

ROLLING STONE

She has done her living with a capital "L": alcoholism, drug addiction, attempted suicide, marriage, divorce, stardom, career extinction and finally stardom again

BY CHRIS MUNDY | June 15, 1995

Drew Barrymore is knocking back a beer. Not a near beer, mind you, but a good old-fashioned Pilsener. Hops and barley. The kind of libation that would impair her ability to operate heavy machinery if, for some odd reason, there happened to be any heavy machinery in sight.

It is a celebratory beverage, and Barrymore is in the mood for a little revelry. For one thing, she is flush with the afterglow of having flashed David Letterman.

Two nights ago, while demonstrating a striptease-style bump and grind on his desk, Barrymore lifted her T-shirt to present Dave with compelling evidence that she is not a little girl anymore. This afternoon, as she's walked the streets of New York, lascivious men of all ages have raised their thumbs in appreciation.

Couple that with the fact that today is her 10-month anniversary with her boyfriend, Hole guitarist Eric Erlandson, and this would already be a banner day. But that's just the beginning. The true reason to rejoice is that Drew Barrymore has been liberated. Today, after almost 11 months of legal wrangling, she is officially divorced from Jeremy Thomas, 32, the Welsh-born bar owner who shared with her six weeks of holy matrimony. Barrymore is giddy. At one point she begins a sentence with the words "My ex-husband..." She stops. "Excuse me," she says. "The devil..." And then she promptly giggles. Not the worldly, knowing laugh she sometimes expels to let you know she's been around the block a few thousand times but the girlish, almost child-like chortle she uses when trying to elicit a response from your inner baby sitter. It is a hollow sound of adolescent embarrassment – perhaps to let you know she's done something naughty – but you both know she has never actually been an adolescent.

Barrymore raises her bottle, takes a slug and pauses for a moment as if to ponder whether anything has been left out. Being off the wagon, stripping, dating, divorce. Nope. If that doesn't cover people's most pressing questions for the time being, nothing will.

She takes another swig.

"I just want to be free," Barrymore says. "That's the whole point I've been trying to make since I was a child, and I'm still making it."

True enough. At the age of 20, Drew Barrymore has lived her share of lives. These are not Shirley MacLaine-style lives, spread out over centuries and existing in the deep recesses of her own mind but rather the kinds of existences shared by aging country stars who sing about boozing, sparring and small-town jails with the accuracy of seasoned newspaper reporters. Drew Barrymore has done her living with a capital *L*. Maybe even all caps. Check the life ledger: child abuse, a year in an institution to rehab from alcoholism and drug addiction at the age of 13, attempted suicide, legal emancipation from her parents at 15, marriage, divorce, stardom, career extinction and, finally, stardom again.

Barrymore is less an actress than an icon, a living embodiment of tragedy and survival. At one point it seemed like campy fun for the world to laugh at her. When that clamor began to subside, she found these same forces beginning to laugh with her. Today, after the success of *Boys on the Side*, a just-released romantic turn with Chris O'Donnell in *Mad Love* and a role in the upcoming *Batman Forever*, it is Barrymore who laughs loudest of all. The only adjective that adequately captures the Drew Barrymore *oeuvre* is *Melrosian*. But this we will attempt to reveal episodically.

Barrymore rests her drink on a table, hurls a dart toward the board and performs a three-second victory shimmy. At the moment she is her child self, dancing gleefully on the playground and hoping for approval. Within two minutes, however, she will speak about a morning meeting with a powerful producer like a jaded actress in the old Hollywood sense. Then, just as abruptly, the little girl will return.

"I'm an adult, and I'm a child," Barrymore says when the fluctuation becomes unnerving. "They go in and out. I get to be a kid now because I wasn't a kid when I was supposed to be one. But in some ways, I'm an old woman – lived it, seen it, done it, been there, have the T-shirt."

See if you can spot the telling symbolism in this picture.

It is midafternoon, and Barrymore is seated in the back booth of a dark bar in New York's East Village. In her left hand is a Budweiser. In her right is a grape-flavored Mickey Mouse lollipop. The topic of conversation is her mother. As is often the case, Barrymore's eyes are welling with tears.

"She just dedicated a book to me," Barrymore says. "My mom wrote a *Joy of Sex* type book for the '90s. Very appropriate." She forces out a laugh and rolls the lollipop in her mouth. "Neither of us is ready to talk to the other one, but for her to dedicate that to me is her way of telling me that she loves me."

Mother and daughter have not spoken in almost four years. The silence, however, is no longer as eerily quiet. Two months ago, on Barrymore's 20th birthday, Jaid Barrymore wrote her daughter a letter, and they have been corresponding by mail ever since.

Barrymore's emotions are mixed. On the one hand, this is a woman who instilled in her a piercing cynicism before Drew had reached preschool. "My mom always told me that I have to be totally accepting that the person I'm with is going to leave because we're all born alone on this earth, and we'll all die alone," says Barrymore. "Both my parents grooved on love, but both of them were not capable of having a relationship with another person. Not a lover, not a friend, not even their own family. It really fucked up my ideas of what love was supposed to be."

On the other hand, Jaid was fiercely protective. When Drew was 6, a playground bully smashed her face first into the pavement, cutting a swath across her chin that required 15 stitches. The next day, when Mother and mummy-wrapped daughter walked into the school, the 6-year-old bully glared at them and laughed.

"I had asked her not to do anything because she's so fucking volatile that she'll do anything," says Barrymore. "But when he laughed, my mother grabbed him by the collar and said, 'If you ever fuck with my child again, I'll cut your fucking dick off.' " Barrymore roars with laughter. "Mom," she says to the thin air, "thank you for that."

Clearly, Barrymore believes some common ground must exist. Although she asked that her mom not be interviewed for this article, she predicts that sometime soon, she and her mother will be speaking again. Barrymore's father is a different story altogether. Although Barrymore doesn't know his precise location (she believes he might be down South), she does know this much: Her father has not owned a pair of shoes in 40 years, does not believe in material possessions and lives the life of a vagabond – often muttering Scripture to unsuspecting passers-by.

It wasn't always so. Born into one of Hollywood's most illustrious and entrenched acting dynasties, John Barrymore Jr. achieved modest success in the movies before drugs and alcohol proved to be his undoing. All that, unfortunately, was before his daughter knew him. Her first memory of her father was when she was 3. He threw her into a wall.

"My father was a junkie and an alcoholic for 30 years," says Barrymore. "Nice combo, huh? So that breeds shitty behavior. It was hard for me to deal with [while] growing up. It was chaotic and violent and scary. When I was 7, I finally said, 'Look, Dad, see ya.' I wrote all over his cigarettes – 'Fuck you, you're an asshole' – and I handed him the cigarettes and said, 'Smoke this, you motherfucker.' I threw a chair at him and told him to never touch me again. I didn't speak to him again until I was 14."

By that time, Barrymore had grown-up problems of her own. Having achieved stardom in *E.T.* at the age of 7, she moved on to a series of successes in such movies as *Firestarter* and *Irreconcilable Differences*. She was a 40-year-old in a 9-year-old's body, and she played the role with precocious ease. Talk shows, drinks, movie offers, nightclubs, cocaine. All before the seventh grade. Then, at 14, it all seemed too much.

"I did attempt suicide, but I didn't really want to die," Barrymore says now. "At least I didn't want to disappear permanently. They rushed me to the hospital and saved me, and there I had to make a conscious decision. I made a conscious decision that I really wanted to live."

The hospital where she spent the next few months was a cross between a rehab center and a mental institution. On the inside she experienced characters like Lillian, the elderly woman in the adult ward who would suddenly slam down her lunch tray and in her best Mae West imitation scream, "You just paid a quarter for an orgasm!" On the outside, living on her own and trying to make ends meet, Barrymore filed the papers necessary to emancipate herself from her parents in order to legally work the same hours as 18-year-olds. Fifteen-year-old recovering substance abusers, she found, sometimes have a difficult time paying the rent.

"She's so appealing, and she's so bright, and she's such an essentially nice human being," says rock star David Crosby, who along with his wife, Jan, took in Barrymore for close to a year after her treatment. "We found it very easy to love her, and I still do. I knew her dad, and I know her mom. I've watched the four generations of major alcoholic destruction that she comes out of. So I feel very strongly about her. She's an extremely talented kid who got dealt a very short hand. Her father was a disaster and never made any attempts to correct it – let's leave it at that. And to put it very mildly, as politely as I can, I disagree with her mother's approach to life rather much. I would really hope that Drew keep a distance from her. I will say this: I consider her mother one of the worst influences possible."

Luckily for Drew Barrymore, there were more parental substitutes – fantasy figures for most of the world but the only grounding forces in her existence. To this day, Steven Spielberg still tells Barrymore that she is his eldest child.

"If people like David and Jan and Steven weren't in my life, I'd probably be a lot more fucked up than I am," says Barrymore. "They made me believe that there actually were trustworthy people out there."

Barrymore fidgets and for a split second begins a microtirade about how Spielberg can only see her as his little girl. Then a moment later she smiles and admits that this is precisely the way she likes it.

This year on her birthday Spielberg sent a package to a restaurant where she and friends had gathered. In it was a blanket and a copy of the *Playboy* magazine in which Barrymore recently posed for a pictorial. The note said: "Here's my version of you in *Playboy* and a blanket to wrap yourself in." Inside the magazine Spielberg's art department had woven its own computer-generated wardrobe to cover her in every photo.

Drew Barrymore claims that no one who truly cares about her would dare call her Drew. It is a name she has heard and read so many times in so many contexts that she can barely stomach it. Some people call her D, but to most she is Daisy. Around her neck she wears a beaded, grade-school-style necklace that proudly spells out her flowery alias.

In person Barrymore is tiny, a miniature version of herself: ultrahip, 70s leftovers tightly clinging to her matchstick limbs and a coquettish expression attached to a face that doesn't look a day removed from her role in *E.T.* Because of this she possesses the ability to charm those around her in two contradictory manners. One is overt: all over-the-top enchantment and a contagious overflow of positive energy. The other is passive: a thinly veiled sadness and a distinct awareness that she comes with her share of baggage and could certainly use a little help in carrying it. She uses both tactics equally, and each comes in handy. Her history, she knows, is one in which most of the world is well schooled.

"I think the day I read an article that doesn't talk about my past, I'll probably shit in my pants," says Barrymore out of the blue. "Just shit my pants. I've never shit my pants my whole life, but that will be the time."

A laundry problem is quickly averted. Talk turns to *Mad Love*, and Barrymore, without missing a beat, travels back in time to make a point.

"My character goes into an institution, and her brain starts to deteriorate," she says. "How many other fucking actresses can relate to that?" She stops, waves her arm in the air like a kid trying to get the teacher's attention and shouts at the top of her lungs, "I can!"

And so the question bubbles menacingly to the surface: Does she worry about drinking again after having lost a year of her life to institutionalized rehabilitation?

"Every time I take a sip of alcohol, I think, 'What will people think?'" Barrymore says. "That's strange. Try that on for fucking size, living your life in a fishbowl for everyone to judge you. How 'bout that?"

Instead of an answer, another question is asked. This time, it is whether – regardless of public opinion – she fears that drinking might shatter the fragile balance that she has achieved in her life and career. She is, after all, part of a family tree that has been tragically uprooted by its history of alcoholism. To this, she smiles sweetly.

"I'm fine," Barrymore says. "This is what kills me. Ask any person in this industry if I ever missed one fucking day of work or if I was ever unprofessional or threw a temper tantrum or walked onto the set drunk. It's never happened. Doesn't that stand for something?"

She pauses and affects the more dramatic tone of a veteran actress.

"The only reason anyone found out anything about me is because some guy broke into my hospital and reported it," she says. "I never asked him to exploit my story. Nobody ever would have known, because I never missed a day of work over it. This guy has some pretty gnarly karma coming. So to clear the record I had to tell people myself. I had to go, 'OK, I'm getting my fucking life together.' And now I'm fine. I'm happy."

Barrymore dabs her hand at the tears that are beginning to chase each other down her cheeks and chooses her most childlike tone. "Can't just be happy?"

It is not your typical uniform in which to commune with nature. We are seated in a park alongside New York's East River, and Drew Barrymore is extolling the virtues of the great outdoors. She is wearing a leopard-print coat and an intentionally loose, low-cut blouse circa *Charlie's Angels*, the Cheryl Ladd years. Her purple sunglasses are held together with a diaper pin, and her hair is in spiky disarray. It is a souvenir snapshot from the Sex Pistols' reunion picnic. If, of course, they ever decide to hold one.

Barrymore settles onto a park bench and begins playing with a friend's dog. Suddenly she leans back and stares intently into the air.

"I tell you, nothing makes you appreciate being outside more than being locked up for a year," she says. "Nobody appreciates the sky more than me. Nobody. I have this fear that goes way beyond claustrophobia. I want to fucking be free. I mean that in every possible way."

More than any one thing, Barrymore seems defined by her inner battle between yearning for liberation and needing security and reassurance. She repeatedly and emphatically stresses that her friends are her family. Since the age of 15 she has lived a life of utter independence. At the same time, she has almost never been without a boyfriend, and a large number of those relationships have been live-in. When she and Erlandson began dating last June, they set about cohabiting almost immediately.

It wasn't your typical beginning to a love story (unless your idea of romance involves vomiting, in which case your opportunities are probably rather limited). It was in Los Angeles, outside a rock club, and Barrymore had stepped outside to relieve herself of anything she had eaten in the last 24 hours. Suddenly a hand was placed on her shoulder.

Noticing the tiny creature purging herself in the relatively seedy neighborhood, Erlandson had stopped to stand guard. Skyrockets, however, were not yet in flight.

Two weeks later, after being given the wrong hotel room number by a photographer, Barrymore knocked on Erlandson's door accidentally. There was intrigue, but still, Barrymore claims nothing was set in stone. And then while filming *Mad Love* in Seattle, Barrymore ran into Erlandson yet again. This time, he suggested they retreat to his apartment to play records. Nudge, nudge, wink, wink. The rest is history.

"I love him so much," says Barrymore at this moment and countless others to come. "And I have a family now from Eric, too. He has such a huge, amazing family. Seven kids. I never thought I'd have a sense of family until I had my own kids. I want two: a boy and a girl. My daughter will be named Ruby Daffodil."

Of course, there is extended family as well. While Barrymore brings to the relationship her trailerful of issues, Erlandson enters the union with Courtney Love – his bandleader and a walking psychology experiment in her own right. It's enough to make you want to buy some popcorn, sit back and watch the carnage. During the rehearsal for Hole's *MTV Unplugged* taping, in fact, Love chastised Erlandson by saying, "You're the one with the girlfriend on the cover of *Playboy*."

Explaining her position, Barrymore flashes a look of uneasy diplomacy. "We're not close at all," she says, "but that's fine. As democratically as possible, we don't feel the fucking need to be best friends. We respect each other's positions. No woman can suffer anything more torturous than losing the man she loves. In every way, that makes me totally accepting. I don't excuse actions, but it makes me totally accepting."

Barrymore's understanding is one born out of lifelong tutelage. Most of her mistakes have been public. Many of her scars are visible. About the only exception is the tattoo (one of six) that bears the name of her former fiancé, Jamie Walters – the actor and singer currently haunting America via radio and *Beverly Hills, 90210* episodes. Barrymore turns around and pulls up her shirt to display the artwork – a cherub holding a banner with a thick black line in the middle.

"His name is gone," Barrymore says. "It just bled. How insane is that? When my tattoo artist did it, you could definitely read it, but he said, 'Trust me.' I asked why, and he said, 'Just trust me.' A year later the name was gone, and so was Jamie."

Still, for all the analyses of her life – both paid for and heaped upon her unwittingly – she claims that nothing has been more painful than the mockery she endured after her marriage. Not that it was a blessed union by any means. Just that a mistake is a mistake – plain, simple and human.

"I was struck by her," says Patricia Vander Weken, the minister/psychic/private detective who performed the ceremony. "She was the kind of beauty that men would give up their entire kingdom to just have dinner with. She has a wonderful power and energy. And there are many people from England who have a rock steadiness that I felt he had. I really felt that this would be helpful to this young woman. I felt they'd be together spiritually for lifetimes to come."

In reality they were not together for many lifetimes. They weren't really together for many weeks. Now that the divorce is legal and there are no lawsuits pending, Barrymore's claim is that it was a marriage performed to help Thomas obtain a green card. Yes, they were dating; no, they were not ready to be married.

"He needed the marriage, and I stupidly agreed to it," says Barrymore. "We were married for six weeks, and we were only together for, like, two days of it. It was such a joke. The whole thing was a fucking lie. The press lied about it, we lied about it. I felt alienated from the world when it happened because I felt like such an asshole and that everybody knew it. But after I did something wrong, I made it right. I got out of it. I just said, 'OK, my fucking life's ruined, you got what you wanted, you're happy, I'm fucking out of here.'"

Quickly, another topic is suggested: a game of show and tell. Barrymore dumps out her backpack on request and begins reeling off the items: cigarettes, wallet, a photo of her kissing her boyfriend, Filofax, camera, pocket dictionary. She is asked to name the last word she looked up.

"I can't say," says Barrymore. "I actually looked it up and wrote it down, and it's really insane because it pertains a little too fucking closely to my life."

Barrymore is met with a slightly stunned silence.

"OK, fuck it," she says. "But if you print it, you have to explain this. I looked up this word because I was obsessed with finding its purity. The last word I looked up was *nirvana*. The definition of *nirvana* is 'the final freeing of the soul from all that enslaves it.'"

For what seems like the hundredth time in the past few days, Barrymore begins to cry. "When I looked that up, it was just crushing to my soul."

Don't call it a comeback. Barrymore's been here for years. Los Angeles: city where she spent what would have been her youth; site of her renaissance; spiritual home of the cellular phone.

We have traveled west to L.A., and Barrymore is driving around like she owns the place. She is behind the wheel of a black automobile that closely resembles a monster truck. Stuffed animals duck for cover all across the front dash. She slashes through traffic, stops dead on Sunset Boulevard to complain about another driver, and then lurches forward again with a broad smile. There is not a game in this town at which she is unskilled.

When she was broke not that many years ago, she worked in a coffee shop. "I was there for four months," says Barrymore. "Finally the owner said, 'You suck. You're such a bad employee.'" But shortly afterward she got the phone call that proved to be the beginning of the beginning. Word had gotten around town that Barrymore was doing well in her auditions and had been close to landing a number of roles. When she read for *Poison Ivy*, she could feel it was hers. On Page 1 of the script, her character had a tattoo of a cross with rose vines growing through it – the exact tattoo that Barrymore already had on her ankle. And so the phone rang to tell her that she would be a murdering teen-age slut. Barrymore cried tears of joy.

"I knew this movie was going to do exactly what I wanted it to do for me," she says. "Especially being a child actor, the last thing anyone will associate you with is sex. I had this vision of coming in with a bang. I had a vision of me being like Lolita. I wanted something crazy that no one would expect out of me."

More roles followed, some good (*Gun Crazy*), many disastrous (*Doppelgänger*; the TV show *2000 Malibu Road*, with Lisa Hartman Black) and one a guilty pleasure (*The Amy Fisher Story*). But more than anything, she was once again an entity. Finally, with *Boys on the Side*, Barrymore was playing with the A team. No matter how much you might have been put off by the movie's schmaltz quotient (read: a lot), there's no denying that Barrymore breathed life into the film at every turn. It's not surprising that she counts that character as the one most like her true self.

Now she's being asked to carry entire movies. In *Mad Love*, the movie lives and dies on the chemistry of Barrymore and Chris O'Donnell. It is a heartwarming tale brought to you by Disney. Even if Barrymore describes it in less-than-Disneyesque terms.

"The story is so innocent, it's beautiful," says Barrymore. "They're not just these fucked-up fuckers who are just fucking out-of-control crazy. They're just sweet kids who just want fucking happiness."

Fuckin'-a right. Now seems as good a time as any to mention – if you haven't already guessed – that one of Barrymore's favorite and most oft-used utterances is the *f* word. It is less an offensive usage than an animated one. Take her life philosophy: "I have to fucking be crazy and live my life and just fucking go for it, fuck everything and just fucking suck the marrow out of every fucking day." Nonetheless, we will defer talk of her *Mad Love* life to O'Donnell.

"We always hung out together all through the shoot," says O'Donnell. "Drew seems very mature, but when you get to know her, she acts her age more. Butterflies and daisies. *That* is her deal. And she has a book with her at all times to keep track of the world. I always gave her a hard time because she'd actually be taking pictures of clouds."

From the friendly skies, next stop *Batman Forever*, the predicted blockbuster that serves as another great indication that Hollywood is no longer shying away from Barrymore. She decided to play the role of Sugar – a henchwoman for Two-Face, played by Tommy Lee Jones – as a tribute to her idol, Marilyn Monroe.

"I think Drew's marvel is that she is the one who is breaking the chain," says David Crosby. "We're talking about all the way back to Ethel Barrymore and [Drew's] grandfather John. She's the one that's going to stay on top and break that chain. She's been brave and persistent in fighting her way back to having the respect of her peers. She earned every inch – no one else."

Toward that end, Barrymore, along with two partners, recently founded a production company. When she is not filming a movie, the establishment serves as her daily commitment. It is a business intent on playing hardball, taking the initiative and developing its own projects on its own terms. Barrymore named the juggernaut Flower Films.

"Fuuuuck!"

The person screaming is Drew Barrymore. The same Drew Barrymore who just recently said, "Please don't have a problem with me. Please do not judge me. Actually try, just for one second, to look at the good sides of my life. Look at what I'm going toward instead of what I've done before." But here she is, seated in a quiet but full hotel bar, screaming.

"FUUUUCK!"

She is not angry. On the contrary, these are *fuuuucks* of joy – *baisers de joie*, if you will – it's just that they're a tad loud. She is attempting to explain how some days when you wake up in a surly mood, you just need to get it out of your system and then get on with your day.

It's an interesting point mostly because it illustrates something else altogether. While she often talks about her desire for anonymity, Barrymore continually does things to draw attention to herself. Lots and lots of attention. Tales of self-indulgent, look-at-me behavior stalk Barrymore and Erlandson-like a bloodhound with a personal stake in the chase. She admits to the disturbingly contradictory behavior.

"It's weird, I know," Barrymore says. "My whole life has been this open book. I'm so used to it on one level, and I've learned to really cope with it because it's never going to be any other way. Everyone will always be curious about my life because it's been insane. All I have to say to those people is 'Fuck you,' and yet, 'Take the ride.' "

Barrymore stops and fixes a serious expression on her face. "Do you think people are interested in me because of the tragedy or because of the survival?" she says.

The answer Barrymore receives is, both. The world is not littered with 20-year-olds battling back from personal catastrophe to regain the form and stature they exhibited during kindergarten. It makes for an oddly compelling spectator sport. There's just no telling what aspect people are most drawn to. Some people attend hockey games for the fights, some for the precision skill of the athletes.

"I guess that makes sense," says Barrymore. "Sometimes it pisses me off, wondering which one people are interested in." She pauses. "I can't see myself the way other people see me. I'm not insecure. I've been through way too much fucking shit to be insecure. I've got huge balls. But I've been humbled. That makes you grateful for every day you have."

And so Barrymore exits, armed with the power of this new information. Two days later, interrogation complete, she sends flowers and a poem: "I watched you go down the sidewalk/Away went my being/Away went my friend/I will find you again."

It is a thoughtful offering that raises guilty questions. Is it a gesture of pureness, a response to human interaction and acceptance? Perhaps it is an attempt to control a situation – the act of someone with whom social engagement is less an art than a survival instinct. It doesn't really matter. Either way, it is sadly beautiful.