



THE HARDER THEY FALL

CELEBRITIES TELL THEIR REAL-LIFE STORIES
OF ADDICTION AND RECOVERY
GARY STROMBERG AND JANE MERRILL

Updated with photos and new interviews

Foreword by Lewis Lapham, *Harper's Magazine*

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Foreword by Lewis Lapham

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*What though the radiance which was so bright
Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind.*

—William Wordsworth, "Ode"

Richard Pryor

(comedian)

ARE THERE WORDS TO tell you how much I loved Richard Pryor? He made me laugh, he made me think, and he often scared the shit out of me. I thought I had a special appreciation of black people and their plight while I was growing up in the late fifties and early sixties. Integrated schools, equal-housing opportunities, "one man, one vote," freedom marches, integration of sports, "would you want your sister to marry one?"—hell yeah, I married one myself. These were all issues of great importance to me. However, Richard told me that unless I were black, I didn't have a clue. Whitey could appreciate all he pleased, but he couldn't walk in a black man's shoes. This was the kind of thing that Richard talked about and chewed to the bone.

I first met Richard in 1975 when I was producing my first motion picture, *Car Wash*. A character in the film was patterned after the legendary Reverend Ike, who once proclaimed, "The best way to help the poor is not be one of them!" We tried to get the good reverend to play himself in the movie, and it appeared as if he would do it. But after a lengthy negotiation, he informed us at the last possible moment that God had instructed him not to be in the movie. I think it had more to do with our refusal to pay the fee he was asking, but I could be wrong.

We were scrambling around to find someone to take his place, when someone suggested Richard Pryor. "Wow, what a great idea!"

we all responded. Aside from being the funniest man alive, I knew Richard to be a legendary cokehead, so I got word back to him that if he would do the movie for a reasonable fee (and we promised it would only take one day), a nice surprise would be waiting for him in his dressing room. Richard quickly agreed, and a day or two later, we shot what turned out to be one of the highlights of the film.

Richard played Reverend Ike better than Reverend Ike would have. And man did we get high. Just watch Richard's performance in the film sometime, and you'll see the manic energy that coke gave him.

The one-day shoot extended into a second day, but Richard was enjoying the experience so much that he agreed to come back without charging us. This is pretty unusual, in my experience, because actors or their agents will almost always take advantage of a situation like this to get as much money as they can. Not Richard though. At least not in this movie. Maybe it was all that good coke floating around the set, but Richard was back the next day and did a hell of a job.

Richard had been clean and sober for several years at the time we compiled this book, but his multiple sclerosis prevented him from participating directly. Jennifer Lee, his life partner, suggested that I find existing material from his albums, films, and books. This composite, I believe, reflects the best of Richard's riffs on his drug use and the culture he helped create. Richard Pryor died on December 10, 2005.

—

**From *Pryor Convictions: And Other Life Sentences*
(New York: Pantheon Books, 1995)**

You can't tell nobody not to snort no cocaine. Mother fucker's gonna snort it anyway. It took me a long time to learn that shit'll kill you. Once a big booger came out my nose. A mother fucking black one this long. Scared the shit out of me. I said, "Goddamn, please, I'll quit. Just let it stop."
(139–40)

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Then I fell in love with the pipe. It controlled my very being. This mother fucker say, "Don't answer the phone. We have smoking to do." Or the pipe's talking about "Now come on, don't put me down anyplace where I might fall. It's two in the morning and it's hard to get one of me." (183)

Somebody told me if you put coke on your dick you could fuck all night. Somebody told me. My dick got a Jones. Six hundred dollars a day just to get my dick hard. (78)

Neither Maxine [former girlfriend] nor I had tried LSD before, so we didn't know what to expect. We started out at a rock concert, but by the time that shit kicked in we had made it back to the safety of our home. Thank God.

I can't imagine what it would've been like had we stayed out, because once I started tripping, I got into a thing with our kitty. Ordinarily, me and the cat didn't have much to do with each other. We put up with each other.

"Hi, kitty. How ya doin'?"

"Don't talk to me, asshole. I see how you treat women."

Suddenly, this cat follows me around as if we were attached, as if the cat was my shadow. Real close. Too close. Particularly for somebody on LSD. Whenever I went the cat crept right beside me, rubbing, touching, meowing. I thought the cat was fucking with me, you know?

"Get the fuck away."

"Fuck you, Rich."

I swear, me and that cat got into an argument. (79)

I remember Redd Foxx and I spent an entire night and most of the next morning at a little table in his club, battling each other for the attention of every waitress, listening to jazz, and snorting cocaine by the spoonful. I kept asking for more, more, more and Redd kept giving it to me, until finally I was too tired to inhale.

"Hey Redd, why do I always want more?" I asked.

He laughed as if to emphasize my ignorance.

"Because you're a junkie."

Then it was my turn to laugh.

"Bullshit."

I just didn't see. (101)

Needless to say, going over to [dope dealer] Dirty Dick's house meant I had one thing on my mind, and it was no secret to anybody, because I was so God-damn open about using cocaine that it had become a cornerstone of my act, such as it was. When I walked into his place one afternoon, I saw him going through this complicated process to fix up a fine rock of 100% pure coke and then smoke it.

It transfixed me. My feet might as well have been in cement blocks. I stared and tried to comprehend the nuances of the ritual. It was like watching someone do a new dance step. It looked cool, the expression on his face, total bliss, real out there, and when the mother fucker came down from that rocket blast, he looked at me like he's just come.

"Oh, man," he said.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, Rich. You know, I just seen God."

"God?"

"Mother fucking God."

When I first did it, I knew it was going to fuck me up, but I had to do it. Had to be hip. Mother fucker said, "You ever try this?"

I thought, He's going to string me out. He's a dope dealer who needs me to get hooked so he can get some freebase. This dude used to snort a little coke. But I saw him and said, "What's wrong with you?"

He said, "Have you ever freebased?"

"Say what?"

"Freebased?"

He told me he saw Jesus.

Dirty Dick didn't have to ask if I wanted to try it. From the look in my eye, he just started to cook the rock.

"I'll do everything," he said. "You just suck on the pipe."

Honest to God, I was scared that first time. I thought it was going to be something else. But it was nice.

That was the worst part.

That it was nice. (179)

It started out innocently enough. Every now and then. A little bit. "Naw, not now. No base. Fuck it." Pretty soon, I noticed I wasn't walking as far away from the pipe as I used to. I used to put the pipe down and go.

If you're unlucky, you sit and wait for someone to fix your rocks, and that's all you think about—when am I going to get my turn? The person who cooks has got all the power. I was fortunate. I had money. I cooked it myself. I was fascinated with shaking up the shit, cooking it, watching it settle down, you know?

I was like a kid watching magic.

Performing it myself.

Spellbound by the power of turning powder to rock.

You put it on the paper end and—*dink*—it turns into a rock. (180)

After freebasing without interruption for several days in a row, I wasn't able to discern one day from the next. Night and day became shades of gray. Now *did* I care about such details as time. But after waking from a short, unrefreshing, troubled sleep I drove into Hollywood, where I entered my bank and demanded all the cash from several large accounts I had there.

My brain was strung out. That morning's smoke-a-thon rekindled my paranoia that people were stealing from me.

I wanted my money.

While I was ineffectually arguing with the bank manager, who explained that he needed prior notice for such a transaction, Jennifer called my house and pleaded with my Aunt Dee to get me help. She'd never seen me so wasted and sickly. When Aunt Dee reassured her that I was fine, Jenny made a beeline out to [my home in] Northridge in order to confront me herself. But the sight of me in the dark, clutching my pipe, told her it was useless.

"I know what I have to do," I mumbled. "I've brought shame to my family. I've hurt you. I've destroyed my career. I know what I have to do."

Shortly after she frustrated herself out the door, Deborah [former

wife] phoned me. We hadn't spoken for almost a year, but she felt compelled to check in and see how I was doing. It was as if she and Jenny, the people who didn't give a damn about my power trips or being cut off, sensed it might be time to say good-bye. They knew it was a scary time.

"You're the only one I trust," I told her. "They're trying to get my money."

"Who is?" she asked.

"It's not fun anymore," I mumbled.

"What's not fun, Richard?"

"I don't think I can get out of here, you know?"

The house was full. From Rashon [bodyguard] to my cousin and Aunt Dee, not to mention the housekeepers and cook, people were doing their thing. They were trained to leave me alone. Oh, Mr. Pryor, he's in his bedroom. They didn't mention that the door was locked. By late afternoon, the only reason to suspect I was present was the continuous smell of acrid smoke and the foreboding vibes that sent into the rest of the house.

Nothing changed as darkness took the heat out of the beautiful spring day. Hovered over my rocks, pipe, cognac, and Bic lighter, I smoked and soared and crashed and smoked again, repeating the deadly cycle over and over again as if I was chain smoking Marlboros. But I didn't allow time even for cigarettes. I'd never felt more paranoid, depressed, or hopeless.

Hopeless.

As if I was drowning.

Voices swirled in my head so that I wasn't able to tell which came from me and which were hallucinations. My conversations became animated, like those crazy people on the street. I heard people who had worked for me talking outside the bedroom window. They were loud, rude, laughing, angry. They made fun of my helplessness. I yelled at them, louder and louder, and still they refused to answer.

"What the fuck are you doing out there?"

As that craziness went on, I continued to smoke until I ran out of cocaine. By then, I was experiencing serious dementia. Stuck in a surreal landscape of constantly shifting emotions. No weight. Floating at the distant end of a tunnel. Miserably alone. Frightened. Voices growing louder,

coming in. Wave after wave of depression. Needing to get high. Real high.

No more dope.

Unsure what to do, I panicked.

"God, what do you want me to do?" I cried. "What do you want me to do?"

I didn't wait for a response.

"I'll show you." I said with the giddiness and relief of a certified madman. "I'll show you."

More laughter mixed with tears.

"I'm going to set myself on fire."

Hysteria.

"Then I'll be safe. Yeah, then I'll be okay."

Now here's how I really burned up. Usually, before I go to bed I have a little milk and cookies. One night I had that low-fat milk, that pasteurized shit, and I dipped my cookie in it and the shit blew up. And it scared the shit out of me. Not the blowing up, but the catching on fire.

Imagining relief was nearby, I reached for the cognac bottle on the table in front of me and poured it all over me. Real natural, methodical. As the liquid soiled my body and clothing, I wasn't scared. Neither did I feel inner peace.

I was in a place called There.

Suddenly, my isolation was interrupted by a knock on the door. A bang, really. My cousin opened it and looked inside at the moment I picked up my Bic lighter. I saw him trying to figure out what I was doing.

"Come on in," I said.

He zeroed in on the lighter in my hand.

"Oh no!" he exclaimed.

"Don't be afraid."

Then I flicked it. The lighter didn't work. I tried it again and nothing. Then I did it a third time.

WHOOSH!

I was engulfed in flame.

Have you ever burned up? It's weird. Because you go, "Hey, I'm not in the fireplace. I am the fireplace!" (186-89)

Deep down, I knew the truth. Lying in my hospital bed, I let my mind wander back to the time when I'd asked Redd Foxx why I always wanted more, more, more cocaine, and how he'd looked at my ignorant face and told me it was because I was an addict.

An addict.

I didn't tell anyone.

As if it was a secret. As if it wasn't true.

But who were you fooling, Rich?

Even then you wanted more. (204)

You go through changes in your life and you just fucking change. Something happened in my life just fucking changed my mind about all the shit. I used to think I knew everything, man.

I'd be fucked up and I knew it. I knew all the shit.

And all of a sudden I didn't know shit.

I was one of the dumbest mother fuckers that ever lived. If you catch me on the wrong day and ask me my name, you're gonna get trouble. (206)

Several weeks later Richard got a call from a friend in a rehab. She wanted him to help her in recovery by participating in her therapy. He reluctantly agreed. As he remembers the situation: (207)

One day, caught in the fervor, I stood up and admitted that I, too, was a drug addict and alcoholic. It wasn't anything I didn't already know. Amen. Or hadn't known for years. Sing it brother. But to say it loud, in front of strangers, without adding a punch line, man that was like saying adios to the greatest, funniest character I ever created. My best work, you know. And it scared the hell out of me. (208)

From *Richard Pryor: Here and Now* (Columbia Pictures, 1993)

I stopped drinking.

It's really strange.

I stopped after twenty years. I'll probably die tomorrow.

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I get tired of waking up in my car driving 90.

You ever go home drunk, trying to get to your bed, and your house
can't move?

You know you're fucked up when your dog won't come to you!

And where does that breath come from? Did someone just come and
put it in your mouth?

I couldn't stop drinking until the bartender would say, "We got no
more liquor!"

I went for a job once, and the guy told me I couldn't have it because I
wasn't dependable. I told him, "I got a \$200-a-day habit. Tell me that ain't
dependable."

I can remember when I was just off drugs. I noticed that my dick was
smaller than I thought.

I get scared when I'm out on stage sometimes. I want to run. If I had
some drugs, I wouldn't give a fuck. But then I come off stage, and I still
wouldn't give a fuck. Then, by the time you're fifty, you've had a lot of
don't-give-a-fucks. You miss a big part of your life that way.

- DICK BEARDSLEY**, long-distance runner
GLENN BECK, broadcaster
GERRY COONEY, boxer
ALICE COOPER, musician
PAT DAY, jockey
STEVE EARLE, musician
DOCK ELLIS, baseball player
DESTRY FORGETTE, rodeo cowboy
PETE HAMILL, writer
MARIETTE HARTLEY, actor
ANNE LAMOTT, writer
RICHARD LEWIS, comedian
HUGH MASEKELA, world music pioneer
MALACHY MCCOURT, writer, actor, entrepreneur
MALCOLM MCDOWELL, actor
CHUCK NEGRON, musician
RICHARD PRYOR, comedian
JIM RAMSTAD, U.S. congressman
MAC (DR. JOHN) REBENNACK, musician
NILE RODGERS, musician
GRACE SLICK, musician
PAUL WILLIAMS, singer, songwriter
FRANZ WRIGHT, poet

“My own disease would like to tell you that my ‘isms’ are now my ‘wasms.’ But as this book reads, it’s an ongoing process that leads to the sweetest spirituality. My hat’s off and great kudos to those who share their story like it is, for those of us who still need to hear it.”

STEVEN TYLER, Aerosmith

“A candid look at how addiction and recovery have no boundaries. Stromberg and Merrill have disarmed their subjects to get accounts of recovery so incisive that you’ll carry details with you long after you close the book.”

JOHN BRADSHAW, author and lecturer

“What a trip and honor to be part of this book that so magnificently and painstakingly illustrates the journeys of those of us recovering alcoholics and addicts who have fought on a daily basis to get our lives back. The upside is that I am part of the book. The downside is that I’m part of the book.”

RICHARD LEWIS, actor, author, and comedian

You know you’re an alcoholic when you misplace a decade,” says singer-songwriter Paul Williams in this all-star account of addiction and recovery. Now with photographs and two new profiles, *The Harder They Fall* shows how substance abuse truly knows no boundaries. Musicians, athletes, comedians, writers, public figures—these are stories of greatness rebuilt, one day at a time.

Cover design: Theresa Gedig

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