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My guest today is Bertie Blackmon.

I spoke with Bertie at the recent Barron Writers Festival, which was held this year outside in the Bangalow Showgrounds.

The sky was blue, the sun was warm, and the northern rivers turned on its full charm.

Bertie had friends and family in the audience, including her mum, who shouted out the occasional correction from the floor, which is not something that usually happens with guests, but which I think is fairly typical of the Blackmon family.

Bertie is a musician, a writer, and an artist.

Her memoir, titled *Bohemian Negligence*, tells the story of Bertie's childhood.

Her early life was marked by the magic of having the artist Charles Blackmon as her father.

Bertie's mum was his much younger second wife.

Charles Blackmon was one of the most celebrated Australian artists of the 20th century.

He created dream-like figurative paintings of Alice in Wonderland, of schoolgirls, of cats and flowers, and of sleeping women.

And Bertie says her childhood was full of imagination and an intoxicating freedom.

But there was darkness too,

and there are dangers that can show up when children are left to navigate the world too much on their own.

CHEERING AND APPLAUSE

Bertie, your dad, Charles Blackmon, had six kids.

Where are you in the lineup?

Smuckbang in the middle.

Well, three. No, four. I'm number four.

Yeah.

Almost the middle. An accounting problem.

Artists middle too. Yeah.

And how old was he when you were born?

Um, I think he was 52.

Was a lovely, middle-sized, lanky man with slightly balding, curly, grey hair.

A very impish creature.

I think in the photos I've seen of Charles Blackmon, there's often a beret.

Was that something that he usually wore?

Yeah, it wasn't for display, only he did wear them at home too.

He had a little rack of them next to the door where he would select what colour.

How were things between him and your mum when you were little?

They were very much in love with each other, my mum and dad.

It wasn't, yeah, all I remember really about their relationship is a lot of tenderness and love and respect between them, which was beautiful to be around.

When did that change, or how did that change?

I think that changed, well, you know, my father was a notorious drinker, so I think that the drinking became more intense for my mum, and then my mum decided to leave because it was too much for everybody.

He was already famous, you know, a celebrated artist.

What was it like being in his studio as a kid?

I was very big, and I think about walking into it when I was a little bit bigger, although I'm still pretty small.

It always felt so enormous to me.

There were big blank canvases or canvases full of colour and things kind of stacked up.

There was always a lot of work going on,

and it was a beautiful place to sashay around as a child.

What was it like watching him work?

How did he go about making a painting?

Well, I mean, I guess when I would watch him paint, I was quite little,

so my memories of him painting are kind of kaleidoscopic, you know,

so I remember the sound of the paintbrush really vividly,

and I remember the sound of, like, glug glugging of probably what was turpentine,

and I remember snapping of charcoal and very much the smell and the scent

and the wild colour of everything,

and I remember him teaching me how to draw a straight line,

which when I was a little bit older, I think I was seven, I was a year two,

and one of the things you have to do is fill an exercise book full of, like, ruled lines,

and I was like, I don't need a ruler.

My dad told me how to write a straight line, so I'd put my pinky finger down

and, like, go down really quickly, which I filled the whole book.

I think a number of books like that, and they were like, no.

That is incorrect, and I was devastated.

When he was working, did he need silence, or did he listen to music?

He usually listened to the radio, listen to the ABC radio a lot,

radio national, a lot of...

It's true, though.

A lot of classical music, and the only more popular music I remember him listening to was, like, Roy Orbison and The Beatles, and that's it.

I asked other siblings about what else, and that was mostly what they remember.

And, you know, those beautiful figurative paintings of his, would he draw,

would he sketch out the painting before he got to work with the paint itself?

Yeah, usually, me would draw with charcoal onto the canvas

and then go straight on or rub it off, and I think other...

Me, my mum, who's sitting right there, can talk more to the skill of the...

you know, how to paint a picture, but I remember watching him do a painting,

and he would put masking tape across parts of the canvas

and then paint over the masking tape and then rip it off,

and suddenly there'd be a really beautiful palm leaf sitting there,

and I was like, wow, that's...

You know, using texture and geometry and things and different little tricks like that was always beautiful as a child to watch.

Again, I never watched him paint like that as an adult, so I think my memories of it are kind of refracted that way.

Was he a kind of painter that would get frustrated with work and leave it aside, or was it a joyful place for him, the studio, usually?

I don't remember him getting frustrated at his paintings.

I remember him talking to his paintings and talking to how he worked and talking to the line of it embodying, you know, the line of a cat's tail, and this woman is smelling these beautiful sweet flowers, and outside is the moon, and the moon is talking to the cat, and the woman is looking away because she's, you know, had a rough day. I know, things like that, he would talk to...

Well, I'm making it up, like, talk to, like, whatever he felt in the moment, and I guess maybe artists can be split up that way in moments as you make it, and it kind of, they create themselves as they become what they are.

He liked to dress up, your dad.

What sort of things got him in a costume, and what were some of the best?

Well, I think most things would easily get him in a costume, but he used to dress up as the hunchback of Notre Dame, which I always enjoy very much.

Though, usually it was women. It was a female hunchback of Notre Dame.

It was just...

He was mates with Barry Humphreys, yeah.

Yeah, he was, so...

I mean, I think they probably dressed up a whole lot more before I was born.

LAUGHTER

Frocks, a lot of that going on, and there's a chapter in my book where I talk about getting to pick his bra cup size before taking me to school.

We had a huge, long table near the door, which was full of grapefruits and oranges and lemons, and probably apples and other things too.

But I would have to choose what size fruit would be his bra size.

What did he go for? The big ones.

LAUGHTER

And you say before he dropped you off at school, so he'd dress in a dress and grapefruits down a bra and take you to primary school.

Yeah, yeah, into the little yellow hold and burina that we got into.

I think if I did anything like that to my kids, the horror is...

You know, I can't even imagine it. How did you feel? Were you embarrassed?

No, I loved it. I thought it was amazing.

It was really into it.

And no one seemed to... The school that I went to, no one really made a big fuss either, so...

That's just Charles.

Yeah, it was just, you know, it was just him.

You've got a lovely description in the memoir of cooking spaghetti together.
How did he teach you to cook spaghetti? What was the secret?
Well, it's a very... I mean, I think it's a secret most people that like to cook spaghetti know where you put the spaghetti in hot, boiling, salty water.
And the way that you test it is you throw it at the ceiling and see if it sticks.
So we would do a lot of that, and I actually tried it recently the other day.
It did not stick. It fell back on me.
But he would do it a lot, and there were lots of strands of dried spaghetti on the ceiling of his kitchen.
Where had he learned about European food?
He told you some stories about working at the Mora's café.
Yeah, I mean, he loved food. He did live in Europe for a long time.
Again, before I was born.
And again, before I was born, he did work in the Mora's kitchens down in Melbourne, cooking and doing all sorts of things.
Shannan and Genzi would have been doing in that kitchen with those guys.
How did he repurpose the wine down there?
Well, this is a story he told me, so I presume it is hopefully true.
They used to run out of wine quite a bit down there.
So he would go around to everyone's wine dregs that were in the kitchen and pour them back in the bottles and slap a new label on it and just draw a lovely picture and then go back and serve it out again.
I would say I tried to do that once and the wine was disgusting.
I'm suspicious that I've had that wine somewhere.
You just know.
So hanging out with him could be pretty fun.
I mean, more fun than going to school.
When you wanted to get out of school, how would you convince him that you needed to stay at home?
I mean, I think every child has their number of tricks, but he did do a great trick on me one day where he had like a...
I don't think they have this anymore.
They probably don't work, but it was like a little dot and then when you put it on your forehead, it would change colour to see if you had a temperature or not.
And so he put a little dot on my head one day and I was like, you know, Daddy, I'm very, very sick.
And then I saw that he'd just taken one of the red dots from like the sold painting boxes and stuck it on my head so I could stay home with him.
So it was very red and I was very sick.
So sick.
What could you do together when you were so deathly ill, Bertie?
Well, you know, we did lots of things.

He would get to go and hang out in the studio with him
or we would go to the etching press studio
and he was doing a lot of etchings at the time.
He loved to do etchings and so he taught me how to do that,
which was wonderful.
I did learn that when you draw something into an etching plate,
it does come out backwards when it gets printed.
So I did a few little etchings when I was in there with him
and everything is reverse, which I think I like, you know, such as life.
After your parents separated,
your dad introduced you to a new partner.
What kind of impression did she make on you?
Well, you know, I think she was a bit of a weird woman.
She was a bit younger.
She was a little bit...
Yeah, she was vivacious.
She was a little bit witchy.
She used to do this kind of weird...
A little bit witchy.
...finger.
You know, she'd come up to me and she'd be like,
you need more vitamin C.
You need these things.
And I was, you know, young enough to be like, that's fine.
I'll take those...
It's a little bit northern rivers.
Yeah, well, you know, she might be here somewhere.
You begin the Memoir Birdie with a different kind of memory
than the ones that you're recounting now.
It's an early memory of lying next to your dad.
Why is that such an important memory for you?
It was the first time that...
It was the first time that I felt the difference in my father,
that I felt a little bit unsafe around him,
a bit nervous.
He is very drunk.
So I just remember...
It's just such a...
It's probably one of my most vivid, old-time memories.
And it just stuck with me for many, many years
because I was just quite confused, I guess, about how I felt.
There's a kind of ambiguity that, I guess,
is how a child feels when they're around
and an adult they know and love and trust,

but can sense that that adult is out of control
in a way, that mixed feeling.
Yeah, and I must have, for the first time,
sort of sensed that maybe that's what drunk was
or because I could feel that it wasn't quite him,
and I guess that's what made me nervous.
Do you always remember alcohol being a part of his life
when you were around?
No, not really. Definitely in the later years,
not when he was with my mother so much at all,
but definitely when he remarried again.
I think his drinking just got worse and worse.
You describe a visit like a kind of a family reunion
where you and your younger brother flew up to join your dad
and his new wife and other siblings in cans.
And things seem like they got a little bit out of hand
that that line between celebration and something darker
was starting to get crossed.
Yeah, I mean, I would...
I mean, there were many long lunches that we would have
as families and everyone would drink lots of wine
and how those things go, everyone gets louder and louder.
But I would walk into the hotel room
and he would be sculling the little bottles of alcohol.
And as a child, I was still...
It doesn't land on you.
You just think that that's normal.
And, you know, then he would just kind of go to sleep on the floor.
There is often then, or it seemed to be in your experience,
you can get exposed to a kind of adult sexuality
when alcohol is in play in a way
that I think sober parents wouldn't do.
Is that something that was disturbing at the time
or more when you look back, you think that was a weird...
weird things to see, weird things to be around?
No, I think it was definitely not at the time
because it was very normalized in terms of it was just kind of going on.
So for me, again, just being a young child,
I just didn't think there was anything wrong with that
until I then told my mother one day what I'd seen.
And then, you know, it was quite alarming to me, her reaction.
And I also thought that I'd then done something wrong
and then you kind of go into this kind of...
the talk in your head probably starts to change as a child

where you then was the moment when I started to look at things differently and noticed things and, you know, after certain moments like that, people would try to stop to have drinking.
So when I would go and see him, he would have little stashes of wine and I remember I'd like dobbed him in one day and Mum came and picked me up and he was... and he got really angry at me.
It was one of the first times he'd...
I could just... he was really pissed off and I was just modified that I'd, you know, broken his trust, I guess, but also I knew that I'd done the right thing.
He just really sticks out for me, that one.
How did things compare at your mum's place?
Was it a calmer kind of house?
Yeah, it was much calmer. It was a completely different space, you know.
Mum's a painter too, so in her house, in our house, it was a really safe house. You know, it was full of colour.
There were lots of people coming round all the time.
And, you know, at Dad's house, when he married his third wife, it became a lot kind of...
It was ridiculous and great at times, but there was a lot more sadness in the house.
I would start to feel that way.
But, you know, when things were like that, I wasn't at my Dad's house all the time, so I was mostly with Mum.
You did have a really terrifying experience at your mum's place one night when someone broke in.
What did you wake to? What happened?
Well, we lived in the sort of...
And Paddington, at the time, was in the 80s, which was very, I think, lots of...
I don't know, whatever drug was going on at that time.
Before Ice.
Heroin.
Heroin, yeah.
And we had, I think, eight robberies in two years, which was a lot in the previous week.
Someone had been kind of trying to take our TV in the house, and Mum came downstairs and she'd shoot them away, as much as you'd shoot a drug addict out of the house.
And then the next week, they came back and they crowbarred in our front door, tied up.
My mum ripped out the phone calls from the walls

and, you know, screamed at her a lot.
And I was a seven, six or seven at the time,
so sitting up in bed and my brother was asleep.
And he disguised himself by putting my school uniform over his head,
which is a very weird thing to see.
The robber did that.
Yeah, yeah, when he came into the room.
But luckily, nobody was hurt,
but it was a very, again, a very sonic memory for me,
like a lot of texture and, like, the threat of violence.
We're very lucky that nothing bad happened to anybody.
How did you get help?
How did you free your mum if she was tied up?
That's terrifying.
Well, I tried to untie her, but I was very small.
So I just screamed out the window for help a number of times
while this man had taken our car.
I could hear him, like, revving it up the road.
So I called for help and I think someone three doors down
came and knocked on the door.
And it went back and asked mum, you know,
should I open the door?
Hoping that it wasn't.
And, you know, feeling very terrified walking through our house
that had our stuff thrown all over it
and opening the door, not really knowing, you know,
who would be there on the other side.
Yeah, that's just...
I don't recommend that experience for anybody.
You also spent time with your mum's mum, Jane.
Where did she live and what was her house like?
She lived in Wallara, which was just up the road,
which was around the corner from where my dad lived
with his first wife and children.
So they all lived rather close to each other,
which I think is interesting.
She lived in this beautiful house,
which had a white picket fence and was very tall
and had, I think, what maybe wasn't at the time,
but now is the tallest palm tree on the street
so you can really see it from a distance.
And it was number 99.
What did she look like?
What did she like to wear?

She was very tiny and she had a little bob.
She had a brown bob.
She would only wear black, many, many, many shades of black.
And later in life she started to turn into
some, like, other earth tones,
but mostly it was trying to find the perfect black.
We went into so many shops trying to find the blackest black
and she's like, not darling, that's not the right black.
You watch that once and it washes out.
It becomes not as black.
So she ended up in, like, a few, like, polyester numbers,
where I think, like, in some of the cheapest shops,
sell better black, black black that does not fade.
What sort of stories did she tell you about her life?
I mean, she had an amazing life.
She, you know, she was a single mum with four children
with a number of jobs at the same time, I would say.
And she, after the time most women would hold to marry
or, you know, become a secretary,
and my grandmother did not do either of those things.
She, well, she went over to Paris.
She went to Europe, you know, as a really young woman.
And I do believe, actually, she did have a few jobs
as a secretary over there,
but for, you know, very interesting people.
And she met my grandfather in Budapest
and, you know, had a...
Baghdad, sorry, Mum, you know.
You know, yeah.
This is a new experience being fact-checked while there is access.
Yeah, well, you know.
Someone take Birdie's mother out of the tent
so Birdie can say whatever she needs to.
I was...
It starts with a B.
It starts with a B.
So she'd had a kind of adventurous, independent life.
She had an incredibly adventurous life.
She was like, darling, all I needed in this tiny little bedside
was to wash myself in the sink and I had a little gas stove
and put everything on that and that's all you ever need.
And then she ended up in this wonderful, rambling house
in Wallara that was full of her beautiful treasures.
She was a...

I think hoarder is too strong a word,
but she had an amazing amount of incredible treasures, baskets,
and she'd have newspapers upstairs,
but, you know, just her life was all around her house
and really extraordinary.
She was obsessed with percussion,
which is where I first discovered music in that way.
She had an amazing collection of Japanese gongs.
She'd give me chopsticks and I'd go into the garden
and play them.
I remember being very little doing that and I just loved it.
She loved it too.
She loved what she made me do that.
One of the things you write about Birdie
is the sexual abuse that you suffered from a neighbour of your aunts
and you told your mum about that, which is so brave.
What happened then?
Well, I guess I was somewhat of a whistleblower with this person
because he was a serial pedophile.
Yeah, there were a number of young children
that he'd been doing that to.
So, you know, my memories of what exactly happened
are a little bit blurry because, again, I was very young,
but I think mum asked me the question,
like, has anybody ever touched you?
And I just said yes because they had.
That's a question that I think about.
I look at my own child now and I'm just like, bloody hell.
You know, you just can't imagine it.
The answer being yes.
So, you know, my memories of it are kind of fuzzy and confused
because, again, I go into a space of seeing everyone that's very stressed
and, you know, feeling like it's all my fault,
which is, I think, very common for children.
But when it happens to them, you don't want anyone else to, you know,
be in a stressful situation,
or usually you've been groomed to place a blame on yourself
and that you're asking for it and it's all on you.
And, you know, if anything gets out that everyone will turn on you,
which is a terrible thing to tell a child.
It's a very, very common story to hear that.
As you say, you were a kind of a whistleblower.
Did this abuser go to jail?
No, he didn't.

It was a number of years before he ended up being prosecuted and, again, these memories are blurry.
But by the time everyone started to come forward, he committed suicide.
So he was never prosecuted, but he would have been.
Did you ever consider not writing about that part of your story in the book or what was it like to include that, to go to it in a narrative way that you did in the memoir?
It was very difficult to write, I've got to say.
And I didn't know how I would write something like that because I've read some books where there's pedophilia involved and some descriptions of it and, you know, what the children went through and I find those, obviously I find those things very difficult to read because it brings up my own experiences of all of it.
So I have to say that I could barely reread them now and when I had to narrate them for the audiobook, it was incredibly difficult.
It's one thing to kind of write it down with your eyes shut and relive it and you feel, you know, physically ill and it's not nice, but, you know, I hope that maybe by writing it down it's a type of therapy that gets good to get things out of your body.
And then saying it out loud is a whole other thing.
It's like being asked a question, has anyone done this to you?
Yes, it makes it very real and then saying the words out loud make them very real in a different kind of way.
It's very confronting.
You describe how your mum tried to take action to help you and you were believed and yet you were left alone with this man who no one knew what was going to happen but is that part of the negligence of this title that you were put in a situation that had the potential to be dangerous?
No, the negligence word comes with the story, you know, with my relationship with my father.
I think that anyone, you know, this person was a family friend, he'd been a family friend in our family for a very long time.
You know, I think if anyone suspected anything like that no one would be doing anything like that.
You know, my aunt lived next door, he seemed like a perfectly nice human being, he was like our family accountant, you know, like anything like this, it's usually very close family friends that no one suspects and kind of speak about negligence.
In a way, like, you know, there's the right relationship that I had with my father in many of the beautiful ways,

this open way of being and how we kind of grew up
in these different ways and I know negligence seems like a really harsh word
but I don't think that my childhood was negligent at all
but I think there were sort of elements of that
between parts of relationships within my childhood
that probably speak to what that is.

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I was struck by the number of times
that you were in situations without an adult
with some dodgy older kids
and adults were off having a good time
and the kids are kind of in their own society
and how, reading that as an adult, how precarious that is.
I guess like a lot of people that we hung out with at the time,
that's how everyone was really living
and a lot of that actually happened up here.

So, you know, kids just hanging out on mass
and then adults are like hanging out in the house
and like we go off and build like tepees in the forest
and like catch yabbies and like for us
we just spent a lot of time together
like it wasn't like one child kind of outside
or they were like a mass of us of all like different ranges of ages and things
and we had just the best time
but you know like then sort of weird things can happen in those situations
and I think luckily nothing too kind of strange happened
there was you know a horse riding camp that I went to
where there was like a weirdo old kid that was
you know some things are happening with the kind of younger girls
but as far as like us off in the forest
there's like little impious kids catching yabbies
it was pretty great and also you know the adults all together
having an adult time and the kids are lighting fires
as they should be.

Did you seek out kids from different sorts of homes
for friends like did you want kids who had the really straight
180s solid family or were you gravitating towards kids who were
in situations more like yours?

I think that like a lot of my old friends are like
their parents are friends with my mum so we all naturally
hung out together a lot.

Some kids I knew some kind of normalish kids at school

and I would go to their house and be like they're eating frozen pie for dinner yum.

And you know I'd get for their like weird food that I'd never eaten but like in the end kind of wasn't really for me and probably yeah I was more actually interested in their processed food than anything else because our house has been so lucky and my mum is a really amazing cook, my dad is amazing cook those fresh fruits and vegetables.

I was like what is this interesting smell?

Tomato sauce from a camel soup.

As you're making clear you really want to show the light as well as the dark that came with the freedom that your parents encouraged or insisted that you take.

Tell me about your time in a rodeo in the Northern Territory.

I got to go on a fantastic trip up into Catherine with a dear family friend of ours who had a daughter of the same age and I was there for three weeks.

That was my first time going up north into the bush and seeing the earth be a different colour.

I'd seen this sand pretty much.

So I was like a little young white kid venturing into a space you know into a community and things like that.

It was amazing like just so beautiful and incredible and then you know also I'm a city kid and I still am.

So confronted with like horses and manure and like work.

It was fun though like we got to go I got to go on a wild goat and got sort of slapped into the middle of the stadium and like tied onto a wild goat.

Just wait because usually rodeos are involving horses.

What do you mean wild goat?

I have like a kid section where you know the adults where and the kids are in a big mass group together strapped to goats getting slapped out into an auditorium where they're like go, go, go for it.

Who came off best in that contest?

You or the goat?

The goat.

I got whipped off really quickly.

There is a photograph of me just clung on.

There's actually another photo I've seen that doesn't have the goat of you from that trip.

It's just a really great photo of a kid.

Can you describe your expression or there's a real presence that you have?

Yeah, it's actually one of my favourite photos.
Well, myself as a child, I think I'm 10 or 11, I think.
And I'm sitting and I think I'm feeling pretty cool.
I do say at the time I think I felt pretty cool
but I'm sitting out the back of the rodeo
against like a horse trailer sort of leaning there
wearing like a trucker cap and like no t-shirt
and jeans and no shoes and just kind of looking away
just feeling very free and still feeling young too.
Like I don't remember that kind of which sort of comes later
on when you're becoming where hormones kick in.
You're like, oh, I feel suddenly really different
from everyone else.
So I was just sitting there very comfortable in my own skin.
It's probably the look that you're getting.
I look at that.
I'm like, I want to be that again.
That's great.
You mentioned the percussion at your grandmother's house
and music is this part of you from such an early age.
What was the experience that you had in the car
with your mum and a friend driving down to the coast
and they were playing Nick Cave on the stereo?
What was happening inside as you were hearing that music?
I was the first time that, I mean, I grew up with a lot of loud music
around mum, love to play loud pop music, which is just so good.
But it was the first time that, you know,
you're nearly driving somewhere and you're watching the road
and curling down this highway.
And I could see the water in the distance
and was, come sail your ships by Nick Cave.
And it was the first moment where music really sung into my bones
in a very particular way where it really shook me
and got into me.
And I was like, I resonate so deeply with where I felt he was coming from
and for whatever was going on in my life at the time,
I was like, I want to do things like what he does.
He's like conjuring this amazing resonance and nuance of life
that I feel like I touch upon sometimes
and I just felt very compelled to want to do that too.
What was your first experience of singing into a mic before an audience?
What did I say in the book?
School.
School, OK.

But you can say whatever you want.
That's right, unless your mother wants to intervene.
But from my point of view, your memory is yours.
No, it's true.
My first main instrument was drums.
I played drums for a number of years
and I used to play drums in the garage,
which is pretty typical of any drummer.
And I remember mum came in one day and I had headphones
and I was playing the drums and I was singing.
And I started to feel like singing a little bit
and I remember she opened my eyes and she was just looking at me.
I can't remember what she said, but she was like, I was like,
I've been watched.
OK, but maybe I want to do this a little bit more
and I was not sure how I felt about that,
but we had a school.
Was she surprised by your talent, do you think?
I think she was astounded by my talent.
She must have disappeared like...
Beyonce, bring it.
I don't know if she was.
Melting.
No, she's horrified.
Don't sing.
No, because as mum, yes, says,
quiet child apart from me bashing the drums really loud in the garage.
And then we had a school performance
and there was like an audition to sing,
so I was like, OK, I'm going to try this out.
And I never told anyone, which is pretty typical of me,
I just go off and do things.
So I went off and auditioned and then I got in.
Were you nervous?
I was, but like, it was just this thing that happens.
Like, when I sing, things just kind of fall away
and it feels very powerful to me.
Like, I feel...
Like, when you sing, obviously, your chest resonates
because there's air in there moving around,
but it just...
I feel very connected in myself when I do,
when I'm not hitting a wrong note.
But it felt like that when I auditioned

and then I performed it.
It was the first time I think mum would ever...
No one knew that I was doing this
and I think I just denounced everyone that I was doing it
and then everyone was there
and there was sort of five or 600 people in this audience
and then I sung The Long and Winding Road by The Beatles
with a band.
And that was really bloody great.
Come in with a bang. Yeah.
Your dad wasn't there to watch you sing that night, though.
What was going on with him?
He...
I think by that point,
he suffered a number of strokes,
which kind of kicked forward Corsikov syndrome,
which is like an alcohol-induced dementia.
So singing became a way for me,
I guess, to express, you know, loss and longing,
kind of loneliness and a confused space in that regard.
But no, he didn't hear me sing that.
And so The Long and Winding Road
was the eventual end of his
in the beginning of my long and winding road of life.
He descended into that alcohol-induced dementia.
Who was looking after him?
His wife was no longer with him, his third wife,
and so he had close friends that would come and help
and that they eventually became his carers.
He had dementia for 20 years before he passed away,
so it was a long...
And, you know, at the beginning, he had these strokes,
so it was more like a recovery for having strokes
than he had another exhibition of really big charcoal drawings,
and he'd been trying to kind of...
Not trying, but like everyone was encouraging to paint and work
because it's where he loved to do most in this world.
But, you know, you could see the dementia really kick in
and he became very frustrated and, you know, as it is with that.
Disease use become a bit like a broken record
and so in his drawing, you know, everything started to change
and he drew and drew and drew,
but started to repeat the same drawings over and over again
and it was like a slow unwinding in a certain type of way.

What kind of relationship could you, as his daughter,
have with him, as that dementia took hold?
I think it was a very refracted one.
It became very, I guess, one-sided in many ways
because I couldn't... I would try and ask him questions
and I think he would become very frustrated
that he couldn't answer them so he would
just sort of say something else back usually.
He got really obsessed with strange things.
Well, like great things like the Titanic.
He was obsessed with that for a number of years, which was great.
He was obsessed with Julia Gillard, which was also really great.
Were he obsessed wanting to talk about or wanting to find out about?
Yeah, like just her name and then it would just be like a few sentences about her
or very famously he ended up in hospital again with pneumonia
and they gave him like 17 blood transfusions or whatever
to kind of get him back on track
and then he recited the entire script from Young Frankenstein
from beginning to end.
You know, so that we're all like, he's back, you know.
So I knew things were good when he could recite that film.
Was he, you know, you describe the frustration he had
with his primary language, which was art, drawing.
Was he still drawing as he was in his 70s, 80s?
Yeah, definitely.
He was drawing up until the very, you know,
the last sort of days before he died
before he couldn't sort of hold a pen anymore.
I was lucky enough, he was very, he was around the corner for me
in a facility and I would go there most days
and, you know, sit there and he would draw
and he would draw these beautiful drawings
where he would do the outline of usually a schoolgirl and a cat
and then he would colour in the whole page in black borrough
and they were all in black borrough
so they're in these beautiful faded images
that also look like they're behind static
which I think is really interesting and beautiful
and I think that they are gorgeous snapshots into
and also really sad, like hard to look at
but I feel like that's what he was seeing
and I think it's really interesting, you know,
being able to be, you know, apart from him being my dad
and the complexity of our relationship

being able to be next to, like, such an extraordinary artist
and watching him recede
and seeing what that looked like to him.

It's such a painful, heartbreaking condition
in that you're with someone physically
but the way that you're with them is so different.

Were you able to talk about any of the stuff
that you write about in this book?

Could you have any of those conversations with him
or did you try to have them just one way?

No, I didn't.

I think I tried to...

I was actually scared about what he might say, I think
because I hadn't been able to get...

I mean, I have this tattoo on my arm which says
on a hill there was you and me, Charles,
which he wrote on my arm about 10 years before he died
with a texter and I was like, that's great
because he hadn't said anything to me for a really long time
and it was this beautiful moment.

I was like, he always remembered who I was
but it was a really beautiful tender moment
where I was just always searching for him to say,
like, I love you, I miss you, or happy birthday,
or whatever you wish for when you're a kid
and he wrote that on my arm.

So, you know, I have that moment
and that's very beautiful and precious to me.
And then the moment when the person that you've lost
but not lost actually does pass away
can be such a mix of feelings too.

What was it like for you?

I mean, it was really beautiful.

We were lucky because my big family
and my other siblings were not around
and so my mum and my brother came
and we were all in the room together when he passed away
which was we were all sleeping next to him on the floor
and, yeah, it was very...

and we'd all been awake all night for a number of days
and it was quite a privilege to be next to someone
as they pass away, I mean, anyone,
but your parent and watching what the body does
when it slowly goes as well

and, you know, he stopped eating
and then I accidentally...
he was just looking at me, I was eating some chocolate
so I was like, fine, I'm just going to give him this lint bowl,
this lint chocolate bowl
and I got stuck, I don't remember, he got stuck in his throat
and I was like, oh my God, I've murdered him
it's like Charles Blackwood does by death of lint chocolate ball
but, you know, he got it down
I was like, oh my God, thank God
messed that up but we sat around and we drank wine around him
and some of his old friends came around
and it was really special for my brother
and my mum and I to be in a room with him alone
which we'd never been before together since I was a child
because of the dementia
and I think, you know, my dad loved my mum
and their breakup was very difficult for both of them,
you know, really difficult
so it was very healing to be with him
but it was the moment we all fell asleep
for about five minutes that, you know, he passed away
and we woke up and he was gone
You mentioned that it would have been his 95th birthday
Yesterday
Yesterday
How do you mark that anniversary?
Well, usually I mark it with having steak with Bernay's sauce
which was one of his favourite meals
but instead I marked it with a hot dog
watching Matilda's football
I think he would be happy
Yeah, I think he would have been into that
Anyone would be happy
Yeah, yeah, a couple of snags, you know
You're a parent now, Birdie
How do you talk about your dad to your son?
I wrote a children's book called Micah the Star Sailor
which was about a little girl
who misses her father
who spends a lot of time in space
and he's an astronaut
so I tell Remy that he is an astronaut in space
and that's where he is

and he's now taken to telling me that he sees him all the time
which can be a little bit like, oh my God, he's there
He's winking at me, I can see Charlie
and it's just really beautiful
It's very confronting sometimes
because I'm sure he probably can see him
I know that he is there
and it's a really beautiful and circular life moving forwards
and memories being these living things
We have our memories of things we experienced in our life
but then the stories that we tell our children
and how they, now then his memory of me telling him that
as he gets older and about his grandfather
and the way that I talk to my son
I like to invoke the way that my dad talked to me
and my mum talks to me
and in a particular way of describing the world
I was very lucky to have such poetic parents
Life was domestic but life has to be incredibly beautiful
or it's not worth living
I think that sense of being has been really instilled in me
and I will instill that in my boy too
Do you see flashes of your dad in him?
I do, I see when he's making a weird grunt or a shriek sound
or the way that he chews his food with his mouth open
but sometimes I see him looking away
that's something and it's a real black man look
I know I have it, I get told it all the time
it's this particular look, you're just like your father
I guess that's good
So there are things that you want to pass on
about the way that you were raised
that poetic sensibility, the freedom
what do you want to do differently?
Much of those things I think are so important
I would like to do the same
I feel frustrated that I don't have
like a lovely big bohemian house to raise my son in
I have no kind of wild notes that I had
because as much as it was nuanced in some ways
I think that kind of live living is really really beautiful
and wild
and so I would like to be able to give that to him
but I just have to find different ways to do it

not in my tiny little flat in Pod's point
we go to the park
This is where the real estate reality is
That is, it's really hit me I was like damn
I didn't get my big house
You dedicate the book to your mum, Genevieve
what was it like having her read your version of your early life?
I mean I spoke to mum a little bit
like she knew I was writing the book
but I had a number of conversations with her
while writing it that I didn't want to talk to her
to fact check or like talk about what I was writing too much
because I didn't want it to colour
I guess my memories and my experiences of things
so I think we had a number of conversations about that
which made me feel less nervous
because I was like the main thing that I wanted
especially mum like is most important for me
for her to feel okay reading this
like I wanted her to feel okay reading this book
because she's my mum you know
for her not to tell me that that didn't happen
and I think especially as a survivor of sexual abuse
when someone says do you know that didn't happen
or it didn't happen that way
not that she would say that about what happened in that regard
but it's a very triggering kind of sentence
to say to someone who's constantly kind of relegating
in a sometimes in a space of guilt and shame
so she did not do that
I think it would have been very challenging for her to read
it's been a beautiful and healing
I hope book for our family in some ways
and a very healing thing for me to do
I think there's not a lot of anger in the book
is that something that you had to work
is that a place you had to work to get to
or is that just you?
I think that's just me
I maybe turn anger into other things
but I think you have to get it to
I just knew I needed to get into a space of forgiveness
in many ways or you live your life in that space
and I just never wanted to do that

and also think that yeah
I'm not generally like an angry person
that way I don't think blame is useful ever
doesn't matter what someone's
I just think you just got to move on and turn
and I'm lucky because I can turn
what might be feelings of anger
darker things like that into beautiful things
in terms of art
into art or writing and singing
and I have channels to put those feelings into spaces
and I think that's a great privilege
to be able to do that as well
we're all made through our childhood
and through what we make of our childhood
where do you draw the lines between the person you are today
and that upbringing that you had?
I think it's definitely made me who I am
I think we're born a certain way
that's not in anyone's control
you kind of have your little soul and you're put on this earth
but it's a bit like
if you kind of have a lump of sticky tape
and you kind of just keep rolling it down a hill
all the stuff will get stuck to it
and you just that shape and you can't shake it off
unless you are, unless the tape's crap
you know we are who we are
and I think that we're definitely made up of all those
beautiful granules of experience and memory
and I think our stories are extraordinary
and everyone's story is beautiful and important
It's been really fascinating to hear the sticky tape
that you are and that you've collected along the way
Thank you, Birdie
Thank you, Birdie Blacking
you