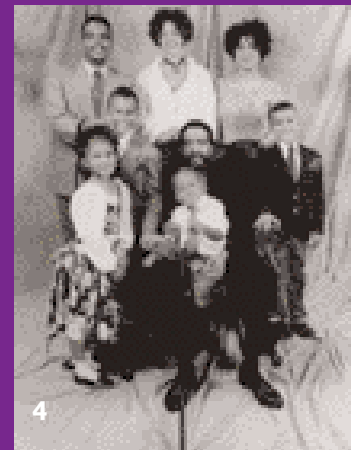
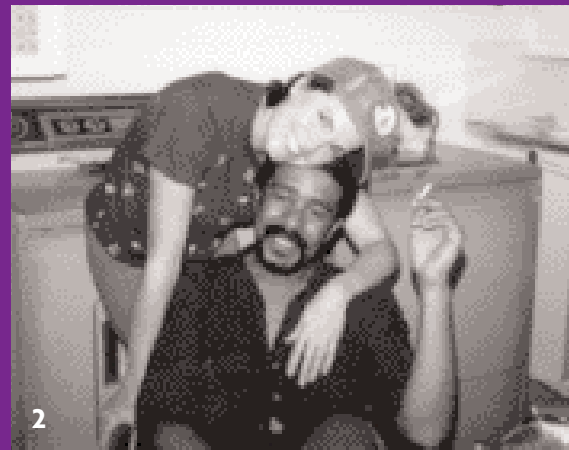
I don't think any of us ever ends up where we thought we would. To be surprised by life and to go with it is quite necessary. I still have the three bullets that remained in the gun Richard cocked at me hanging on my bulletin board today. Next to them hang three pencils that my editor used on my book, worn down to the same size as the bullets. Underneath it I have a little sign that says, 'Lemons into lemonade.'

STAND BY YOUR MAN: FAMOUS FORGIVERS

- Diva WHITNEY HOUSTON is still with husband Bobby Brown after years of alleged physical abuse. In 2003 she stood by him when he turned himself into the police for battering her.
- Rock star wife SHARON OSBOURNE has left and returned to husband Ozzy despite his substance abuse problems. In 1989 she pressed a murder charge against him after he attacked her, then dropped it on condition he enter rehab.
- Sitcom actress LESLIE ASH has insisted she is happy in her marriage with ex-footballer Lee Chapman – despite being admitted to hospital in 2004 with a collapsed lung and broken rib – after what she said was energetic sex with him. He was arrested on suspicion of assault but never charged.

JOURNEY OF LOVE

- 1 Poolside Hollywood high life: Jennifer and Richard in 1978
- 2 A happier moment in tempestuous times, 1979
- 3 The couple's first wedding in Hawaii. The next day Richard changed his mind
- 4 Richard surrounded by his children and grandson
- 5 Jennifer today, a survivor



- *Pryor Convictions*, by Richard Pryor, is published by Revolver Books at £16.99.
- *Richard Pryor: Live and Smoking* DVD is now available to buy courtesy of Revolver Entertainment. Price £15.99.