

INTRODUCTION

As a child I kept a diary. I kept a record of my day, what I wore, what I ate, what walks I took, almost like a hospital log, a bit sterile but with the odd silly drawing of my pet parrot spouting his latest learnt phrase. It helped me tidy the vastness of everything, to make sense of it all, and perhaps stopped me feeling lonely. I abandoned this pursuit in my late teens and twenties, too busy being in love, forging my own path, and perhaps this love stopped me writing. I took it up again in my early thirties, at the advice of an older actress I was working with, while juggling two new babies and a theatre tour. I'm glad I did – there was certainly much more that I needed to make sense of. And I kept going. This memoir is a selection of some of those stories.

I sat down at the beginning of lockdown and reread all the diaries. Then I wrote down some of the stories, not with an aim to publish – it was more like an exercise for myself – but a sudden need to

My Lady Parts

sew all those books together. Some of them I felt needed to be heard, some not, so I sent a few chapters to a few agents, picked the very best one, and began the less joyous task of finding the book I wanted people to read. I had to find what was trying to come out of this ugly lump of clay – shaping, reshaping, cutting away, losing hope, abandoning it, coming back to it, and slowly with the help of my editor finding the stories that needed telling – thousands of words crossed out (I write in longhand) until I began to see something I could imagine others reading. So, three years on, it has its shape and I'm handing it over.

To avoid disappointment, here are a few things that you won't be hearing about in this book. You won't be hearing about my day in a New York recording studio, improvising with Michael Caine, what my holiday was like at Danny DeVito's house, why I chose to turn down sleeping with Andy Warhol (when he was going through his bisexual phase), which type of cigarettes John Goodman and I shared on breaks while filming *The Borrowers*, what Julie Walters wrote to me in a letter, or what Maggie Smith and I talked about backstage at Chichester Theatre. No, no, no. Sorry. None of that! I also won't be telling you what Steve Coogan and Matt

Introduction

Berry are like, or if Chris Morris is a ‘nice bloke’, and if I found John Malkovich intimidating to work with. Sorry. No, no, no. What you will be getting is a selection of stories, front and backstage, of a life so far spanning forty years ‘in the business’. From the bear pit of the stand-up comedy circuit in the early Eighties to appearing in some groundbreaking comedy shows, from *The Day Today* to *Smack the Pony* and beyond. About being a working mother in a business that does not exactly welcome babies and children; about tragic life events, survival and single motherhood. It’s about putting food on the table without selling out, and continuing to create in the chaos.

My hope is that we can all see the vital need to cast off the cobwebs of compliance and fear, and to find our place – not keeping our voices down but coming out of the ‘twilight of passivity’ into the joy of the fight and the light.

One

The Wild Child

Casting Call

Child actor required (aged seven to nine), no experience necessary. She is a wild child, always muddy, always outdoors, and likes to eat gravel. She excels at mimicry and physical comedy. Discipline, including smacking, will not deter her. She will shun authority and loathe her incarceration in a classroom.

Growing up, I had no burning desire to become an actress. I did however passionately want to be a nurse, and hounded my younger brother, Blair, in my nurse's outfit, wrapping him from head to toe in bandages and forcing him to endure the stethoscope, the thermometer and regular lie-downs so I

My Lady Parts

could play the bedside heroine. It could be said to be my earliest role. I have no idea where this passion came from (let's hope not the *Carry On Nurse* film). I keenly felt other people's pain and generally wanted them to feel better – so this naturally segued into entertainment. Laughter cured tears, lowered heart rate and vastly improved mood.

Primary school seemed like a hideous assault on my freedom. I preferred the anarchy of our garden, which, during the holidays (the only times worth living) was filled with an array of children from other countries. The lovely house we lived in, in suburban Sunningdale, just off the golf course, had a long garden, a Wendy house and magical train tracks at the very end of the garden. It also had to be paid for by regularly being filled with children whose rich parents from Milan or Düsseldorf didn't really want them for the long summer, Easter and sometimes Christmas holidays. So, they came to us, and we spent our time creating shows for the grown-ups. They became my earliest theatrical cast: extras delivering lines off and feeds, dressers and prop makers. It's highly likely that I was the lead, the director, choreographer and dramaturg, and with a large trunk of excellent clothes – my father's ex-army jackets, my mum's gaudily flowered Fifties

The Wild Child

dresses and rejected moth-eaten fur coats – we certainly put on diverse, if not entirely democratic, shows involving physical comedy, clowning, Italian, German and French accents, songs and a good smattering of tears and tragedy. Snacks were provided for parents and their guests (it was the Seventies, and there was always a drinks party), but God help them if they chatted or ate too loudly. We required utter focus and attention, laughter and, of course, applause.

We had an eclectic menagerie of animals that were also invited into the stalls to watch: a pet goat called Chanel, a Border collie, a spaniel, a ginger cat and a free-flying African grey parrot called Fred who heckled with ‘Stop it, you’re BAD. BAD!’ in my father’s voice (who hated him) and trills of laughter in my mother’s voice (who adored him). Was this where the seed was sown? The joy of making people laugh or cry (or at least pretending to), the ensemble effort? The storytelling? The bossing people about?

My first primary school was a very unhappy time, although I had begged and begged to go to school early. We had a brutish headmaster, Mr Pitt, who looked like a more sinister Blakey from *On the Buses* and terrorised the school. He was tall and stick-thin, with a well-groomed moustache and a

My Lady Parts

black cloak. If anyone was late for assembly, he would make them wait until nearly the end, then they would have to walk up the middle of the hall and be humiliated by speaking their excuse to the whole school. Once I went into school in slippers by mistake and had to walk to the front. I often felt physically sick if we were late, and I would catch him in secret places within the building admonishing a terrified child who had misplaced a lunch box or spilled a drink.

Breaktime was freedom. I would tear down to the school monkey bars, hook one knee over and get a crazy momentum going, creating full somersaults. It was my way of releasing the fear. One breaktime, a young boy came up to me, my age – perhaps eight or nine – and told me that some boys wanted to see me. I walked up to the top of the playground, where I was ushered into a circle of boys. I was told to lift up my skirt and pull my pants down. I did so. Why? As they sniggered and touched themselves, I felt deep, deep, burning humiliation. I was finally let go and skipped back down to the bars to show them I didn't care, but there was a feeling as though everything had changed. I never played on the bars again. I had been exposed and degraded. A little thing but also a very big thing. I felt shame.

The Wild Child

I was unable to tell my mother for quite a long time, but she could see I wasn't myself. I felt I was 'bad', and I remember the feeling getting so big that I finally had to tell her. We went up to the school, where I had to identify the boys, and I remember I was made to feel like it was a huge waste of time, that I was being neurotic and attention-seeking. One by one they each had to apologise to me.

And then I became a pariah. The whole school knew, and I became the girl always at the edge of the playground, never invited into the girls' skipping circle, somehow tainted by this incident. So many women have experienced so very much worse than this. It just steals a little bit of the light in your soul.

This school became more and more unbearable, me crying at the gates each morning until finally my mother moved me to another one. The escapism I found in the stories and shows we performed as a rag-tag bunch of young kids in the garden set the blueprint for my later love of theatre – these children were perhaps also feeling displaced, lonely at first, then increasingly part of a community. Our garden was my first stage. I had a trusted audience who loved me: pets, family and friends, a group of displaced young ones from around the world. I could be noisy, dirty and outside most of the day. School

My Lady Parts

was simply a prison. It was then that I began to write a diary and record ideas for shows and stories. It is highly likely I was the heroine: tribal warrior princess, magnanimous queen surrounded by courtiers, saviour of animals in peril – basically, kickass heroines, who are still all too rare in the stories we are telling today.

Then, aged eleven, horror of horror, my parents announced we were moving. Where? we children wailed. Across the golf course? No, to the wilds of Fife. The East Neuk of Fife, Upper Largo, and we were going soon. They sold it to us as a marvellous adventure. The house was like a palace, the sea on our doorstep, a new school and new friends. We had no idea what to expect but we tried to be brave. A month later, we were suddenly, and brutally, ripped from our soft southern comfort and garden theatre promenades, and deposited, in winter, to a Regency manse in Fife, Scotland, where we lived for the next five years.

We arrived by sleeper on 16 December 1974 in a force nine gale. The roar of the wind in the trees outside was epic as they thrashed and groaned at the entrance to our freezing new home. ‘When are we going home?’ my little sister asked. My parents’ silence was deafening.

The Wild Child

Whisky and electric blankets were unpacked. The next morning, I set off along the country roads to get to the sea. The landscape was so unfamiliar, so wild and lonely and beautiful; we had previously lived in the commuter belt of middle England in Surrey, on Sunningdale golf course, with its carefully controlled fairways, small stands of pine and tiny choked streams. Here was anarchy. The hedges were a riot of unknown vegetation, the likes of which I had never seen, a vast treasure chest of unfamiliar wildlife. Thistles ten foot high, majestic oaks hundreds of years old. Fields full of sheep or young bullocks. But always the sea ahead. I sped on, my hands frozen to the handlebars, simply unable to stop or turn back. I was entranced and under a spell, euphoric. This first intoxicating immersion into real nature gave me a lifelong yearning in my bones for wilderness – and the sea. A deep love of nature seared into my cells. Outside in the wilds, where I spent much of the next five years, was where I felt my truest self. The wild child in me responded to the landscape and I would spend whole days walking the forests and beaches. This was freedom, and I was triumphant.

Two

The Clown

Casting Call

Young girl aged twelve, fish out of water, hides in toilets at school and is bullied. Uses comedy and powers of mimicry to overcome her bullies and is finally accepted. Skinny, with lank hair and knobbly knees.

Darkness in Scotland was swift in winter, falling each day around 3 p.m., then sudden stars. I would travel to and from school on the bus in the starlight in those brutal early months, learning how to navigate a pitch-black road by slowly making out the silhouette of our house. My sister attended the local village primary school in Upper Largo, and my brother was dispatched to the private Dundee High

My Lady Parts

(boys needed the better education as future bread-winners; girls were likely to become secretaries or homemakers so state school would do).

I found myself on the first day at Kilrymont School, on the outskirts of St Andrews, crushed by a thousand children outside the closed doors where, to my deep embarrassment, my mother had driven me in our old Jaguar in a fur coat, not looking unlike Grace Kelly. We were like zoo specimens, the object of much hilarity. It wasn't an auspicious start.

The glass doors were finally opened and we were borne along a semi-stampede into the school. I could barely understand what anyone was saying, and was given a maths test to assess my academic ability (I failed, and was consequently relegated to the bottom stream). My memories of the first few weeks are of sheer panic, fear and self-consciousness. I had a piping English accent, I was tall and gangly with long greasy hair, and I was freezing. No one talked to me, so I hid in the toilets in breaktime. I even hid between the coats in the cloakrooms, as my mother had insisted that I wear a pair of 'bloomers' – a sort of thermal, purple knickerbocker – as we weren't allowed tights (legs were pinched by some teachers to check for flesh-coloured tights). Once, one of the scary girls who

The Clown

taunted me in the corridors yanked me around to the side of a playground wall, and my skirt was repeatedly pulled up to the delight of a horseshoe of girls, with much hilarity and yells of ‘Let’s get a look at yer bloomers’. Much shoving, pushing and disgrace ensued, but I realised to my joy and a deep-seated need to survive that my powers of mimicry could swerve a good kicking, and I launched into Basil Fawlty. ‘No, no, stop it! Stop it at once!’ A silence fell, then explosive laughter, before an ominous instruction to ‘Dae that again’. So, I then became Sybil, and, of course, the icing on the cake, Manuel. The girls loved it. I had gone from victim to entertainer in a few brave sentences.

‘Who else can ye dae?’ Racking my brain, I tried anything to divert and make them laugh: Stanley Baxter, Freddie Starr, Dick Emery, the Queen. It was a glorious revelation that laughter averted a good battering, and slowly as my accent changed to drop the English tones, like a worn-out chrysalis, I became accepted in my role as ‘the clown’, and more people were brought in to listen. I suppose it was my first stand-up comedy routine.

My English teacher at the time, Mr McKay, smoked at his lectern and brought *Macbeth* to life. He persuaded me to join the drama group – my

My Lady Parts

first role being the bitchy upper-class queen in Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, followed by a whole host of nasty villains that primarily required an English accent and a vicious skewering of the upper classes. Comedically it was win-win; I muscled into every play going as we had a thriving and inspiring drama club. I loved it, but I still didn't have a burning desire or knowledge that this was my path in life or even a career. It was fun. I made friends. I had found my tribe.

I left Scotland to attend Strode's College in Egham to do my A-levels (English, history and French – I'm not sure a drama course was even invented then). After Scotland, and the long distances, the isolation, I reconnected with old friends and went sort of wild. I could speak in an accent I was familiar with, I could wear what I wanted. I was euphoric. I rarely walked anywhere, just danced and leapt and spun, and I fell in love.

I was a flaky student. I wasted time and was full of bluster and mischief in class, always doing impressions of the teachers, walking perilously close behind them in corridors. I drew silly cartoons of imagined love affairs between members of the class and passed them around. I terrorised my French teacher, and even though I was proficient in the

The Clown

language, I did precisely no work. I liked my English teacher but played stupid tricks on him, for instance making the whole class go into the Portakabin next door pretending we'd got the wrong class, snickering and watching while he waited for us all. We thought it was hilarious.

The head of the English department took me aside one day and told me I should do AS-level English; the consensus was I could get into Cambridge. I just wasn't interested. I was in love with a beautiful guitarist who had a car. I tried reading Chaucer and gave up, and politely declined their encouragement. From playground clown in Scotland to class clown in England, I gave my A-levels very little attention, apart from English. I was an avid reader of plays: Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Chekhov. A seed must have been sprouting because I applied to do drama at uni.

I decided Manchester University was the one for me, loving the course, the town and the tutors. But my grades weren't good enough. I had turned down other universities – I knew it had to be Manchester – so the next day I travelled up there on a train and demanded another interview. I interrupted a rehearsal trying to find a tutor whom I had liked on my first visit, and was told 'this isn't how things are done'.

My Lady Parts

I was told to wait, that no one was available, to go home, but I refused, got interviewed eventually and went back to London on the train a very happy teenager. In my interview, I gave a brave and utterly flawed description of Brecht's *Galileo*, the last play I had seen at the National Theatre. I hadn't understood a word of it. But I was very good at pretending, and I did just that.