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Parented by Richard Pryor

Rain Pryor's 'Jokes My Father Never Taught Me' is a love letter to her complicated dad.

December 08, 2006 | Teresa Wiltz | Washington Post

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WASHINGTON — Hers is a life lived bumping around the margins of fame. Rain Pryor didn't get the Nicole Richie-esque existence filled with endless shopping and carefully cultivated fabulousness enjoyed by other children of the stars. Sure, her dad had fame and money, lots of both. He was, after all, Richard Pryor.

But a lot of the time, she says, the money went to the hookers hanging out at his house -- "Daddy, the whores need to be paid" -- and not to paying child support to his many ex-wives raising kids far from the Hollywood Hills. So hers was a childhood of abundance and of lack, of private jets and welfare checks, of elaborate vacations in Hawaii and a gig selling hot dogs on the beach when she was 13.

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Now an actress, comic and singer, Rain Pryor, 37, has spent her life navigating tricky terrain. She is the daughter of an exceedingly complicated African American icon who famously set himself on fire, and an equally complicated blond, blue-eyed Jewish woman who fervently believed she was black. In a new autobiography, Pryor writes of lighting candles for Shabbat with one set of grandparents and also listening attentively to her great-grandmother, a onetime bordello owner, breaking down racial realities as she shuffled a tarot deck: "You black, Rainy. The world's gonna see Rain as a [black person] no matter what her mother is."

Over the years, she managed to shake off the craziness and the pain to integrate her dual identities, finding an outlet and mining a few laughs from it all in her new memoir, "Jokes My Father Never Taught Me: Life, Love, and Loss With Richard Pryor."

"You're either going to go down the path of self-destructiveness," Rain Pryor says, chic in black high-heeled boots and a cape, her riotous ringlets flat-ironed into submission, "or you're not.... Success is the best revenge; it's the ultimate ha-ha. Statistically, I should be strung out ... but you won't see me in a hospital any time soon."

You will see her strolling through the streets of Baltimore. She moved to Charm City two months ago,

FROM THE ARCHIVES

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ostensibly to be closer to friends but also to flee Los Angeles, the city of her birth. Too much history, she says.

She'd never left home, save for a brief stint in New York when she was a baby, when her mom pursued a dancing career and her neighbor Miles Davis sometimes baby-sat, playing his horn until Rain drifted off to sleep. In L.A. she also left behind a home and a husband, separating after four years of marriage.

In Baltimore, folks recognize her -- she's a dead ringer for her dad -- but somehow it never feels intrusive, Pryor says. For now, Baltimore feels right.

It has been an intense year: Her father died of complications from multiple sclerosis on Dec. 10, 2005, just as she was beginning to write her memoir (co-authored with Cathy Crimmins). Tensions ran high with Jennifer Lee, her father's fourth and seventh, and final, wife. In May, Rain Pryor's half-sister Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor sued Lee in Los Angeles County Superior Court, charging Lee with elder abuse and fraud. Rain Pryor has not joined the suit but says she supports it. (Lee has denied the allegations.)

Grief sucked her in. "My dad had passed away and I was in such a fog," Pryor says. "The good memories brought pain. I wanted to call and go, 'Oh, remember -- ?' and read him parts of the book. That's what's most difficult." The memoir serves as a billet-doux, or love letter, to her father.

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Her mother, Shelley Bonis, was married to him for about two years. The book describes her as a jive-talking dancer with a fondness for wearing Afro wigs -- it was the '60s -- and quoting Malcolm X. (It was her politically conscious mother, Pryor claims, who nudged Richard, then a mild-mannered, Cosby-esque comic, into exploring racially charged topics in his act.)

Pryor says she and her mother aren't speaking at the moment, although Bonis previously supplied information for the book. (Bonis did not return a call requesting comment.)

Her father's drug habits sparked violence and tumult in the home. When Rain was 6 months old, Richard Pryor split. According to the book, Bonis' extended family encouraged her to put the child up for adoption but in time welcomed Rain into their lives, providing much-needed stability.

When she was 4, her mother introduced Rain to her father. The book recounts that he took one look at her and said, "Ain't denying this one's mine!" That night, during a sleepover at her father's home, she wandered into his bedroom. She'd heard noises and was afraid. She saw her father on top of a blond woman and ran out.

This is one of her indelible, earliest childhood memories: Her father followed her and, as he gently tucked her in, gave her a profanity-ridden dissertation on the facts of life. She went home and told her mother: "People make funny noises and then babies come.... He was making noises. I was worried. But he said I didn't need to worry. He was ... having fun!"

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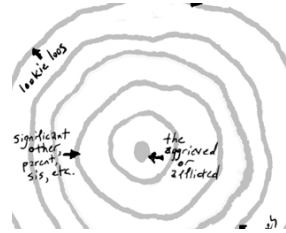
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