

A celebration of the life of Lorraine Rowan Smith

21 August 1962 – 7 March 2017

29 March 2017, Italian Villa, Compton Acres



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Today, we hope to share with you tributes that capture a little of who Lorraine really was. We hope that in these words you will recognise the Lorraine you knew and we hope that you may perhaps even learn something new about this amazing lady.

Lorraine was such a trooper. Throughout the many months of ill health before her final diagnosis with pancreatic cancer, she was breathless and she was weak and yet, Lorraine's first reaction was always worry about everyone else. Over fifteen years ago, she'd nursed her fiancé Richard through lung cancer and the last thing Lorraine wanted was for her family to go through the same. As always, Lorraine tried to find the positives in everything, her terminal diagnosis meant that she had time to sort things out, her emotional wedding to Phil so close to the end meant that she experienced the love and generosity of so many people to make their day truly amazing. In her final months, Lorraine focused on her loved ones and as her daughter, Emma will share with us, she was so delighted to be here long enough see the curiosity emerging in her strong-willed little granddaughter. Lorraine never indulged in self-pity, she was just so sad to be leaving you all behind.

Lorraine died, aged 54 years old, on the 7th March 2017. There are no words that will lessen the grief of losing someone so beautiful so early, so enjoying life to the full (as she always did) and making the most of every opportunity. Lorraine was beautiful inside and out, her kindness, her compassion beyond expectations and with a graceful presence, once experienced; never forgotten.

With Lorraine, there was the Lorraine who loved and who married Phil just two weeks before she died. There was the Lorraine, a much-loved daughter, sister and mother; so integral to the family that was so important to her. There was Lorraine on stage; talented and mesmerising in performances, that many of you will have seen. But, did you know, that following her incredible work with military veterans, Lorraine had been made an Honorary Colonel of the 29th Infantry Division? Did you know that when she stood in the square at Sainte-Mère-Église in France; when she started to sing, the beer-drinking paratroopers were stunned into silence? There was so much to this beautiful lady.

Lorraine and Phil married on 17th February at the Guildhall Registry Office. Lorraine knew which dress she would have and how everything was going to be and with the wonderful support of family and friends, their wedding was exactly what she'd hoped for. Back at the Conservative Club, friends sang, her favourite band The Regular Joes played, there was great food, dancing, fun, laughter and the company of great friends; Lorraine's eyes gleamed with happiness all day. Lorraine's beauty shone in her 1930s inspired purple dress, with the intricate lace trimming, as she and Phil danced to: 'I Love The Way You Love Me'.

Phil first saw Lorraine on-stage at one of the Classics Concerts in the early 90s, though they met when she came to audition for his Jazz, Swing and Vintage Nights. It was pouring with rain that day and she arrived a quiet and demure 'drowned rat'! Off stage, Lorraine was often quiet and reserved, though when she began to sing; it was with the voice of an angel. They began to work together and over time, Phil realised that Lorraine had so many unique qualities he'd never seen in anyone else. She was of course beautiful, but it was more than that; Lorraine had an incredible innocence and charm, she was intensely loyal and always saw the good in everyone. She had such a style and grace; it was although she had stepped out from another era.

Lorraine was adventurous and daring and would approach any new experience with such enthusiasm, never making a fuss if something went wrong and with her dry sense of humour, she could always make Phil laugh. Lorraine effortlessly turned her beautiful voice to singing Jazz and it opened doors for her across Europe and the U.S. and travelling with Phil she could really indulge her sense of adventure. She loved the glamour of their trip on the QE2 yet she loved the simple pleasures too. Their campervan trips to Barcelona and Venice coping calmly with breakdowns with her happy-go-lucky grace and humour, screaming with delight the first time she went snorkelling in Spain and clinging to Phil, as she perched on the motorbike luggage rack on a trip around France!

Born on the 21st August 1962, from when she was a little girl, all Lorraine wanted to do was to be an actress. From the day that she was born, her parents Dorothy and Slavko / John remember her as 'a little angel'. Lorraine was always about helping everyone; especially her parents and her younger siblings Denise and Darren. She loved stories, both reading and being read to and she was involved in school plays and choirs from as soon as she was able. Dorothy and Slavko / John clearly remember the day that Lorraine came home from school saying that she'd been told off for dreaming in class. It was just the first week in Primary One and when they sat her down to talk it through, Lorraine agreed to go back, though she also said that she'd be dreaming again; nothing could stop Lorraine from dreaming!

They were a close family, spending holidays together with relatives in Scotland and Slavko / John's family in Yugoslavia. They took day trips to family in Wimborne and Dorset too. There were many fun times with the cousins at Eastertime rolling their eggs down the hill at Badbury Rings. One cousin remembered wonderful summers together and Lorraine's bedtime stories, told with such realism that they all could hardly sleep! Lorraine always had a talent for entertainment and a key feature of family Christmases were her quizzes and games; singing on the HiFi microphone and tongue-twisters with accompanying dances and the stealing the present game; you never had a clue what you were going to end up with! Everyone always looked forward to Lorraine's games.

Lorraine pursued her dreams and secured a place at Mountview Drama School in London, later being a founder of The Big Little Theatre Group and a member of Arena Theatre in Christchurch and the Highcliffe Charity Players. Whatever Lorraine did she was totally committed and there were so many highlights. The 'glory days' of the Big Little at the height of their success and the 'pure gold' of performances at the Winter Gardens and spectacular Classics Concerts with the songs from West End. Lorraine won many awards including Best Actress for her performance in Barnum and she returned from Dundalk in Ireland with the crystal vase; her family were so proud.

I'm going to hand you over now to Lorraine's biggest fan; her daughter, Emma to share with you more memories and moments from Lorraine's extraordinary performances and from across their life together. Emma was born, as Lorraine left Drama School and spent her childhood with Mum in hotel rooms on tour, watching her get ready in dressing rooms and witnessing rehearsals and performances from the side of the stage. They were so close; wherever Lorraine was, Emma came too.

Throughout her performing career, my mother was a stalwart professional. I've seen her 'ad-lib' when someone forgot their lines and compensate when an accompanist lost their page or something... you get the idea, the show must go on! But in all my life I had never seen that, never seen her own emotions almost crack through a performance... and that really says a lot about just how much it meant to her; how honoured she felt to be doing it. She was singing to actual WW2 Veterans in their 90s and I think she meant every lyric from the heart.

This brings me to why you have all been asked to wear an item of red today. I don't think many of you will know this but every single Friday, going back several years now, my mother always wore red, sometimes just a single item or a top but always at least one item in red. I asked her what it was all about and she told me it was her own little way of remembering all those who had lost their lives in the wars. You see, for her, Remembrance Day meant so much that once a year wasn't enough! She thought about it every week. So, I invite you all now, if you would like a nice way to remember her then wear something red on a Friday, and remember what it meant to her and why she did it.

In doing this tribute, I wanted to tell you all how wonderful my Mum was, and how she was the kindest, most loving, golden-hearted person I have ever known. But I have this frustration that my words won't carry any weight because I'm her only daughter and we were so close. She was more like the sister I never had, so I'm bound to say that, right? Like, of course I'm only going to say good things. Well, just so you know I'm giving a totally honest appraisal here, I'm going to tell you all the bad things about my mum.

Firstly, she wasn't known for her punctuality... I got in the habit of asking her to be somewhere 20 minutes earlier than I really meant. Called it, adding on 'Lorraine-time'! She was also a world-class, grand master procrastinator - rarely doing today what could be put off 'til tomorrow.

She was absent minded and forgetful. I couldn't count the number of times she went off to do a gig and then called home in a panic because she'd forgotten her backing tracks or something equally crucial. Then someone would have to urgently traipse across town with whatever it was and get it to her. It was because her head was always off in a daydream somewhere else. Before I could drive, I spent a lot of time in the passenger seat watching her face contort as she was either going through a script or a song. I would giggle to myself and try to guess what it was she was rehearsing through. If you didn't know she was a performer, she would have looked absolutely mental! I know this is actually rather cute and doesn't really sound like a bad point, but having your awareness elsewhere doesn't exactly make for safe driving. She drove into the back of a skip once! Seriously. It may have been evening time but the skip was bright orange, with reflectors, and stationary.

She also didn't know how to travel light. She would always turn up laden with at least four bags full of who knows what that she didn't need. Probably lots of lists or something, that woman always had a list in her hand. She was so anal, she always documented everything, kept track of the running orders of every gig, every penny earned and spent for the last 20 years, all kinds of things.

She was quite untidy and a bit of a hoarder. Random bits of paper and clutter just tended to gravitate towards her. Never messy though, I don't mean unclean. You could probably eat off the surfaces when it was only her in the house, you just couldn't see them 'cause they were under three inches of lists!

That's really all I've got. And even her bad points were kind of endearing. Boxes full of decades worth of handwritten account spreadsheets might just be a fire hazard, but recently I found a notebook where she had meticulously documented my vocabulary until the age of 3. It was even alphabetised, and she had kept a running total of the words I could say every month. (374 by the age of 21 months, ladies and gentlemen, yes indeed). How anal can you get?! That was so Lorraine, and such a treasure for me to find.

Nothing bad I could say about her involved any malice, or any selfishness. She didn't have a mean bone in her body, and never had anything negative to say about anybody, not unless they were being mean themselves, and even then she'd probably have sympathy for their difficult childhood or something. That ought to illustrate to you the kind of pure heart she had.

So, now for the good stuff. I hoped today you would learn something you didn't know about her, so... Did you know she gave fantastic massages? I think had she not ended up as a Civil Servant, she really should have been a Masseuse. She had these magic hands, you see; never had any official training or anything but instinctively felt exactly the right pressure to use. When I was pregnant, she would come over once a week with her little suitcase of oils and her 'Aromatherapy Bible' just to give me a massage because she thought I needed to de-stress. And I remember one awful night, many years back, I had the worst migraine I'd ever had; nothing would touch it. The only thing that took the edge off was her fingers on the pressure points of my skull pressing uncomfortably hard enough to distract from the pain inside my head. She stayed up for hours with me doing that. And I remember being much younger, how she would massage my belly when I had painful trapped wind or tummy ache and how much that helped. She was always looking after me like that.

Not just me either, the whole family. She always knew the right remedy for your little ailments – her first aid cupboard was brimming with cold packs, hot packs, things you inhale to help you breathe, the best thing for bruises, the best tea for a sore throat. And she never stopped looking after everybody. Even a couple of weeks before the end, though weak and with more than enough of her own worries, her parents both had a persistent cough and she was straining to tell us loudly enough that they needed to drink some pineapple juice, because that has enzymes in it that help with coughs. They have been swigging it ever since and, yes, it really helped.

She was so generous. On her bucket list, along with getting married and taking Ada to see her first pantomime, which was better than wonderful, she also wanted to give everyone their presents from the Christmas she had missed while she was in hospital. Now a lot of people might see that as a get-out-of-jail-free card. Being seriously ill over Christmas, then being diagnosed with cancer no less, you are most definitely excused from having to get anyone gifts. But to her, it wasn't an obligation; she just didn't want to miss out on making people happy. So she gave me the list she had prepared (of course, a list, are you noticing a pattern yet?), we made it happen and she did indeed make us all very happy.

Also, she could knit. She made me several jumpers and cardigans as I was growing up, but this has to be her masterpiece ... a blanket.

Remember I said she could procrastinate? This took around 30 years to finish!! She started not long after I was born, I remember it hanging around my whole life in various states of completion. I would tease her about whether I would see it completed before my 20th birthday, then my 30th, then before I had my own baby... all those milestones kept passing. It was on her bucket list to complete it and though she was so close to finishing it off, in the end she did need some help. But this turned out to be a good thing, because rather than embroider her signature in the last panel as she had always planned, she asked her friend to leave me a very special message...

I'm not sure if anything in life gave her so much joy as becoming a grandmother. Or 'Grandma', I should say rather, she insisted on 'Grandma'.

She had always been mad about babies – she loved having her own and would have loved to have had more but it just never happened. She told a family member that as much as she yearned to have a grandchild, she'd pretty much resigned herself that sadly it was not to be because it was never something I wanted. The interesting thing though, is that she never told me that (I only found out much later), because she would never dream of pressuring me. First and foremost, she just wanted me to be happy; whatever that meant.

The pregnancy wasn't planned; I panicked and naturally turned to my mother. She was at work, so I texted her "2 pink lines, Mum, 2 pink lines – AAARGH!! What am I gonna do?!" Now, bless her, I think the colour pink rather than blue confused her, because she stood up at her desk and asked all her colleagues: "What does 2 pink lines mean?" So that secret was out pretty quick, thanks Mum! But anyway, I didn't know what to do, and she would just listen as I went over and over all the options, agonising and undecided, with her waiting patiently and never, ever pushing, not even a hint to sway me. No matter how desperately she wanted that grandchild, all she would say to me was: "Whatever you need, I'm here for you." And I think that's amazing, so selfless. Then when hormones won the day over my better judgment and I decided to see it through, she pretty much jumped up and down for the whole of the next 9 months!

Around the same time, she writes this on Facebook:

"She is soo soo cute and soft, and with that gorgeous baby smell. Just like when Emma was her age – can't stop gazing at her. I am loving every minute, even the baby cries, happy to rock her all night for my girlie." [April 2015]

And she did – literally. We had a really rough time with Ada in the beginning – she wouldn't sleep for any length, had a tongue-tie and had dreadful colic, which for the uninitiated means inconsolable, soul-crushing crying for long, long periods.

Mum was fantastic. We discovered that the only thing that would calm baby even slightly was a kind of jiggling motion when you walk. So, my Mum would walk tirelessly up and down our garden, jiggling away for hours and sometimes all night too. In the very early days she couldn't completely take the burden of a whole night from me, as I was still breastfeeding. But even then, Mum would stay next to me just to take Ada straight off me after every feed, so I could collapse, then she would do the half hour of jiggling up and down to settle her back down again. She must have walked several marathons up and down that bedroom and garden. And she did this at least once a week, sometimes more, even though she had to get up early and drive across town to her full-time job. I don't know how I would have survived those first 18 months without her.

When Mum was in hospital she loved to hear what Ada had been up to so I got into a routine of taking a video each day to show what had happened in the last 24 hours. I got some really cute ones, she especially loved the one where I got Ada to say 'Gan-ma' for the first time and her singing 'Twinkle, Twinkle'. But there is a reason you should never work with animals or toddlers, and that is that so often when they do something interesting, they stop as soon as you get your camera out. I was getting frustrated at all the cute things she was missing. Then one day, Ada was being a right little rotter all morning so I gave up, huffed into the hospital saying "sorry, this is all I could get you today" and it was a video of her having a tantrum because in opening up a chocolate coin for her, I'd broken it in half (big mistake)! But Mum, rather than be disappointed that it wasn't something adorable, she loved it! She even watched it over and over again, because to her it was adorable. She smiled and said: "It reminds me of the time you had a tantrum because I broke the ear on your Mickey Mouse cake!"

I used to think she had super-human patience with Ada, but that wasn't really it. She didn't just tolerate the screaming meltdowns; she genuinely loved them as much as the smiles and giggles, because they're all part of Ada. She loved so powerfully and unconditionally.

Lorraine died 3 days before her Granddaughter's second Birthday. But I have to look at it the way she did. In a conversation that I wasn't ready to have, she said to me: "I could be sad that I won't get to see her grow up. But I am just so glad that I got to see her develop into a curious, strong-willed little person. I know how the rest will go, because I've seen it all before with you, and she's just like you."

That was the hardest part to write, and to say. But thankfully we're on to the easier part now...

No tribute to Lorraine would be complete, or course, without mentioning her incredible talent. I grew up with her singing in the bath, in the car, over the TV and did many many concerts with her, so I heard her sing all the time. Then, last May she did a one-woman play about the life of Edith Piaf and it had been such a long time for me that I had almost forgotten, but my gods that woman could act! And I mean, properly act your socks off! There was one scene where she did 'drunk acting' – that is so difficult to pull off convincingly and she nailed it. Then another scene where a baby dies (it really wasn't a happy play, this one), she totally committed to it and the grief was palpable and heart-wrenching; I was in tears. I really am not just saying this, I promise you that having grown up watching Big Little productions and surrounded by talented people that I am not easily impressed. But I was so totally mesmerised that I forgot I was watching my mother. I was watching a completely different person, I was watching Edith Piaf! Afterwards, I looked around and thought to myself: "Why does this woman have a day job?" "Why am I watching this with twenty other people in a nightclub rather than paying through the nose for a ticket at the Albert Hall or something?" I'm so gutted that it wasn't filmed. I promised myself then that next year when she does it again, I would frog-march in everyone I know and drum up the audience she deserved. C'est la vie, I guess.

So, as for her other talent. When it comes to her singing, it makes me sad to think that many of you don't know what she could really do. The Big Little concerts of the 1990s may have been the glory days in terms of scale and grandeur with the full orchestra and choir etc... but she continued training her voice long after that and it only grew to even greater heights. So, I'd like to show you now what I consider to be one of her most shining moments. It's a performance of 'The Jewel Song' from a Silhouette Opera concert in 2011. She sings the part of Marguerite, who is being tempted by the devil with a box of jewellery that she tries on and admires herself wearing – you'll see Mum acting this one out of course, as she always did. Now, there are more melodic and beautiful songs I could have chosen but it had to be this one because I remember this very moment in 2011. I had come out of the Dressing Room to listen from behind a pillar, my jaw hit the floor and I had never been so proud of her. I'm sorry if you're not into opera that I'm kind of throwing you in at the deep end. But even if it's not your cup of tea, you just have to appreciate the power and total precision. This piece is not an easy sing and it's nowhere near as effortless as she makes it look. I get goosebumps every time I watch it, and I hope you feel the same.

Totally nailed it to the wall, didn't she?! But despite all that awesome talent, she was never one to blow her own trumpet. She was never a 'diva' with it. She wouldn't dream of just swanning in and doing a solo, no way, she would always turn up (marginally late perhaps), to every rehearsal and learn all the Chorus parts as well, to back up everyone else. And she didn't insist on always being the star of the show, she was more than happy to just be involved, whether that was background chorus or prop managing side of stage. She would throw herself into whatever she was doing with gusto.

I know you'll remember her amazing talents, because quite frankly, how could you forget?! But I hope you'll also remember what an incredible person she was. I hope you'll remember her selflessness, her warmth and optimism, her adorable naivety, her dedication and passion, her generosity, and most of all her seemingly limitless capacity for compassion, for forgiveness and for love.

Lorraine was dearly loved by audiences, by friends, by colleagues and most importantly by her husband and family; family meant so much to Lorraine. She could sing like an angel, she was just adorable with such beauty and her wonderful graceful nature, that could always stop you in your tracks. Lorraine's extraordinary talent and presence enthralled her audiences; she leaves behind so many extraordinary performances and memories. Lorraine was also adventurous, embracing the highs and lows of life; she always found the silver lining in every cloud.

In our farewell, we hold on to everything that Lorraine was and the wonderful memories and moments we shared with her. Rather than dwell on her loss, we celebrate her extraordinary life and her 'seemingly limitless capacity for compassion, for forgiveness and for love'. Lorraine lives on now through her influence on your life and her legacy, in the stories that you will share for the rest of your lives; she always will.