

SURVIVOR

In her first interview since leaving Ashley, and battling malaria, Cheryl Cole talks to Christa D'Souza about single life and her new excitement for the future. Photographed by Patrick Demarchelier

“

It's like a fairy tale.” That's how Cheryl Cole described the way her life was unfolding when we last met, 18 months ago. A fairy tale? When you look at it on paper – a pathologically unfaithful husband who cheated on her not once, not twice, but five times, a pending divorce, a brother remanded in jail on armed-robbery charges – it's certainly Grimm.

What a different space Cole is in now compared to last time, when she, “Ash” (her footballer husband) and the two chihuahuas were on the verge of moving into their Surrey villa, and the talk was all of how she was planning on having rescue donkeys in the paddock... and, of course, having babies.

And here she is giving her first interview after the announcement of her divorce. One must tread carefully here, but the question remains: how is she coping? Does she feel very betrayed?

“Yes, definitely I do,” she says solemnly, carefully, cautiously, “but I've got to take everything that's happened and learn from it. I accept that that's a chapter of my life that's finished. And I've just got to be grateful that I've got so many good things going on. I have. And there's no children, you know? Some people's lives fall apart, are turned upside-down. Of course, it's heartbreaking, but it's not anything remotely like it *could* have been and I'm very, very thankful for that.”

It's a lovely summer's day, the atmosphere is calm at the studio where she has taken a break from a shoot to promote the latest

range of Girls Aloud eyelashes, and Cheryl Cole, a teeny tiny figure of a thing dwarfed by the giant orange beanbag she is sitting in, is just as spectacularly uncommon-looking as ever. Yes, she's wearing an awful lot of make-up, which, shoot aside, one can't help assuming has become her normal day coverage, but apart from that she's pretty understated. Barefoot, and dressed in a simple little strapless playsuit from Theory, her look is a far cry from the last time we met – when it was all about Balmain, Zac Posen and Sonia Rykiel. That naturally golden skin, those doe-like features, that luminous molten-chocolate smile – it's blindingly obvious why she's the nation's sweetheart. Those L'Oréal ads you see plastered over every bus stop? That's how she *really* looks. Neither, by the way, is she the gothic, emaciated wraith the red-tops would have her be. At all. “No, I've actually put on weight,” she says, a glimmer of a dimple making an appearance, “which is a good thing, for me.”

But still. Despite the bouncy exterior, despite her epic beauty, her impression is not matched by her mood. Though fastidiously polite as always – gosh, this girl has good manners – she seems tired, jaded, remote, a little “off”. Not at all the frank, funny “Tweedy-Pie” of yore who talked about being teased for liking “black men's big you-knows” and naughtily clunked herself on the head when talking about the wooden-plankishness of some of her fellow wags. What there is is a very slight puffiness about her jaw that wasn't there before. And those gooey, heavily made-up eyes peering over her mug of peppermint tea, they're >



"I've just got to be grateful I've got so many good things going on," Cheryl says of her life after Ashley Cole. The singer filed for divorce in May. Cheryl wears silk chiffon dress, £5,100, Dior. Satin platforms, £600, Gina Couture. Personalised necklace, £235, Thomas Nayler. Ring, Cheryl's own. Hair: Luke Hersheson for Daniel Hersheson Salon. Make-up: Val Garland. Nails: Lorraine Griffin. Location: Spring Studios. Set design: Stevie Stewart. Digital artwork: Pascal Dangin at Box. **Fashion editor:** Lucinda Chambers

not so much sparkly as... glassy. What's going on? Is she pregnant? Is it Botox? Is she all right?

Yes, yes, she says brightly. She's "fine, absolutely *fine*." It's just that she's not looking forward to the journey she has to make to Cardiff this evening for the next round of *X Factor* auditions. Which is understandable, after eight weeks of being on the road supporting the Black Eyed Peas. ("Like working out without actually working out, dancing eight hours a day; which is great because I *hate* the gym.") And then there's the second solo album she's working on, to be released at the end of this year. Let's not forget that. Indeed, in between auditions and guest appearances and L'Oréal spots, that's where she is, in a recording studio somewhere in Chiswick (collaborating not just with Will.i.am but "a bunch of different producers"). You can tell she's hell-bent on making it even more of a hit than *3 Words*.

And then there's the little impromptu gathering she had to celebrate her 27th birthday yesterday evening with her mum, her friend/dance-partner/lover/whatever Derek Hough, her manager and some of her closest friends. There was a birthday cake, which she had rather a lot of, and quite a few vodka-cranberries (which she's not really used to, not being a big drinker), and this morning she woke up with a "serious, serious" hangover. Not to mention this acid reflux of hers, which for some reason has started playing up in the past few days... "I shouldn't have had any birthday cake," she says, eyebrows forming an anxious peak above that magnificent aquiline nose (no Botox, then). "Sugar's a trigger. I take pills for it. It runs in the family. But they say emotion can trigger it, too..."

Meaning if the girl's a little below par, it's hardly surprising. For the past six months, she has been, as it were, under 24-hour surveillance, with zoom lenses all but trained into the windows of the lavatories of Hurtmore House (as the mock-Tudor ex-marital home is aptly called). Is it any wonder she's a little wary, what with all those rather *Readers' Wives*-ish women coming out of the woodwork, one after the other, boom-boom-boom?

When we first met, late in 2008, Cheryl made a point of forgiving Ashley for his one-night stand with the hairdresser in Tooting, the one whom he famously got sick all over. "Don't get me wrong," she said at the time, "it was horrendous. But look. Ashley's young, and he's got quite a young mentality for his age, anyway. He's learning. He has >

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"Oh, I'm not depressed. Not me. I've got mental discipline."
Silk top, from £200. Silk shorts, from £190. Both Anna Sui, at Net-a-porter.com. Satin platforms, £600, Gina Couture





“Thinking about yourself constantly isn’t so healthy.”
Embroidered silk top, from £4,660. Feather miniskirt, from £3,380. Both Lanvin. Ring, Cheryl’s own. *For stockists, all pages, see Vogue Information*

PATRICK DEMARCHELIER

a beautiful soul, he's a very nice guy, and I'm not stupid, you know. I'm really, really not."

I too thought Ashley very sweet when I talked to him back then – not a natural intellect, maybe, but sweet about her, and how pasta and eggs were her speciality and so on. But by my calculations that was the same time as, it was later alleged, he was playing away with Vicki Gough. Another two emerged soon afterwards. And if that weren't quite sufficient humiliation, there's Cheryl's brother Andrew Tweedy, a former glue-sniffer remanded in custody after an armed robbery in Newcastle in May. I mean, how much more is she supposed to take? Is she seeing a therapist?

"Oh, I'm not depressed," she says briskly, assertively. "No, not me; I've been there before and, as I said, I've got a lot to be thankful for. A lot. Even just talking to other women, talking about their lives, looking at their situations, mine's not a fraction of that..."

"And I've got a lot of mental discipline," she continues. "I know that. Like even if I'm knackered, I keep myself going no matter what. I have to keep going. I have to perform. I have to deliver. People have this misconstrued idea that you have this team around you, that people are pulling you like a puppet. It doesn't work that way; it all comes from *you*."

Cheryl has never played the victim card. Like the true Geordie toughie she is, she's simply got on with what she's doing, kept looking immaculately fabulous, kept getting out there on stage, kept signing autographs, kept smiling for the photographers at the airport, and, in the process hasn't once, not once, fallen off her lofty pedestal. Far from being tainted by what has happened in the past six months, her allure has almost been enhanced. And the more she gives, the more, so it seems, we want.

Could Cheryl's compulsive desire to deliver be what keeps her going? "Oh my motivation is *absolutely* about being in the public eye," she says earnestly, a vestige of the old Chezza making a ghostly cameo. "Like, I *tort-ally* get it when people who sit in offices with nine-to-five jobs can't be bothered. What would be their motivation?" She checks herself. "I mean, obviously you've got to do it for yourself, not for anyone else. But it's such a vicious circle, because thinking about yourself constantly isn't so healthy. I suppose that's the point of having children, isn't it? Being able to live your life through them instead of you, having them be your motivation? That's the 'right' thing, I'm thinking, when you love someone else more than you love yourself. That's what I think about my mum. I mean she takes care of her

appearance and everything, but she loves me more than she loves herself."

Ah, Joan. Joan Callaghan, with whom Cheryl now more or less lives in Hurtmore House. That's the same Joan who single-handedly raised five children on a council estate in Heaton. The same Joan who had the foresight to enter her daughter into a "bonny baby" competition in 1983, the year Cheryl was born. And the same Joan who sits beside her daughter with her stony, impassive face and her pixie haircut and stays shtoom. Who never says a word – unlike, say, Gary Tweedy, Cheryl's birth father, who's had his say in the press; or Derek Hough's father, who's thrown his tuppence in too. Joan says not a *word*. Which is probably why Joan is the only person Cheryl trusts.

"I mean, I've got my team around me – the girl who does me hair, Sundraj [her PR manager]. They've been with me for eight years, they've helped keep me going, but that is *work*. My mother is blood. I can't believe my mum started having children at 17. When I think of myself at 17, you know,

"I would never give up what I do. I love my music. I have to accept that there is sometimes a downside and work around it the best I can..."

my God, I was *soooo* young. I don't know how she did that. Admirable. That's the word I think of when I think of my mum. She just does it. And that's the way it's been with all the women in my family, actually. You just get on with it."

Which brings us back, ineluctably, to children. We ran the gamut last time we met, from breast-feeding (she definitely wanted to) to water births (as long as she could have "the jab"). And here she is now, clearly desperate to have them, needing them, in fact, to consider herself whole. So? Are they still on the agenda?

"That's definitely something I want to achieve," she says, very carefully indeed. "It's the toughest job in the world, but I know it must be the most rewarding too. But, see, I *am* ready now. I'm 27. I'm a woman, not a girl any more. I really feel that."

Twenty-seven. In showbiz years, that's not so young. But what does Cole mean when she says she's not a girl any more? Does that mean no more playing *Sonic the Hedgehog* on the Wii in her pyjamas, like she did last

time we spoke? Does that mean no more "people-pleasing", no more crap-taking (except from one of the chihuahuas – who still, to this day, even though he's five, "goes" indoors when it's raining. "I've tried and tried to train him, but it's just part of his personality which I've accepted now.") Does that mean she's going to regain the control over her life that she feels, with her private life laid bare before *Heat* and so forth, she has lost? Because it would be a shame if that smiley, ultra-open "Tweedy-Pie" is gone forever. It felt such a part of *her*.

"Oh, I know, it's hard not being me, putting on a front," she says, wincing a little at the thought. "But I must. It's too painful otherwise. I need to keep parts of me for me, which is hard because I'm a very open person, I'm not normally good at compartmentalising. I mean, I don't want to be one of these people who complain about their privacy," she shrugs. "That's the price you pay, I understand that, but I'm only little, I'm only 5ft 3in and some of these men with their cameras, they're very *big*. Like, I know this

sounds a bit mad, but when I'm out there, I'm constantly paranoid I might have one of me private parts on show by accident."

This paranoia, she says, she feels even when she's at home alone with Joan behind lock and key. Not surprisingly, for all sorts of reasons, it is almost impossible for her to relax; for her to separate "all this", as she puts it, waving a tiny hand around the room (meaning the shoots, the entourage and the craft services), and "reality".

"Recently I've been trying to meditate," she continues, "but I can't seem to get it. My mother does it, and I really think that actually may be the way forward for me, but the thoughts keep coming in. Always. How do you stop them coming in?"

Cole has never slept very much. Like Margaret Thatcher, she only needs – or so she once claimed, anyway – about four hours' sleep. Lately, though, even that's a bonus. Indeed, about the only quality rest she's getting these days is during the day – an hour here, an hour there, "because, I don't know, I suppose I know I shouldn't, and > 378

also because it feels safe when everybody else is awake... See, night-time, that's when my brain starts ticking over. I'm frightened of my mind at night. I find myself racing, racing, racing, talking nonsense to myself. Sometimes I wake up in the morning and think what was that all about? And it's so vivid when I dream. So vivid it could be real, you know?

"Don't get me wrong, though," she says gathering herself hurriedly, once more. "I would never want to give up what I do, I love what I do, I love my music, I love being a judge on *The X Factor*. I have to accept that there is sometimes a downside and work around it the best I can..."

The interview is over. As I leave, I catch one last glimpse of her staring at her reflection in the mirror, half-listening to her manager and unsuccessfully attempting to stifle a massive yawn. Cheryl Cole yawning. Somehow, it's such a peculiar sight.

And, now, of course, it all makes sense – the exhaustion, the vivid dreams, the glassy eyes, her seeming not quite right. Because, 72 hours after our meeting and, just a day after the *Vogue* shoot, Cheryl is in an ambulance on her way to the intensive care unit, drifting in and out of consciousness and finding it hard to breathe.

Could anyone have known when she turned up to the shoot, excited, amenable and professional as ever, eyes widening in appreciation at all the macaroon colours and sugary-coloured resort pieces that had been called in, that she was in the grip of a potentially fatal case of malaria? Did anyone realise, even when, in the make-up chair, she pointed to a "weird mark" on her shoulder and asked what it might be, that she was seriously unwell? Of course not. Because she's admirable. Because she's a fighter. And because it wouldn't occur to her to give up. "We looked at the mark, and told her we thought it was a mosquito bite, that was all," says hairstylist Luke Hershenson. "Nothing to worry about – the weather was hot and all that sort of thing. When I think of what happened then..."

Instead, what overridingly came across is just how exquisitely she conducted herself throughout. No wobblers, no walkouts, no rudeness. No *nothing*. She just, as she would say, "got on with it". What a trouper. And while contracting malaria is about as un-fairytale-like in its awfulness as anyone could imagine, considering what she's been through this last six months, you know she'll rest up, regroup, recharge and come out, yes, fighting.

Same Cheryl Cole. Still unassailable. In fact, probably more so. Whenever you're ready, girl, we're here for you. ■

her Barbie, Peggy Ashcroft would read her bedtime stories, and Maurice Sendak drew her pictures. "Not that I remember. That's brutal, not to remember and to be told afterwards."

Was it a bohemian childhood? "My father is not a big party-thrower, neither of my parents are, so I have no memories of exotic eccentrics in turbans arriving. There was none of that," she says with an amused smile. "But I grew up in a house where it was normal for brilliant people to rock up for a lunch and have incredibly scintillating conversation, and I would just listen. I'd be sat at the table. I was very included from a young age."

At 14 she went to board at Roedean, the all-girls private school – an experience she didn't much enjoy, judging from the wrinkling of her nose ("I wanted to be grown-up") and instead looked forward to exeats, when her father would collect her in his vintage black Mercedes and "we'd bomb up the M25 to London with music playing really loudly." They would go to the theatre, after which they would go to a restaurant for a post-mortem on the play. "Just us two. He was very good at encouraging me to have an opinion; he'd always ask 'What did you like? What didn't you like?'"

She went up to Cambridge, reading English literature at her father's old college, St Catharine's, and met the group of thespians who remain her best friends today: Khalid Abdalla, who starred in *The Kite Runner*; his girlfriend, Cressida Trew; Dan Stevens, with whom she shared a flat for a while; Tom Hiddleston; Eddie Redmayne; and Jock Davis. It was a formative time, with a lot of launching of theatre companies, putting on of plays – one, directed by Rebecca, called *Cuckoos*, which involved parachutes – and drinking in college rooms late into the night (Rebecca's was decorated with Barbie dolls). "My Cambridge friends are like my family; we're wound into each other's lives," says Rebecca.

Despite this "incredibly intense university life of meeting people and finding out who I wanted to be", Hall's ambition won out. Impatient to start a career, she left after her second year. It was a decision she describes now as "incredibly bullish. I wanted that feeling of not having completed, I wanted a chip on my shoulder..." "Lots of people were immediately impressed by Rebecca," says Khalid Abdalla. "It's always been very clear what Rebecca's direction in life is." Nowadays she keeps in touch with her friends with Skype and email, meeting up in London whenever work projects allow. "When people's worlds aren't constant, it's very important to Rebecca to check in with people she loves and who love her," echoes Cressida Trew, who describes her as "incredibly loyal. That's a really big thing." Success, Maria

Ewing tells me almost vehemently, will not change her daughter in any way. "There's nothing false about her, it just isn't there, and never will be. That's what she is and she'll remain that, I know that."

When I ask Peter Hall about his daughter's career trajectory, he is full of fatherly pride, but also trepidation. "She's on the brink of a really extraordinary career. But even saying it I'm doing something dangerous. There are, I am afraid, a lot of mean-spirited people in this business." Certainly among her colleagues it is hard to find anyone with a bad word to say about her. "You could make a big mistake in presuming that she's going to come with a sense of entitlement," says Ethan Hawke, who became a friend during their nine months together working under Mendes's direction in the Bridge Project. "That's obviously not true. She's a lot of fun, she's not pretentious at all, and she works incredibly hard."

The Bridge Project demanded serious hard graft. Sam Mendes's directorial style incorporates an intense rehearsal process, in which actors work together in one room with no props, without access to cell phones or newspapers, day after day for months. It was an emotionally demanding rehearsal period that Rebecca described at the time as not so much going into a rehearsal room as "going into a way of life". "She's doing the kind of work that makes the difference between being flavour of the month and being a serious craftsman," Hawke says. "It's hard for a beautiful woman to achieve that in this industry, and her generation of actors has been encouraged in the worst way. They're all encouraged to smile and say their lines and shake their tits. Being really beautiful is being given permission to be dull, but she's not taking the bait. Rebecca's playing the long game, and it will pay off." Nicole Holofcener compares her, ironically enough, to Winslet: "People love her, just love her. It was kind of like Kate Winslet when somebody discovered her. 'Oh my God, I want to see her in everything.' I imagine Rebecca going in that way."

At the end of our dinner I ask Rebecca how she sees her life and career panning out. "Who knows? I do have a massive fantasy about owning a tractor one day, just going out into the fields and mowing some hay," she laughs. "Who knows? I don't know! I think I'm quite a mutable person. I'll go wherever's next, or wherever I am. I know that sounds so incredibly 'I live in the moment' hippie-style of me, but I do [feel that]. I hope I'll be happy." Does she really lack a plan? I don't believe it for a second. As Peter Hall says, "She knows what she can do and what she wants to do. In that way she's beautifully stubborn." ■
"The Town" is released on September 24