

THE  TIMES

MAGAZINE

25.05.24

David Baddiel
On his mother's affair



**BAD SEX, MEN,
MISCARRIAGE,
BIRTH TRAUMA,
ONLINE DATES**

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14



Polo star Malcolm Borwick with the Princess of Wales

44



5 Caitlin Moran Why are traumatic births considered normal? **7 What I've learnt** Nile Rodgers on surviving cancer and quitting cocaine. **8 David Baddiel** My mother's long-running affair was an open secret, the comedian and writer explains. **14 The Prince Charming of polo** The sport is having a moment thanks to a Netflix series produced by Harry and Meghan. Sophia Money-Coutts saddles up for lessons. **20 Cover story Paloma Faith** Men, sex and IVF – exclusive extract from the singer's candid new memoir. **29 Eat!** The chef's guide to barbecuing fish. **34 Eddie Izzard** Why the comedian turned actor wants to become an MP. By Martin Samuel. **38 'People still ask me about Debbie Harry'** Will Pavia meets Blondie guitarist Chris Stein in New York. **44 At home with Jasper Conran** The designer talks late love and the death and legacy of his mother, Shirley. **51 Pout!** How to fake a tan. **52 Giles Coren reviews** Jincheng Alley, London WCl. **58 Beta male: Robert Crampton** Help! I have a very addictive personality. *Melanie Reid is away*

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CAITLIN MORAN

One in three mothers endure traumatic births in the UK. I still remember the horror of mine

Traumatic births have been in the news recently – a damning report by MPs featured harrowing stories of mothers left in agony after being “fobbed off” with paracetamol; who were rendered incontinent or suffered life-changing injuries. The report found a staggering one in three women have traumatic births, and 5 per cent develop PTSD. Many were left unable to work and described their injuries as “destroying their self-worth”. The report’s recommendations included the appointment of a maternity commissioner and a “safe space” for women to talk about their experiences.

I know women need this safe space – after I wrote about my traumatic first birth in *How to Be a Woman*, in 2011, I lost count of the number of women who came up to me, often already crying, saying, “Chapter 13 – that was me.”

I was induced on a Friday morning, February 2, and things rapidly spiralled: on/off labour; posterior position; strep B infection; failed pain relief, foetal distress; pelvic nerve damage. The ward was severely understaffed; we were left alone for hours. It wasn’t until sunrise on Monday – utterly broken – I was finally wheeled in for a panicked, emergency c-section.

A small, illustrative story: for the next year, every Monday at 7.32am, I would stop whatever I was doing and cry. My daughter was born at 8.45am. But 7.32am? That was when the anaesthetist finally administered an epidural that worked.

I marked not the birth of Dora, but the first moment, after three days, I stopped believing I was going to die.

Twenty-three years later, certain episodes still have cortisol clarity. The inexplicable madness of being sent home with painkillers that lasted only 20 hours – for the last 4 hours of every day, I would lie paralysed on the floor, until the next dose finally allowed me to hold the baby again. This pain, and the now obvious PTSD, coupled with sleep deprivation, meant that on the third night, at 3am, I watched in horror as my baby cried – and then her jaw dropped and endlessly distended, like Francis Bacon’s screaming pope, and all the blackness of the world poured out of her mouth. She seemed, at this point, possessed: evil. I was on the verge of psychosis. I was very, very unwell.

If there is a maternity commissioner – and, with the possibly not unconnected



And stop calling us ‘mum’. ‘Mum is struggling’ – no one would say, ‘Plumber is struggling’, or, ‘CEO of Barclays is struggling’

combination of 5 per cent of new mothers having PTSD and birth rates falling through the floor, this seems sensible – there are several things my traumatic birth taught me that might be useful.

The first is that while many NHS employees are indeed angels – doing a magical job in terrible circumstances – there are as many terrible people as there are in the general population. I remember one midwife, perhaps 12 hours into my already agonising labour, looking at my hopeful, innocent birth plan and snorting.

“These mothers come in here wanting their *water births*,” she said scornfully, “and in the end, they have to stop being silly – and *cut those babies out*.”

Enduring a labour requires courage and self-belief. Being told the birth plan *you are instructed to write* is treated with disdain by professionals – and they merely see you as a guaranteed future failure they will have to, sighingly, save – definitely dents your warrior courage. But it didn’t even occur to me to complain afterwards. Who grasses up angelic midwives?

The second is a simple need: more respect for mothers. If we introduced a system wherein every father was taken into hospital and punched, over many hours, in the stomach, while people murmured, “Good boy – you’re doing so well!”; if fatherhood involved lying on a bed while knives cut open genitals; if fatherhood meant returning home after major abdominal surgery, riddled with PTSD, and being left as the sole carer of a newborn child – we would, I think, be *astounded* if this was embraced as “normal”.

Childbirth is women’s war: countries need both armies to protect them and new babies to continue them. Soldiers are paid and given medals. Even if mothers *were* given medals, they’d have to sell them – to pay for childcare. The shrugging manner in which we accept that motherhood is bestial, demeaning, painful and financially ruinous puts a heavy burden on women. One they increasingly demur to undertake.

Which is why, finally, I say: don’t call us “mum”. “Mum is uncomfortable”, “Mum is struggling” – we wouldn’t say, “Plumber is uncomfortable,” or, “CEO of Barclays is struggling.” “Mum” is a depersonalised thing that is *expected* to be uncomfortable or to struggle. But it was Caitlin who was struggling – and should have simply been given a c-section on the Friday afternoon, by an NHS with a proper maternity plan and the right funding and staff to run it. ■

IN DARK TIMES, COURAGE SHINES



A SMALL LIGHT



Stream for free

What I've learnt Nile Rodgers

Musician Nile Rodgers, 71, was born in New York and left home at 14. His band, Chic, had No 1 hits in the Seventies including *Le Freak* and *Good Times*. He produced Madonna's *Like a Virgin* album, David Bowie's *Let's Dance* and Diana Ross's *I'm Coming Out*. The album he produced with Daft Punk, *Random Access Memories*, won three Grammys in 2014. Last year he was awarded a lifetime achievement Grammy. He lives in Miami with his partner, Nancy Hunt.

I thought my parents slept standing up.

When their friends would come over, they'd do the same thing. As a child, I thought it was a magic trick. I didn't know it was a reaction to heroin. I thought adults slept standing up and children slept in beds. As I got older and learnt more about the word "junk" and heroin, I realised, oh my God, they were taking a deadly drug that made them feel euphoric – that's why they were sleeping standing up.

When someone says you have cancer, it's scary. My friend who had testicular cancer said, "Cancer is going to be in your mind all the time." I kept saying, "I'm not that guy. I'm not really afraid of death. I know it's inevitable. I'm a science-based guy." But I felt all the fear. Prostate cancer was the scariest. When I got my second bout of cancer – renal cancer – I was this cool guy, almost like I just had a cold.

I said to myself, I love music more than I love drugs and partying. I thought, I've got the music part; I just need to get rid of the drugs and the partying. I've never had another drink or another snort of cocaine. I've not done anything mind-altering in 30 years.

David Bowie called my house continuously. My house was being renovated, and the contractor kept answering my phone. He'd say, "Hey, Mr Rodgers, this guy keeps calling up telling me he's David Bowie. I'm hanging up the phone on this c**sucker." I said, "It is David Bowie. The next time he calls, give me the phone."

My heart stopped many times one night. I'm alive because the garbage men found me dead on the 14th floor. They tried to resuscitate me and called the hospital. The doctor was filling out my death certificate, because no matter how many times they tried to start my heart, it would stop. They thought I was done. The doctor told me, "Do you have any idea how hard we worked to save your life? Your heart stopped seven times." When I woke up, my assistant's wife was whispering in my ear, "Nile, wake up. You died last night."

I was a very high-functioning drunk. I've never had a DUI. I actually drove home the night my heart stopped. I had been out with Robert Downey Jr. It's not Robert's fault – we were just partying.



PORTRAIT H el ene Pambrun

'My heart stopped seven times one night. I'm alive because the garbage men found me dead'

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

At 71, my work ethic is still exactly the same as it was. Last night I was up playing guitar until some ugly hour. I did four recordings and three videos yesterday. Some records fail – that's why I do so many. People allow me to fail, so that every now and then, I come up with *Levi's Jeans* [the Beyonc e song he co-wrote]. **I had cocaine psychosis after Madonna's party.** I went into the bathroom at Madonna's house with this really famous actor, and we were just doing coke all night. Someone carried me back to my hotel room. On my answering machine, I had a horrible message from a hitman who said he was going to kill me. I was hallucinating and hearing voices. Every single person I called about this hitman said, "Hey man, are you doing coke? That's

the coke talking to you." That was the first and last time I ever had cocaine psychosis. **The great benefit to my childhood was being born very sickly.** I went to a convalescent home and was in a classroom for kids aged 5 to 16. I got bored so I started to concentrate on what the older kids were learning. By the time I was six, I had read *Treasure Island* and *Moby-Dick*. **I have a strange acceptance of my own mortality.** Being in music, you can't help it, because every year at the Grammys and Oscars, they show people who passed away. So I know that one day my name is going to come up on screen for a split second, then that's it. ■

Nile Rodgers is an ambassador for Prostate Cancer UK and is promoting the Omaze Million Pound House Draw, Surrey, which is raising funds for lifesaving research (omaze.co.uk/pages/enter-surrey)



David Baddiel's mother, Sarah, at home in 1980



With David White outside Golfiana, 1991



From left: Dan, David and Ivor Baddiel with parents Sarah and Colin, Swansea Bay, 1974

'My mother was not ashamed of her affair. On the contrary, she was proud of it'

David Baddiel's childhood was dominated by his mother's relationship with another man, a family friend. It was a betrayal his father never acknowledged. Now, in a remarkably candid memoir, the comedian and author recalls what it was like growing up in a house where sex and infidelity were an open secret

David Baddiel, 59,
photographed by
Vicki Couchman in his
London office



t's, I'd guess, 1977. Which would make me 13. I'm in our back garden. Our back garden is a wilderness. It has a large tree in the middle that sheds a lot of leaves which never get raked. Beyond that is an area of mainly bald grass – mainly dried mud would be a better description – bounded by a hedge. In front

of the hedge is a shit goal. I don't mean a poor life ambition. I mean a junior football goal, a toy, basically, with blue posts and orange netting. It has been out there for about four years at this point and is 97 per cent rust. I'm not playing football, though – despite that being the reason I usually go into the garden. I'm facing the goal, but I don't have a football. A man I don't know that well is standing very close behind me. He has his arms wrapped tightly around me. He has his hands placed on top of my hands. He is asking me to swing my hips towards him. It's not abuse. In case you're wondering. Well, maybe it's a type of abuse, but it's a very particular sort. He's got his arms wrapped around me and his hands on mine and he's asking me to swing my hips towards him because I'm holding a golf club. By my feet is a golf ball. His name is David White, he is my mother's lover and he's doing his best to teach me how to play golf.

David White didn't just play golf; he ran a golfing memorabilia business called Golfiana. So did my mother. Which I think is one of the strangest parts of this story. My mother's way of showing this bloke she was in love with him was to *set up a rival golfing memorabilia business*. With the same name. I'm not even sure that's legally allowed under company copyright law.

Golfiana – my mother's version – was a success. My mother became a well-known figure in golfing memorabilia circles. She wrote five – yes, five – coffee-table books about golf memorabilia, with titles like *Golf: the Golden Years* and *Beyond the Links*. Whole articles were written about her in *Golf Illustrated*. Dealing in golf memorabilia was, for the second half of her working life, my mother's job. She ran Golfiana from home and also from a stall in an antique market called Grays in Bond Street.

You might think her interest in golf was something to which she was just paying lip service, so as to fit in with David White's world – to gesture to this man that she was very happy to accept, say, Lee Trevino's chances at the 1977 British Open as a subject fit for pillow talk. But it became much more than that. Not, I think, in a planned way. It was more... evolutionary. There is a thing in evolutionary theory called species drift, when a trait developed by a species for a specific function, to help them mate and/or survive, gets diverted to a different evolutionary lane. Dinosaurs, for example, evolved feathers, probably as

Sarah and David White in the early Eighties



My parents both had porn stashes. I think they believed masturbation was aspirational

a form of thermal insulation, but for some species the feathers mutated, developing more and more dynamic properties, eventually leading, as they evolved into birds, to flight. Similarly, when my mum suddenly professed an interest in golf, it was initially meant to be a way of demonstrating to David White that she loved him so much she wanted to share his passions. But as time went on, she seemed to lose sight of the fact that her whole interest in golf was for his benefit and ended up becoming a much bigger figure in the golfing memorabilia world than he was. I assume much to his chagrin.

My mother couldn't just pretend to be interested in golf. Golf had to become who she was. And because she was our mother, that meant to some extent that golf had to become, in our family, who we all were. I don't mean any of us became interested in the sport. F***, no. But large sections of the house were turned over to golfing memorabilia. Golf was everywhere we looked. Every ornament, every book, every fixture and fitting. Every painting, every jigsaw. Every card, every cake. Even upon my mother's person – she wore a lot of golf stuff: golf-bag brooches, club necklaces, ball-on-tee earrings. These still turn up often – in drawers, at the bottom of boxes – long after her death.

My mother was not ashamed of her affair with David White. On the contrary. She was proud of it. She considered – in a very Seventies way – that having an affair was glamorous. My brother Ivor tells a story about how, sometime in the early Nineties, he took a new girlfriend – her name was Tracey Blezard – down to meet my mother at her stall in Grays. My mother chatted a little to Tracey Blezard and then started talking to Ivor. At one point, the name “David White” came up. Without pausing for breath, she turned

Sarah at Golfiana in the early Nineties



Colin and Sarah at home circa 1989

to Tracey and said, “My lover of 20 years,” before turning back to Ivor to carry on chatting as if nothing had happened.

But the most amazing thing, probably, about my mother's affair is that despite all this incredible advertising of the fact, I don't think my dad ever really noticed it. It's an astounding feat of willed self-ignorance. Not least because David White was always at our house.

I don't know if my mother slept with David White at our house in Dollis Hill – I'm fairly sure she did – but one thing I am sure is that intimate encounters between them occurred at various golf memorabilia fairs up and down the country, backgrounded by postcards of St Andrews and antique tees and black and white flick books of Bobby Jones's swing.

There would also have been romantic opportunities provided by big golf events, and I do have direct evidence that my mother and David White took that opportunity at least once. In the mid-Nineties my father visited me at the flat I was then sharing with Frank Skinner. My mum was away and my dad had brought over a card that, he said, she'd left on her desk for me. Well. On the envelope it said David.

I opened the card. It had a golf scene on it. I thought nothing of that; my mother often wrote me cards and notes on stationery inscribed with golfing images. Inside was a short message. I read it out, with my father standing in front of me. It said: “To David, in memory of the Masters, when you were my master... Love, Sarah xxx.”

Now, many years later, it's hard to say when exactly in the reading of this card I realised it wasn't for me: that I was not the David to whom it was addressed. When, that is, it became clear to me that what I was reading out loud in front of my father



David, left, and family in 1985 with their cats Bismarck and the three-legged Phomphar

was a love note for David White, a back reference to a torrid time he and my mother must have spent together while watching a major golf tournament in the United States. Probably round about the words “the Masters”. But by then it was too late.

My father said, “What does that mean?”

I have an almost physical commitment to the truth. But even I had to tamp it down in this moment. “In memory of the Masters, when you were my master.” It’s got a very strong suggestion that the adultery in question involved not just golf but BDSM. Perhaps it was both. Perhaps my mother and David White consummated their love in latex plus-fours and Pringle gimp masks. It was just too much to countenance.

So I just said, “I don’t know. I have no idea what it means.” Which is weak, but to be fair, even if I was, say, Boris Johnson, I have no idea what lie I could’ve told to make what my mum had written make sense if it had been written to me.

One thing to note again – my father said my mother had left this note on her desk. But she did not have a study. There was a writing desk of sorts, an antique one, in the telly room at 43 Kendal Road, and when I lived there no one used it, but latterly she may have claimed it as her desk. But it would not, my point is, have been behind any actual closed door. My dad could’ve wandered in at any time and seen an envelope, in her handwriting, marked David.

Whether this suggests that my mother, subconsciously or not very subconsciously, wanted everyone including my dad to know about her love life, or whether this was genuinely absent-minded, I can’t quite call. It’s possible the truth is somewhere in between, that the affair had become such an open secret in her own mind by then that any kind of caution had faded. But I do know something, which is that my dad said, on my reading out that card,

“What does that mean?” Which shows that despite her shouting it from the rooftops, he didn’t straightforwardly know about my mother’s affair.

Something that often happens with marital infidelity is that it gets set in the context of sexlessness: of, that is, a marriage having failed, with the most acute sign of that failure being that the husband and wife do not have sex any more.

This wasn’t the case with my parents. I had insomnia from an early age. There is a variety of possible psychological reasons for this, but one thing that definitely didn’t help was the many nights I spent being woken up terrified in my bedroom by the sounds my dad made during sex. As a kid, obviously, I didn’t know that’s what it was. For years I assumed there was a wounded walrus in my parents’ bedroom. I’ve watched a lot of pornography – really, a lot – and I have never heard a climaxing man make that sound. The only person who I think might make a similar sound to accompany sexual ecstasy is Chewbacca.

Just to give you a clue as to how frightening it was – when I was a teenager, a friend stayed the night at my house. He slept in my room and I went to sleep in my brother Dan’s room further down the corridor. I remember going in to see him before he went to bed and saying, “Listen, they – my parents – might have sex, and you should know my dad makes some very weird noises.” He responded in a teenage,

The only person who might make a similar sound as my dad to accompany sexual ecstasy is Chewbacca

bored, *Hey, I’m 16, I know what sex sounds like* manner. I shrugged – maybe all dads make sounds like that, I thought. I said, “OK...” with that ellipsis in my voice – and went to Dan’s room. At about three o’clock in the morning, a knock on the door woke me up, confused, and I heard my friend whisper from outside, “Can I come in?” He opened the door wearing boxer shorts and a T-shirt, and even in the half-light I could see he was ashen, white with fear.

He said, “Dave, I think your mum’s died.”

I stared at him. I pretty much knew already, just from those words, what was happening and how this would play out. But nonetheless I said, “What?”

“I know it seems unlikely,” he said, “but your dad is making the most incredible noises. Screaming and crying...”

I said, “They’re having sex. I told you.”

My friend shook his head. “No. Really. These sounds...” He grew intense. “The only time I’ve heard someone make a sound like that... it was my uncle. At my auntie’s funeral. He knelt in her grave and made that” – he raised a terrified finger towards the adjoining wall – “noise.”

I sighed, said, “Right,” and got out of bed. We tiptoed across the landing back to my room and stood, both of us in our boxer shorts, by the bunk bed.

After about 15 seconds we heard, “WRUUGGGHHHAAAGGGKKKKK- HHHPPPLLLTTT!” Or similar.

I said, “They’re having sex,” and went back to bed.

These sounds were very disturbing when you didn’t know what they were. It is possible – even though I was breezy with my friend about them – that at some deep level I was damaged by the confusion they would’ve caused at an earlier age. But it wasn’t as disturbing as the time when I was about 13 and I heard my mum in the next room having sex without my dad. On her own. Doing that activity that, many years later, on live TV, she said was a lovely thing to do outside in the open. She made a lot of disturbing sounds while doing this, but the most disturbing for me was the one she made right at the end, which was the sound of her screaming three times the word *David*.

I think by then I kind of knew what was going on. Enough at least not to rush in and say, “I’m here! I’m here! How can I save you?”

As you may have gathered by now, 43 Kendal Road was an oversexualised house. My parents both had large stashes of pornography in their bedroom drawers. This was, in a way, yet another form of collecting. My mother’s consisted mainly of editions of *Playgirl*, which displayed pictures of naked men, invariably looking into the middle distance, invariably with moustaches. My father’s were more exotic – hardcore magazines he’d picked up on travels abroad, principally *Color Climax*. ♣

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I don't know how old I was when I first came across these – hard not to say *oo-er* following that, but fortunately or unfortunately, I was definitely too young for that innuendo to work. I'd say I was about nine or ten and, though immediately fascinated and drawn into the beginnings of a lifelong addiction, I didn't understand where most of the bodily fluids I was seeing spattered across various bodies came from.

Certain habits are set in you very young. I don't mean the obvious habit here. Ivor has always been more responsible and organised than me, as befits the older brother. He has complained to me often in later years that I was much more slapdash when it came to returning my father's pornography to whatever order it would've lain in his bedside drawer after, um, use. Ivor, he has since told me, was religious about this, being apparently terrified my parents might cotton on to his illicit viewing of my dad's stash. I wasn't so methodical. Once I took a copy of *Color Climax* out of their room and into the bathroom. Before I'd really got deep into this particular edition, however, I heard someone coming up the stairs, so I hid it under the laundry basket (an item I can still see clearly: cylindrical, padded, off-white with roses). Then forgot about it. Sometime later, while in bed, I heard my dad in the bathroom shouting, "What the f*** is this doing here?"

But to be honest, Colin and Sarah weren't so great at keeping their pornography hidden either. Once they left a copy of *Club International* on the breakfast table. In the middle of the table, like it was a condiment. Like, "What would you like with your Findus Crispy Pancakes, David; some very fulsome pubic bush?" *Club International*, by the way, was a British pornographic magazine. That's the sort of thing they were called in the Seventies: *Club International*, *Penthouse*, *Mayfair*. I think there was a belief in the Seventies that wanking was aspirational.

The most important moment in *The Trouble with Dad*, the documentary we made about my father's dementia, comes near the end. Sitting in Dad's living room, the director, who is looking for these emotional beats, asks Ivor and me – in front of Colin – if our father has ever told us he loves us. "No," I say. "Of course not." "Why not?" "I think because..." I reply, "he didn't?" This is a joke. Of sorts. But the director runs with it, turning the camera on my dad and saying, "Colin, your son is saying you never loved them." And my dad says, "That's a load of bollocks."

This affects me deeply – you can see it in the film – but I have since come to see it as an extraordinary moment. Because, of course, it was true that Colin Baddiel had never told me or Ivor or Dan that he loved us. I tell my children I love them all

Unlike my father, I tell my children that I love them all the time. Perhaps they find it cringey

the f***ing time. They are no doubt bored of it, or perhaps find it cringey. This is maybe because I'm making up for the lack of that statement in my childhood, but more likely because I come from a generation of parents for whom parenting is more of a defining thing in their lives, and make a point of expressing that to their children a lot through the words, "I love you." I'm not sure, in truth, that my generation's parenting style is necessarily better than our parents' was. I think it's possible that as well as social media, the reason for the epidemic of mental health problems in teenagers and young people now may be something to do with how difficult we as parents have made it – with our over-closeness to them, our insistence on *always*, *suffocatingly*, being there for them – for children to separate from their parents.

Meanwhile, for my generation, hearing I love you from your parents was and is a big deal. Especially from your father, especially for sons. It's a cliché, but certainly in my case true, that many of us were not raised by men in touch with their feelings; indeed, by men who saw being overtly in touch with one's feelings, and therefore freely able to express affection, as suspect.

Which is why my father saying, "That's absolute bollocks," in this moment has this effect. It is the closest I will ever get – certainly now – to my dad telling me he loves me. And I'm not saying that, as some might, to prove that he was an emotionally stunted man. I'm saying it's *better* than him saying I love you. Because truer. Because that is who my dad was: someone who did love me, and my brothers, but could only express that as himself because he was so deeply himself, and to do that he had to do it argumentatively, aggressively and with a swear word. He had to say that the idea that he didn't love me was absolute bollocks.

Colin Baddiel's bantz never completely stopped. It became harder and harder for my dad to find words, but he would still make faces or blow raspberries. His attitude outlasted language and remained defiantly puerile, shot through with f*** you and *I-don't-want-your-pity*. In the final scene of *The Trouble with Dad*, we take him to the pub. We were not a regular pub-going family – not even my dad's Welshness and fondness for a drink could break through our basic Jewishness in that respect – yet something genuine happens.

My brother and I were cueing him. We were cueing him, that is, to do one of his

catchphrases. We used to do this a lot. The catchphrases were the last frontier, the nuggets of Colin-ness that we relied on to be locked deep inside the Fort Knox of his dementia, and we often tried to draw them out with prompts. Catchphrases, after all, frequently have a call and answer structure, and we, at least, could remember all the calls.

You don't see this in the film but in the pub on that night, we tried quite a few. We tried, "Hobble dee hi?" To which the answer is, "De hum di grum." We tried the old stalwart, "I'm off," but got no, "You've been off for years." He was blank. And then finally I tried an old one. "*Have you got a match?*" I said. "No," he said. "No," I said, more heavily, more, to be honest, desperately, "Have you got a match?" Something in him stirred – some deep-set cognitive machinery rustily starting to turn – and he said, "Yes." I looked at him, my face pleading with *And?*

And he said, "Your face and my arse."

I said with joy, "He's still in there!"

I was euphoric that we got that. That film, as much as anything else, was a keepsake, a way to chronicle my dad while he was indeed still in there. It was a holding-on. It speaks of something important therefore that my dad saying a phrase so lowbrow and uncultured and unlyrical filled me with such joy. It speaks of the intense significance of context. Because undeniably, "Your face and my arse" is no great shakes in the words of wisdom department. But in the context of my father and the need for us to feel, to be shown, that he was still who he was, this was the best thing he could possibly have said. This is the store we put on selfhood.

Keats said, "Beauty is truth." A simplistic, no-doubt-not-what-the-poet-meant reading of that – that beauty and truth are aligned – would suggest it is wrong. The way we present physical beauty, for example, contains very little truth, contrived as it is with cosmetic trickery, lighting and all sorts of conventional pressures on both male and female gazes to attune ourselves to a fixed, oppressive to most people idea of what beauty is (little bit of politics there). But I would privilege his next line, "Truth beauty." Truth is beautiful even when it is ugly. Truth, unlike beauty, is beautiful when it is hard to see, when it must be dug out, when it reveals itself despite everything. Which is why I'm happy my father did not, at that point, say something about silken flanks with garlands drest, or even, "I love you," but, "*Your face and my arse.*" ■

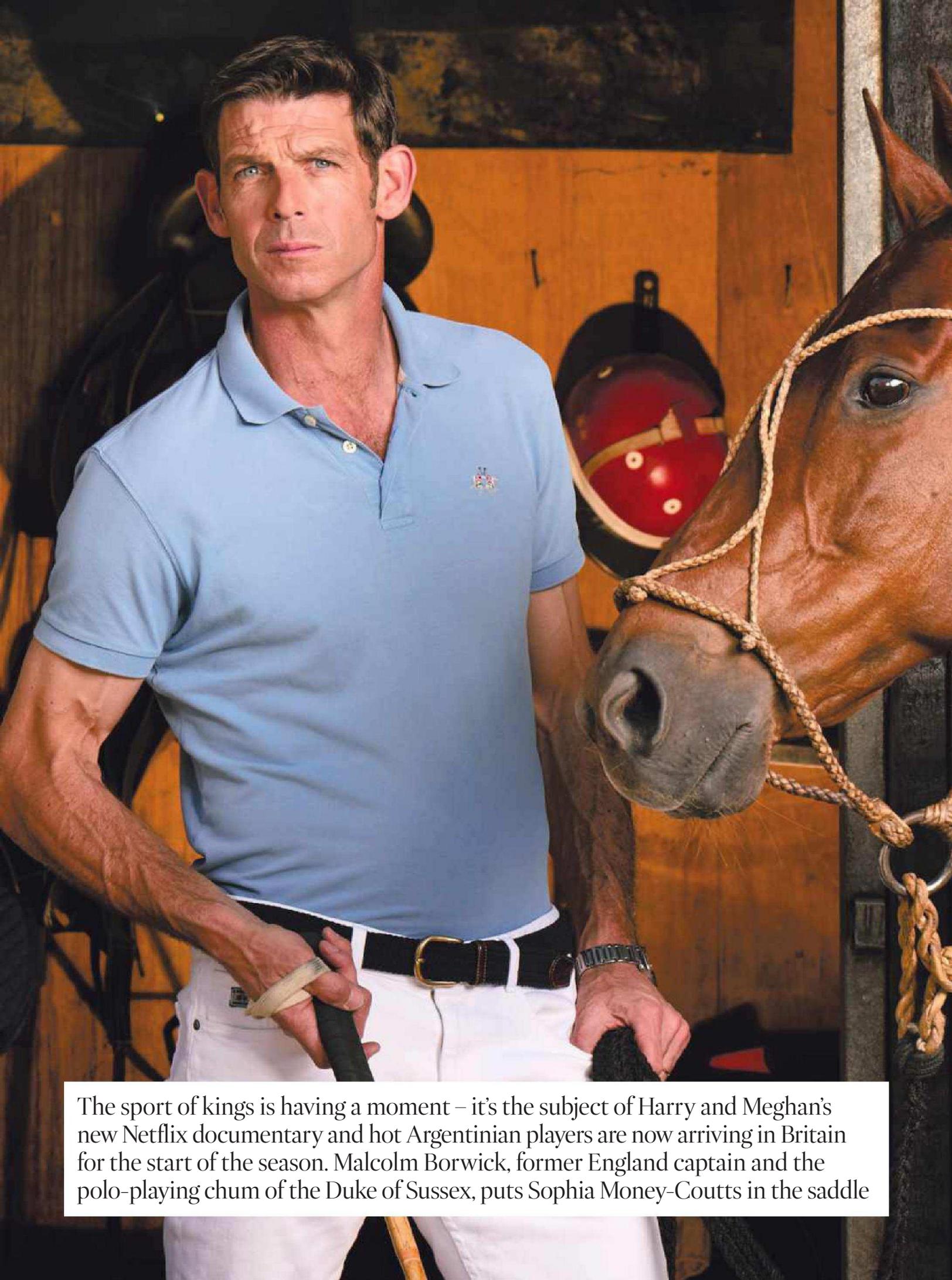
My Family: the Memoir by David Baddiel (Fourth Estate, £22) is published on July 4. To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

WHAT THE CHUKKA?

My day with
the royal polo set's
Prince Charming



Polo player Malcolm Borwick and the writer Sophia Money-Coutts during her polo lesson at stables in Midhurst, West Sussex. Opposite: Borwick, 47. Portraits: Mark Harrison

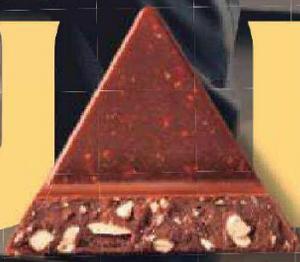


The sport of kings is having a moment – it's the subject of Harry and Meghan's new Netflix documentary and hot Argentinian players are now arriving in Britain for the start of the season. Malcolm Borwick, former England captain and the polo-playing chum of the Duke of Sussex, puts Sophia Money-Coutts in the saddle

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Borwick and Prince William at the Audi Polo Challenge, Cambridge, July 2015



With Harry, Meghan and the polo legend Adolfo Cambiasso in Florida last month



have just had a polo lesson with Malcolm Borwick, former England captain and polo-playing friend of Prince Harry, and now there's an ambulance at the Sussex stables with two paramedics having a look for broken ribs.

They're not checking me, I should clarify. They're feeling up one of Malcolm's clients. People pay

this tall, blue-eyed, intensely charming character, who could be from one of *Polo* writer Jilly Cooper's novels, £250 an hour for lessons, and this poor chap was practising on one of the polo fields behind us (or stick and balling, as they call it, but we'll come to the lingo later) when, bang, suddenly he was on the ground, not moving. Malcolm, like a real-life action hero, leapt off his horse as if the saddle had electrocuted his arse and sprinted over; there followed several minutes of agonised groaning. Then the ambulance was called. But as Malcolm tells me later, this is a dangerous game.

The polo season's just kicked off in the UK, having finished in America where last month Malcolm played alongside Prince Harry in Florida. There, he captained the winning side and afterwards launched a viral TikTok clip and a thousand mischievous news articles after he kissed the Duchess of Sussex. It was classic Prince Harry tomfoolery – after collecting the winning trophy, Malcolm kissed Meghan on both cheeks, whereupon Harry flexed his shoulders and pulled a face. "I didn't even see that," Malcolm says, which I'm not sure can be entirely true because he knows exactly what clip I'm referring to but, like I said, he does have very blue eyes and a charming manner, so I'm willing to let that one slide. "I don't do clickbaiting," Malcolm adds firmly.

The game is about to have a moment, as they say. Not just because it's polo season in the UK and glamorous socialites are flocking to polo clubs in Windsor and Gloucestershire to drink champagne and pretend they understand what's going on in front of them. Not because a

'Harry is an offensive polo player, very positive; William is solid defensively'

Jilly Cooper adaptation is shortly to land on TV either, but because a new Netflix documentary about polo is in the works. It will follow the American polo season, with a behind-the-scenes look at the sport that's often called elitist, inaccessible and the most expensive hobby in the world. It's the sport of kings, after all, where the best horses can fetch £200,000 and to bankroll a top team you ideally need the petty cash reserves of Jeff Bezos.

Who are the executive producers of this show, which is going to show us what an egalitarian and intrepid pastime polo really is? A couple called the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. "Known primarily for its aesthetic and social scene, the series will pull back the curtain on the grit and passion of the sport, capturing players and all it takes to compete at the highest level," declared Netflix when Harry and Meghan's project was announced last month.

Malcolm will feature; the day he played in Florida alongside Harry was filmed. But he won't tell me much more. Nor will he spill much about Harry and Meghan. He's one of those loyal, clipped British sorts who's in their inner circle and won't talk.

He will talk, almost exhaustively, about polo, his 50-plus England caps, why its popularity is soaring again and how you can genuinely play the sport if you're merely "a blacksmith with a horse". He also shows me where to find a horse's erogenous zone, which is exciting, but before then I have to get through my lesson.

First, an admission that will shock precisely no one: I grew up watching polo. I lived about ten miles from the Sussex stables where Malcolm and I meet, in this beautiful, green and moneyed patch of the

countryside. Polo is big here because Cowdray Park, the 16,000-acre estate that hosts one of the biggest polo competitions, the Gold Cup, is close by. At this time of year, the narrow lanes are full of men in gaucho hats exercising horses, and the pubs are full of Spanish chitchat because a vast number of Argentinians follow the polo season around the world: from America at the start of the calendar year, to the UK for our summer, to Sotogrande in southern Spain for August, and from there to the polo capital, Argentina.

On weekday afternoons when I was small, Mum used to pick up my brother and me from school and we would go to Cowdray. Some kids get taken to the football terraces; we went to the polo, where my bro and I played with our mini polo sticks behind the grandstand. Unbearable, I know, but I've picked up a bit about the game as a result. They're not horses, for example. The correct term is ponies. Chukkas are the seven-minute segments that make up a game. The worst handicap is -2 and the best is 10, and there are only nine 10-goal players in the world. Mostly Argentinian. All men.

I've sat on a polo pony once before, but I've never had a lesson. So here I am, on a £30,000 chestnut mare called Habana, being schooled by a former England captain. Reins in my left hand; polo stick in my right. It doesn't look much, that slither of bamboo and tipa wood, but let me tell you, after you've swung it behind you two dozen times in a pathetic attempt to hit a ball the size of a grapefruit, your shoulder will feel it. "Turn your left shoulder towards it," barks Malcolm, riding alongside me, as I raise the stick in the air yet again. "I've got a dodgy hip," I mumble. But Malcolm isn't the sort of teacher who listens to excuses. He comes from a Scottish military family and he takes the sergeant-major approach. "Get your heels down!" he shouts, when I try to hit the ball at a canter.

Poor Habana, I worry, this can't be good for her back. I miss it, then I miss it again, and this continues for some time ➤

THE WHITE COMPANY

LONDON



Borwick and the Princess of Wales at Windsor last year



A miracle happens: I hit the ball. But my thighs wobble like blancmange afterwards

became his wife, and their growing family. He's played "many times" alongside Princes William and Harry and schools me in their differences. "Harry is an offensive polo player, a very positive, very forward-thinking player, whereas William is a really solid defensive player." I see, I say, wondering whether this echoes their characters in real life, but Malcolm doesn't elaborate.

All right, fine. But was this scene as deeply glamorous and louche as people might imagine?

No, he insists. "When I started playing professionally, after Durham in the Noughties, that was the first time it wasn't acceptable to fall out of a nightclub at 2am and get up and play. I was at the forefront of the very first team to have a personal trainer, the very first team that had a psychologist, the very first team that looked at nutrition." As a younger player, he was once told off for going to bed before the boss of the team, but he says all that has since changed.

What was originally a military training game subsequently adopted by Persian nobles two millennia ago was picked up with enthusiasm by the British army in the 19th century, and spread around the Empire. It morphed into an aristocratic game because you needed cash and horses to play it, and from there developed the idea that polo was played exclusively by hard-shagging, hard-drinking toffs and princes. Think of Princess Diana standing by the sidelines in the Nineties watching her husband. I still laugh (tragically) whenever I think about a Tatler cover from 1992, featuring the future king in polo kit with the line, "Is Prince Charles too sexy for his own good?"

Now, Malcolm says, it's a more professional game, taken extremely seriously by players who – like him – do Pilates or yoga every day and study their macronutrients. One of his business collaborations is with the whisky brand Royal Salute, and he now plays for his

Royal Salute team with a handicap of 5 – so still a very, very good player – while juggling various business interests and coaching private clients like poor old Tom.

Imagine Sir Alan Sugar but instead he sounds posh and he's obsessed with polo. Malcolm comes across a bit like that. He has "equestrian real estate" projects in Saudi Arabia, Dubai, Spain and Portugal, he has his whisky collaboration, and he dabbles in breeding polo ponies. Because he's a polo wheeler-dealer, he's also helping to develop a smaller, faster version of the game – Gladiator polo – played with a team of three instead of four, on a field that's roughly half the size. Much as other sports are trying to attract younger fans – think cricket and Twenty20 – so too is polo.

He says polo's popularity has waned slightly in the UK after the late Noughties and what Malcolm calls "the Katie Price era", when the big summer competitions were attended by people who simply wanted to be seen, but he's optimistic about the game going forward. "Let's take it away from Cartier and Jaeger-LeCoultre and make it Budweiser," he says, before explaining that he's also trying to create a rollout surface: "an Astro base that you could roll out in the middle of Manhattan". He reckons this will shore up the future of polo and make it more accessible. He talks proudly of more women playing the game. "I'm a huge believer in reaching out to the next generation, and with the Netflix documentary, we'll get that message across. Polo is always going to have a barrier, but we want to try to reduce it." Oh, so he's more involved in Harry and Meghan's documentary than he is letting on? Again, no dice. Malcolm's too proper for that.

His three children – Ines, 13, Jaime, 12, and Lucas, 10 – have started playing, which makes him "nervous". "Remember that scene in *Gone with the Wind*, the father pushing the daughter to ride?"

And she dies, I say cautiously.

"Exactly. I run the risk of putting my children into a sport that is extremely dangerous. Look at today," he says, gesturing to the yard where the ambulance has gone but Tom is still staggering around.

One lesson was probably enough for me, although Malcolm says it takes six lessons to know if you've caught the polo bug. It might make a nice change from Pilates because you can burn up to 1,800 calories in a match, he adds.

Oh, and if you're interested, the horse's erogenous zone is on its shoulder, just below the bottom of its mane. He demonstrates on one of his, a mare called Lolita, and she turns her neck to reciprocate by nuzzling his arm. Like I said, he's very charming, whether you're a human or a horse. Sorry, pony. ■

as my right wrist starts to scream. But then something miraculous happens: I hit the ball, it makes an immensely satisfying "Thunk!" sound, and soars ahead of me on the playing field. I feel invincible.

Then comes the dramatic fall of Malcolm's client, Tom, behind us and the action is paused. It's quite Jilly Cooper all of a sudden: Clare, the Marchioness of Milford Haven, who owns these stables where Malcolm keeps his ponies, is on the phone directing the ambulance. Tom, in a pink polo shirt, is wondering around asking what day it is. My thighs, meanwhile, are wobbling like blancmange from my lesson.

In between all this drama, Malcolm keeps talking to me about the game. He comes from a posh riding family (his grandmother also played polo for England), and started playing polo for the Pony Club when he was ten. By the age of 14, he'd launched the polo club at Radley College. After school, he travelled to Argentina with his savings. "I went to an Argentinian pro and said, 'Here's £6,000. How long can I stay?'" He remained in Argentina for three months, finessing his polo and working as a groom when the cash ran out.

Tall and rangy, Malcolm was naturally good at various sports. But, for him, nothing could match the speed and adrenaline of polo. He played throughout university, winning the Universities Championship three years in a row. How did he fund this expensive habit? "I wasn't the kid who had parents who bought six ponies and said, 'Here you go, darling, play!'" he tells me.

Instead, while at Durham (studying psychology and then Spanish, which he tacked on to his degree so he could understand the Argentinian polo players), he started developing his business acumen, hustling businesses such as Maserati and Japan Airlines, pitching polo as an aspirational sport worth sponsoring. He was persuasive (and charming), so they listened. By that stage, he was also good enough that he was being called up by teams owned by the likes of Nigerian prince Albert Esiri and British businessman Adrian Kirby, so he played all over the globe for three years after university.

At 24, he was offered a finance role in Singapore, having decided that he needed a "proper" job, but he got the England call-up the same day. How long did he grapple with that decision? "About two seconds."

We pause as Tom reappears to say the paramedics have checked him over. "It's only mild concussion and they say I can drive," he tells us. Malcolm frowns and suggests Tom take a couple more painkillers before getting into his Range Rover.

Tom totters off again and we return to polo. Malcolm, now 47, played for England for a decade at the same time as various international club teams, travelling around the world – from Australia to Korea and India – with his girlfriend, Alexandra, who

STYLING: HANNAH SKEELLY; HAIR AND MAKE-UP: ALICE THEOBALD AT ARLINGTON; ARTISTS USING BOY DE CHANEL AND NO.1 DE CHANEL SKINCARE AND LANZA HAIRCARE AND CAROL SULLIVAN AT ARLINGTON; ARTISTS USING RUBY HAMMER, JACKET, JOHNSONS AND POLO SHIRT, HOLLANDCOOPER.COM, BOOTS, FAIRFAXANDFAVOR.COM, GETTY IMAGES

THE MIDWIFE LOOKED AT ME AND SAID, 'WELL, PALOMA FAITH. YOU'VE SEEN BETTER DAYS'



Hormone injections in her dressing room, a miscarriage on set, postnatal depression, painful sex, an abortion and a break-up... The 42-year-old pop star Paloma Faith has written her survival guide to being a woman and she's not holding back

Paloma Faith,
photographed by
Elliott Morgan



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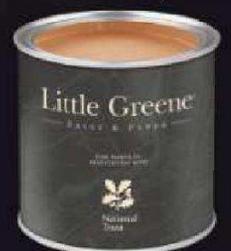
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TRYING

Aged 33, and three months into trying for a baby with my long-term partner, I just knew it wasn't happening. I had my suspicions it was from his side, even though he was only 26 and I was the old cougar, but I didn't want to damage the poor man's ego by pointing the finger prematurely, so we both went for tests. Unfortunately, I was right. He was told he had low count and low motility.

While I was doing an IVF stimulation cycle, I was still full-on working. So I was hiding in music venue toilets jabbing myself, finding fridges in television studios and on shoots as the medicines have to be refrigerated. I remember vividly trying to stash all my meds discreetly in the tiniest fridge between the crudités and the hummus in my dressing room while on the set of *The Voice*.

Of the 14 eggs that were collected, 7 were gold standard once fertilised. They "popped" one in. I hate the word "popped" when it comes to pregnancy or fertilisation, because the whole thing is hell and very far from anything as simple as popping. By this point, the thought of being able to have sex and make a baby sounded really luxurious. I wonder if I will ever feel any nostalgia for the number of times I have had my ankles in stirrups on a hospital bed?

Unfortunately, even though the first one took, it was ectopic. I knew something was up very early on, even before it showed up on the scans, and I kept going back, insisting it didn't feel right. Between finding out and having an operation to remove the foetus from my fallopian tube, it was New Year's Eve, 2014. I put on a sequined dress and lay in agony, cramping on my friend's sofa sipping a soft drink. Days later I had the little bean removed via laparoscopy and was lucky enough that they saved my tubes.

Even luckier, the next embryo transfer worked. I was pregnant.

PREGNANT

You envisage yourself radiant, glowing, living a full life and having bouncy, lustrous hair. Not becoming exhausted, getting itchy, dry skin, feeling obese, crying at any sign of a modicum of anything negative, struggling to breathe, having ankles the size of elephants', sciatica, indigestion and heartburn like you can't believe.

I wish they'd warned me. I kept shouting through my tears, "I bet Beyoncé didn't have all these awful side-effects!" (Oh, I forgot cold sores. I had those a lot too. I doubt Beyoncé had cold sores.) I unravelled in body, mind and soul, while people continually asked me, "Do you love being pregnant?" To which my reply

With ex Leyman Lahcine, her children's father, 2015



I hated being pregnant. Why didn't anyone warn me? I bet Beyoncé didn't have these side-effects



Posting about breastfeeding, August 2021

was, "No, I hate it, but I am really looking forward to the baby."

My babies both ended up brilliant (after a lot of heave-ho) and yet I can't really put into words how much I hated being pregnant. I remember doing an appearance on *The Jonathan Ross Show* when I was pregnant with my second daughter. I had to perform a song and sit for an interview. The way the seats on the set were designed made them so uncomfortable for a pregnant woman to sit on with any level of grace or dignity. They were low and padded; it felt like, once sitting in them, I would never get out. I was wearing a transparent black dress with a crystal-embellished catsuit underneath it (pretty standard maternity wear), a hat and gloves AND heels. I wanted to sit with my legs on the floor straight, not crossed, but if I had done that the cameras would have been right up my skirt and zoomed in on my bulging thighs. The filming took two hours. I just

wanted to be at home in joggers sitting like a bloke with a hernia.

BIRTH

By the time I had my first daughter, I had been in full labour for 21 hours on 8 hours' sleep over 7 days. I was wheeled into a room, projectile vomiting from the drugs. One of the nurses looked at me with her arms folded and said, "Well, Paloma Faith. You've seen better days."

I was so tired at this point I was in a sort of dream state. Nothing felt real. They cut me open, got her out and placed her in my arms, covered in vernix and gunge. I was shaking from head to foot. Convulsing, almost. I had no strength to hold her. I gave her to my partner, shouting, "I'm going to drop her!" and he took her.

On day three of our stay in hospital I had got into the swing of multiple 40-minute naps between dysfunctional and stressful breastfeeds, not knowing if I was doing it properly or if the piranha on my boob was normal. I had hardly slept in seven days and I was very, very shaky on the perspective levels. At about 4am I woke up from a half-sleep screaming. I shouted at my partner who was asleep on the hospital floor next to me and pressed the help buzzer to call the nurse. I was convinced I had solved the problem as to why I felt so out of sorts: they had sewn my head on to the wrong body during the c-section. I looked at my partner with rage that he had allowed this to happen.

It was then that, sobbing, I said I felt that I needed to give the baby up for adoption. I had decided I wasn't going to be able to cope. Later I was told I had suffered temporary postpartum psychosis. I explained to the nurse that public perception of me was that I was a little bit crazy in a palatable way but this moment was the real deal. I wanted to be sectioned and looked after and someone better than me to take the baby. The midwife on the ward that evening was calm and kind. She told the other nurses, "We have a day three, girls!"

No one had told me about "day three" or that it was a thing. But it's something to do with when your hormones change and the milk starts to come in. In hindsight this episode was short-lived but I think I suffered from depression for the following two years. Mental health is a difficult one because you might not be fully aware of problems until the crisis has passed. I wished I had known so I could have sought out proper help or even medication to ease me out of it. But like many women, I didn't.

GOING HOME

I was plagued by toxic feelings of resentment towards my partner, that I had done all this IVF alone and then

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gone through a physical metamorphosis, along with the traumatic birth and then postpartum infection after infection. I was emotionally raw, delirious with sleep deprivation and FULL of hormones I didn't recognise. My partner was working 8am until 8pm, which were pretty much most of my baby's waking hours, and I felt alone. Time took on a new rhythm. It felt very, very slow at first. My best friends became the shopping apps. I didn't have the concentration for books or films. My memories of that period remain opaque but I imploded a bit, I think.

SEX POSTPARTUM

My vagina has always been sensitive but accommodating, a bit like me. I feel guilty about how I have treated it in the past. In my early years of sexual activity, I was so overly accommodating for men that I would allow them to shove it in without lubrication and almost tried to ignore the lack of comfort or arousal. I actively told men I couldn't orgasm to alleviate any pressure they might feel to make me do so. It was years before I learnt how to enjoy sex or met men who took more pleasure out of my pleasure than their own. Too long.

Nothing, though, has been as painful as the first time I had sex postpartum. It was HELL. It felt like razor blades were embedded in his penis. I felt guilty because it was by now seven months since I had given birth and I felt I should have an obligatory try. I was wincing the entire time. He noticed. I was feeling bad; he was feeling bad. It wasn't erotic at all.

I would say it took nearly two years for me not to feel any pain at all during sex. That is a hell of a long time. I went to a lot of gynaecologists but no one had any answers as to why this was happening. If I am honest, I resigned myself to having painful sex for the rest of my days.

ANOTHER BABY

I was determined to have a second child, for my first child. Having said that, having another one can be daunting and the prospect of going through IVF again was tough. None of my old embryos took so I had to undergo a whole new stimulation cycle after three failed transfers. This time I had to take more drugs because of the scar from my first c-section, all while raising my first little one. Starting from amoeba stage all over again was a prospect that riddled us with worry. My partner even said, "I'm not sure we will survive this again emotionally..." Turns out we didn't.

MISCARRIAGE

When I realised I was miscarrying at seven weeks, I was at work. I was on the set of *Pennyworth*, filming a choreographed

fight scene. When my miscarriage started, I was getting straddled and pretend strangled by my on-screen sister. Then the (real) bleeding began. I went to the toilet. When the body prepares for birth it often rids itself of all the poo in the bowels. That day I went to the toilet a total of nine times. The runners on film sets always accompany you to the toilet to make sure you don't wander off and take too many breaks. So here I was, literally shitting myself and bleeding heavily on set while performing the fight of my life, with some young twentysomething waiting outside the cubicle every time.

I chose not to say what was happening to me. I'm not sure why. It wasn't something I felt like explaining. I could have said I had an upset stomach but I didn't want to say that either. One thing that struck me, though, was that I VERY MUCH didn't want to leave the set. If I told someone, I knew they would send me home. Everyone is different but I didn't feel that would be helpful to me and, besides,

Another baby on the way. My partner said, 'I'm not sure we'll survive this again.' We didn't

it was a loss – going home wouldn't bring it back. Instead, I decided to stay on, stuffing my knickers with rolled-up tissues and asking for someone to pick up some sanitary towels. I worked. I shat. I bled. I worked. I shat. I bled. Filming a fight scene was actually quite helpful. I had somewhere to put my sadness, physically.

AN ABORTION

I have never regretted the abortion I had when I was 22. The man I was pregnant by was awful. He was an addict, self-absorbed and had already abandoned one child. I know I would never have achieved what I went on to do had I not had that termination. My life would have been very different.

When my period didn't come I did a test and it was negative. I went to the doctor and she tested. It was negative. The doctor told me adamantly I absolutely wasn't pregnant and it was obvious from her way with me that she didn't believe in abortion. I felt pressured into ignoring my gut instinct. I knew I was pregnant. I just knew. I paid for a scan with the small amount of money I had from my part-time job in retail and little cabaret bookings, and saw a tiny black speck that was a pregnancy on the screen. I felt sick. I knew immediately I couldn't have a baby. I was living in a trendy, mouse-ridden, overpriced

east London loft that looked a bit like a crack den and was definitely a fire hazard. I had no money, no stability and my gut feeling about the man was he was bad news.

I was so early knowing I was pregnant I had to wait a few weeks to take the tablet. You couldn't have it before six weeks. When I went to the clinic to take it, I sat on a hospital bed and was given a glass of water and the pill and told to pop it. I had to stay sitting on the bed for a few hours for monitoring in case of any adverse reactions. I sat. I read a bit. A few hours passed. The woman on the bed beside me began to cry, convulse, grimace and moan in pain. I approached the nurse, concerned.

Me: Excuse me, that lady took the tablet at the same time as me. Does that mean it's not working for me because I am not doing that?

Nurse: Do you think you have made the right decision?

Me: Yes.

Nurse: That's probably why you are OK.

This didn't seem very scientific. In no case is having an abortion easy. It's a series of what-ifs and of self-loathing. I felt that I had let myself down by coming off the pill when the consequences were pregnancy with a man I didn't want to spend the rest of my life with. It is an inherent part of the female condition to blame yourself. The man is not expected to take responsibility. When I was eventually discharged, I went home and resumed my usual day. I thought I'd had a lucky escape as the blood flowed more like a period.

After a few hours, though, the pain flooded in like an avalanche. The blood became heavier and streamed out of me. I was on the floor doubled over in a foetal position, realising that the decision I had made was not going to be easy. The contractions lasted about 90 minutes, and I saw a small clot that may or may not have been the speck of fertilised egg that had been discharged in the toilet bowl.

I never for one second felt that I had killed a baby. Having said that, I know women who have. I know it's not an easy choice to make, whatever the circumstances. But I believe in a right to choose. And I don't regret my choice to this day. Having that child, at that stage in my life, with that particular man, would have been a disaster.

BREAK-UP

It's difficult for me to pinpoint what it is about myself that I felt I'd lost and needed to run to, because on paper, I had everything I wanted. I had an arty, emotionally intelligent, handsome boyfriend, the father of my two beautiful children; a career; a brilliant group of friends. But the truth is that I lost myself in my own eyes and in my children's father's eyes, and I think he lost himself ➤

too. I felt like I was living someone else's life. I hadn't just lost myself to motherhood. I was so fuelled by a hyper sense of responsibility that at times I allowed myself to focus on generating an income, for my kids, my partner, my mum, my sister and whoever else I felt responsible for.

The actual separation took place over a period of years, I can see now. It wasn't a knee-jerk response, although the ending itself felt that way. We went to couples therapy together for two years and felt the slow deterioration of us. I realised that when there are children to distract you, it is actually very possible to remain together for long periods of time, unhappy but OK – OK enough to stay, never really bad nor really good. I found that difficult because I am a passionate person who is hyper-focused on detail. I was the one who was too weak to endure the daily sadness, or worse, mundanity.

I don't think it's fair or necessary to go into the intricacies of my relationship issues, only to say that there was a tangible slow demise followed by a snapping. A dramatic end. That was unbearable. I was suffocated by loss and by guilt. It broke me down, it broke him down and it broke us apart.

The major problems in our relationship began after having children. That isn't to say that I blame them – I don't. I blame us.

I FANCY EVERYONE

What happened to me? Literally every male who shows me any attention at all, even the obligatory greeting in a shop, "Hello, may I help you?", I fancy. Is it nature's cruel way of telling me my eggs are rotting? Is it the inevitable "air of desperation" it was prophesised I would have and was in complete denial of? Is it because I want another baby and time is running out? Probably that actually, but really I could do without the other baby unless it was Lenny Kravitz's, and then I think I could just about manage.

I was on a flight home from my first holiday as a single parent with both kids. Just after I realised my 18-month-old's formula had exploded in my bag, a man of about 33, on holiday with his mum, spoke to me. He was fashionable in a really contrived way but with a glint in his eye. He kept talking about his wife (yuck, married men are not hot), my kids were feral and I was covered in formula powder from the in-flight explosion. AND YET the fact that he spoke to me made me want to be impregnated immediately. He was not my type at all. Like, AT ALL.

I think it's because I am still figuring out what I'm doing. I destroyed the biggest relationship of my life and am essentially freewheeling. I am driving with the top down and hands off the wheel screaming with hysterical laughter. I have a wildness in my eyes. It might be a breakdown...

What's happened to me? Literally, every man who shows me any attention at all, I fancy

DATING AGAIN

A woman at a party forced me to go on what I can only describe as "the wanky" dating app, aimed at people in the public eye. I hated it. It was pretentious and elitist, seemingly full of idiots with professionally taken photos. I don't find men posing with their abs out in black and white very appealing. All I got was identical white men in crisp white shirts or with three top buttons undone sitting on yachts. I don't think I can get with that, with my state-educated, mixed-heritage kids from Hackney. It only served to make me feel more depressed and isolated.

After a while, with no opportunities to meet new people and feeling alone in the house when the kids went to bed at night, I thought I'd try something that I hoped would be a bit more "me". I signed up to a different app. Initially, I thought I'd just go on there to find people to antagonise on text messages for light entertainment and I would definitely not meet up with anyone. Being provocative to strangers is a bit of a fun pastime of mine. But I was paranoid as to why anyone might be motivated to meet me. Would they be trustworthy? Would they be star**ers, in it for the gossip etc?

I liked this particular app because I could filter the shit out of it, unlike the wanky one which assumed superficiality attracts superficiality. After putting my children to bed, I would just sit and scroll. The problem was that I am really not someone who just looks at a photo and likes someone. I fall for personalities. Also, I don't really have a type. So I just clicked "no" on everyone. I was just sitting waiting for my six-year-old to go to sleep, pressing "no no no no". Then the app spoke to me! It said something about me not liking anyone and if I like someone then it will learn my taste and show me the right kind of people. So that night I held my breath and I pressed "like" on two men. Both of them were over 6ft (preferred) and they were VERY different. One of them looked like the type of person my kids' father would be friends with (analyse that) and was American, so probably had no idea who the hell I am or what I do for a living (ideal), and the other one looked like someone I would be friends with. He looked kind, and unpretentious and fun, and I thought to myself, if he's at least fun it would be good on text. So I clicked "like".

To the American, I said, "Because you are American, do you have no sense of

humour?" – a weeding-out technique because if he was really not going to get on with me, he would have been offended.

To the other one I said, "Hello, I have messaged you and you haven't replied in three minutes, I am already bored."

Both men replied and wanted to meet quickly and not text. This was annoying. All I wanted was to text at bedtimes when putting my children to sleep.

ORGASMS

Sexual self-awareness is something that came to me much later in life than most would expect. My own sexual identity appeared to me like a tidal wave three times in my life. This wasn't about having the best sex, but rather moments when I woke up to myself, when I realised things about myself sexually. Strangely, none of them were with my greatest loves. (I wonder if you can have sexual awakenings with great loves? Or in order to be open to them, do you have to have less feeling, less emotion? Is it easier when it's more of a physical thing?)

1. The first was when I was 19. I had never orgasmed, largely down to my denial of my own sexual desires and putting pressure on myself to keep sex as sacred while sacrificing lust or passion. I then met a man and explained to him that I was incapable of orgasm, so he should merrily please himself. He set about proving me wrong and in one evening I had eight orgasms.

2. The second was aged 24. I was with an older man who really cared about my physical experience and refused to let me assist him in pleasuring me, saying it was a bad habit that could become corrosive to my sexual intimacy. I was not allowed to pleasure myself at all with him; instead, he wanted to understand and listen to my body. I think for this one to happen I had to surrender, in a way. Freefall.

3. And finally, in my forties, when I realised I had been denying my own sexual identity for many years. I had fallen into the trap I was in as a teen and accepting that I didn't deserve to feel sexually free or opened up or listened to. Having children made me conflicted about my own sexual identity, as if choosing to be sexual had an impact on my ability to parent well. When I freed myself, my whole relationship with myself and my body began to change.

I no longer blame myself for bad sex. Often, it's to do with compatibility or, in many cases, the fact that men haven't learnt to listen to women's bodies. Thank you, bad porn makers! ■

MILF: Motherhood, Identity, Love and F**ery by Paloma Faith (*Ebury Spotlight*, £22) is published on June 6. To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

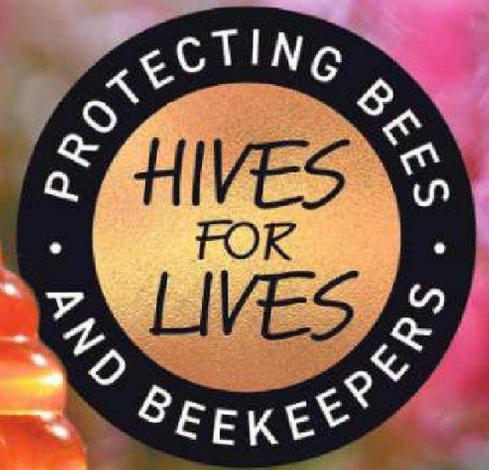
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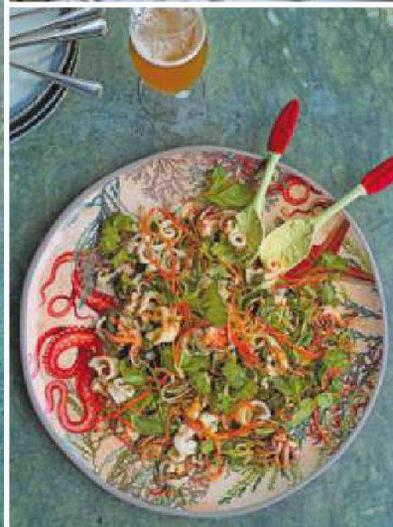
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THE  TIMES

Eat!

HOW TO
GRILL SEAFOOD
AND FISH
LIKE A PRO

ALFRESCO
PULLOUT



Five best barbecued mussels, squid, prawns and salmon recipes

For an island nation, we are surprisingly nervous about cooking fish. So if you want to up your game, take inspiration from Tom Fraser, head chef of Scott's Richmond, the Thames-side outpost of the famous Mayfair seafood restaurant. In a busy week, Fraser gets through 500 scallops, 30kg prawns, 100 Dover soles and too many sea bass to count, much of it cooked over a charcoal grill. "I love mackerel or red mullet simply grilled and finished with garlic oil or a squeeze of lemon, but it doesn't take much effort to elevate any kind of barbecued fish and seafood," the 38-year-old says.

Here are some of Scott's most popular dishes, simplified for the home cook. For best results, Fraser's tip is to bring fish to room temperature so it cooks more evenly, and to dry it well with kitchen roll to prevent it from sticking to the grill. "And if you can, eat while looking out over water. Nothing beats it." **Tony Turnbull**

Scott's Richmond, 4 Whittaker Avenue, London TW9 (020 3700 2660; scotts-richmond.com)

MUSSELS, 'NDUJA, TOMATOES AND GRILLED FOCACCIA

Serves 4 (previous page)

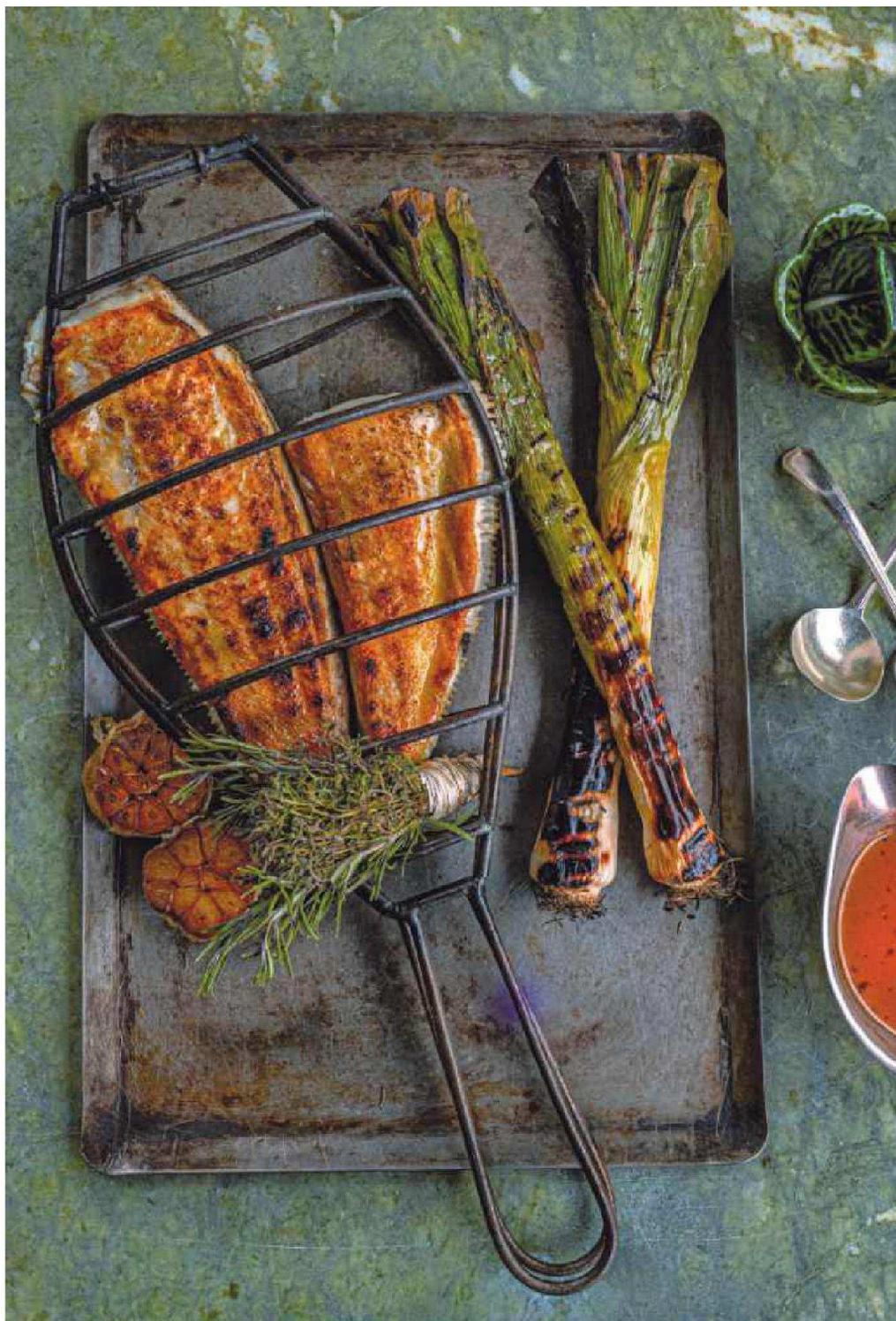
While you are not barbecuing the mussels but rather using the barbecue as a heat source, I've included this recipe because mussels are cheap and sustainable.

- Extra virgin olive oil
- 2 shallots, finely sliced
- 2 garlic cloves, finely sliced
- 4 thyme sprigs, picked
- 1 glass of white wine
- 100g 'nduja (or harissa)
- 250ml tomato passata
- Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2kg mussels, cleaned
- Half a fennel bulb, thinly sliced
- Half a bunch of flat-leaf parsley, chopped
- Sliced focaccia

1. Place a heavy cast-iron pan on top of the barbecue with a good glug of extra virgin olive oil. When the pan is hot, add the shallots and fry for 2-3 minutes without colouring. Add the garlic and thyme and cook for a further 2 minutes. Add the white wine and reduce. Stir in the 'nduja and passata, season with salt and pepper and bring to the boil.

2. Add the cleaned mussels with a splash of water and the sliced fennel and cover with a lid. Shake the pan from time to time. Once all the mussels are opened, they are ready to serve. Discard any mussels that do not open.

3. Finish with a drizzle of olive oil and the parsley. Serve with grilled focaccia.



BARBECUED BRILL WITH PEPPERCORN SAUCE AND COAL-BAKED LEEKS

Serves 4

We often pair peppercorn sauce with meatier fish such as brill or monkfish. It may seem odd charring the leeks so much, but you discard the outer leaves and the centre will be all the sweeter.

- 2 large leeks, washed and any sand or dirt removed
- 1.5-1.8kg whole brill

- 50ml extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt and pepper
- 1 lemon, cut in half through the middle

For the peppercorn sauce

- 1 shallot, finely chopped
- 2 thyme sprigs, picked and finely chopped
- 50g unsalted butter
- 1 tsp cracked black peppercorns
- 1 tbsp green peppercorns
- 50ml sherry vinegar
- 50ml brandy
- 100ml white wine

light green centres. Drizzle with olive oil and season with sea salt. Slice the leeks and serve alongside the brill with the reheated peppercorn sauce and grilled lemon.

GRILLED SQUID SALAD WITH CHILLI-ROASTED PEANUTS AND SPICY PEANUT SAUCE

Serves 4

This is a fishy take on bang bang chicken. The key is to sear the squid for just 30 seconds or so over a very hot grill. Leave it too long and it will go rubbery.

- 4 medium squid, cleaned and prepared
- A little vegetable oil
- Sea salt and pepper

For the salad

- Half a small bunch each of mint, coriander and Thai basil, picked
- 100g mangetout, thinly sliced
- 1 medium carrot, thinly sliced
- Half a cucumber, thinly sliced
- Quarter of a mooli, thinly sliced
- 1 red chilli, thinly sliced
- 4 French Breakfast radishes, sliced
- 100g roasted peanuts, plus extra

For the salad dressing

- 2 tbsp rice wine vinegar
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- 2 tbsp sesame oil
- Juice of half a lime

For the spicy peanut sauce

- 1 x 340g jar smooth peanut butter
- 50ml sweet chilli sauce
- 50ml chilli sauce
- 50ml sesame oil
- 100ml vegetable oil
- Pinch of dried chilli flakes
- Juice and zest of 1 lime

1. To make the spicy peanut sauce, place all the ingredients in a pan on a low heat, stirring constantly until smooth and silky. Do not allow it to boil. Leave to one side at room temperature.
2. Ask your fishmonger to clean and prepare the squid for you and to open the squid bodies and lightly score them.
3. When ready to cook, lightly oil the squid and season. Lay the pieces and the tentacles onto hot bars and press with something heavy like a frying pan to prevent the squid from curling up. Cook for 30-60 seconds then turn and repeat on the other side. Remove the squid from the grill and cut into 1cm slices.
4. To serve, place all the salad ingredients in a large bowl. Mix the dressing and dress the salad. Add the squid and toss together.
5. Spread a good amount of peanut sauce onto a large serving bowl. Place the squid salad on top, finish with roasted peanuts and a little more of the peanut sauce. ➔

- 200ml veal jus (available in Waitrose) or chicken stock
- 75ml double cream

1. For the sauce, sweat the shallot and thyme with half the butter in a heavy-bottomed pan for 5-10 minutes until soft. Add the peppercorns and vinegar and reduce all the way. Repeat with the brandy and then the wine.

2. Pour in the veal jus or stock and cream and reduce until the sauce coats the back of a spoon. Set aside.

3. Pierce the leeks 3-4 times along their length and place directly on top of the

coals to bake, turning occasionally. They will need 10-15 minutes depending on the thickness. Once cooked they should be blackened on the outside but tender when pierced with the tip of a knife. Keep warm and covered with foil.

4. Brush the brill on all sides with oil and season liberally. Place onto a cooler part of the barbecue. When the fish starts to turn a nice golden brown, turn over and repeat. This can take 15-20 minutes depending on the size of the fish. Grill the lemon halves.

5. Once the fish is cooked, leave to rest for 3-4 minutes while you peel away the outer layers from the leeks to reveal the

RECIPES Tom Fraser
PHOTOGRAPHS Romas Foord



BARBECUED KING PRAWNS WITH CURRIED BUTTER

Serves 4

Don't be afraid to get a good deep char on the prawns as the smokiness works really well with the curried butter.

- Vegetable oil, for frying
- Sea salt and freshly ground pepper
- King prawns, shelled and deveined
- 1 lime, cut into wedges
- Half a small bunch of coriander, chopped

For the curried butter

- 1 shallot, finely chopped
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 thumb-sized piece of ginger, finely grated
- 1 red chilli, deseeded and finely chopped
- 250g softened unsalted butter
- 50g garam masala
- Salt
- 10 curry leaves

1. Sweat the shallot, garlic, ginger and chilli in 25g butter for 5-10 minutes until the shallots are soft but not coloured. Add the garam masala and cook for a further 5 minutes, adding a little water if it looks like burning. Cool to room temperature.

2. Place the remaining 225g softened butter in a bowl, add the spice mix and a pinch of salt. Mix well.
3. Lightly oil and season the prawns. Place onto the barbecue and cook for 2 minutes on each side until nicely charred. They should be opaque when cooked.
4. Meanwhile, heat the curried butter with the curry leaves in a pan. When the prawns are cooked, transfer to plates and pour over the butter. Serve with wedges of lime and chopped coriander.

MISO BLACKENED SALMON, BOK CHOI, EDAMAME AND PICKLED GINGER

Serves 4

Leave the salmon to marinate overnight to really ramp up the umami flavours.

- 4 salmon portions, 160g each, skinned and pin-boned
- 2 bok choy heads
- Sesame oil
- 200g frozen edamame beans
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- Half a small bunch of coriander, roughly chopped
- 30g pickled ginger (available from most supermarkets)
- 4 spring onions, sliced thinly
- 1 tsp toasted sesame seeds

For the miso marinade

- 200g white miso paste
- 80ml mirin rice wine
- 80ml saké
- 150g caster sugar

1. Place all the marinade ingredients in a small pan over a low heat and cook for about 20 minutes, stirring regularly, until the sugar has dissolved and the liquid has thickened slightly. It should take on a smooth and glossy consistency. Remove from the heat and place in a container. Cover the salmon with three quarters of the miso marinade and leave overnight in the fridge. Chill the remaining marinade.
2. Toss the bok choy with a little sesame oil, place on the barbecue and grill until nicely charred. Take off the heat, place in a bowl with the edamame beans, garlic, coriander, pickled ginger and spring onions and toss together. Place on a large serving plate.
3. To cook the salmon, thread onto metal skewers if you have them. Place on the barbecue and cook for 3-4 minutes on each side. The sugars in the marinade should start to caramelize and “blacken” the salmon. Once nicely caramelised, remove from the grill and serve on top of the grilled bok choy. Finish with toasted sesame seeds and the remaining miso marinade in a dish on the side. ■

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‘Whatever you choose, Eddie/Suzy, he/she/they, offence will not be taken’



Never mind the pronouns: **Eddie Izzard** has migrated from stand-up comedy to serious acting, winning rave reviews for solo performances of *Great Expectations* and *Hamlet*. But the role the 62-year-old really wants is to be the first trans member of parliament. Interview by Martin Samuel

Eddie Izzard
photographed by
Amanda Searle



Eddie Izzard has leapt up from our lunch table and is revisiting the first big laugh he ever got.

He was a 12-year-old schoolboy in an end of term review, performing the role of a bad cricketer at bat. The adult Izzard first plays an abysmal mistimed shot, ungainly, like a drunk attempting Whac-a-Mole at a fairground. He then mimes an expertly executed cover drive, the shot the cricketer would like to have played had he been good enough. It's a perfect vignette. A neat little satire on the sporting ego that still works 50 years later, even in floral Dolce & Gabbana heels and a black miniskirt.

Suzy Izzard, 62, sits down again. Still got it. Not that she flaunts it much these days. Suzy left Eddie, and comedy, behind some years ago. This month she brings her singular *Hamlet* to the Riverside Studios in west London following excellent reviews in New York and Chicago. Once that is done she may take the show around the world, unless an ambition to enter parliament as a Labour MP at the next election can be fulfilled. Both roles are dead serious and she is equally serious about them. If there has been a pushback against Izzard from some quarters in recent years, it probably dates to his decision to leave his past behind. Everyone loved Eddie the executive transvestite, the comedian who dressed girlie and spoke garrulously, finding surreal humour in everything from the Roman Empire to the Death Star's canteen. And then it turned out – amid the riffs on Jeff Fire, inventor of fire, and Pavlov's cats – he was earnest about all that troublesome trans stuff.

He didn't just want to wear the clothes; he wanted to be the woman within. In 2020, he entered what she termed girl mode. Eddie became Suzy, he/him became she/her, and was thrust into the open mouth of the modern culture wars. Google his name now and there it all is. Disapproval at Izzard pictured entering a woman's toilet in Sheffield; pontifications on pronouns; Izzard's thoughts on Dave Chappelle and JK Rowling; Izzard's reaction to his latest political rejection and the role played by transphobia. Yet he's no hardliner. "You can't get it wrong," says his PR, Karon Maskill, of his pronouns, and it's meant as encouragement rather than threat. Whatever you choose, Eddie/Suzy, he/she, offence will not be taken. So no drama. And amid all this remains an artist at the top of their game, memorising a 13,500-word one-person version of *Hamlet* as adapted by their brother, Mark, to widespread acclaim. A performer who would drop it all in an instant if a political opportunity opens up.

We're in a restaurant by the Thames, Sam's, Izzard between rehearsals. Salad, water, oat-milk latte. And Maskill's right.

Contrary to the polemics, not at all fussed about pronouns. Answers to Suzy, answers to Eddie, not even a flicker when I veer between both. "It's hyper-complex how humans work," he muses. "Yet we're obsessed about boy-girl, whereas if a tiger is attacking you..." And now we're away.

"A tiger is attacking me?"

"Is it a boy tiger, is it a girl tiger?"

"I'm not sure – it's a f***ing tiger!"

"You can surely check?"

"No, I can't check. It's a tiger."

"And they're not bothered either." And now he's playing a gender-confused tiger.

"I am attacking a, what, is it a gay man? Are they the ones with long hair?"

Now he's back in the room. "They don't care about us, we don't care about them, but within our species people get obsessed. And I'm just not obsessed at all. Live your life."

Izzard has been doing that since 1985 when he first stepped out as the person we now know as Suzy. "It was the same year that Boris Johnson was doing the Bullingdon Club, so I think I had a much more positive year than he did," she says. It's a recurring theme, the positive change Izzard made in her life, so that even negative reaction can become a constructive development if it moves the conversation forward. "When I came out in 1985, do you know how many discussions there were about trans people? You can imagine. Zero point zero zero zero. Now there are a lot of discussions. Like gay marriage, our day is coming. Have you heard the latest arguments against marriage equality? No, you haven't. There aren't any. Because there's no way in. The whole world didn't explode. So if I'm going to be at the forefront now and that's all directed at me and people who support me, fine. I've had enough adversity, so it doesn't really matter. There will be a tipping point when trans people can exist on this earth without being attacked and vilified. People heaped abuse on me in the streets and now they do it online.

"But coming out was positive for my mental health. It's positive for people to stand up and be authentic, to be members of society, pay taxes and not cost the NHS money to have to work on my problems because I've worked on them myself. The idea that trans people are going to have to start lying again and going back into a shell, that's not going to happen. Trans people have always been here; just the language has changed. I was TV when I first came out. And transvestite was a Latin term [trans meaning cross, across or beyond, vestire meaning to dress or clothe]. Nobody had updated it since the Romans and they left in AD410." He adopts a manly Roman voice: "By the way, transvestite is the term. We'll leave you with that." Adopts weedy Briton voice: "We won't update it – until the 21st century.



"I came out with 'action transvestite' and 'executive transvestite' – just terms to make it easier for people to see us as members of society. That's all I was trying to do: bring being trans into society. And some people have decided to take a very heavy attitude against it. People you wouldn't expect, really. But generally, people in the streets are, 'Oh yeah, you're being your authentic self. Good for you.' And it is myself. I'm not saying, 'And you've got to do this too.' I'm just going to sail on. I am a trans person. I shall keep existing and people, whoever they are, can say hateful things and I will continue ignoring it. I don't have all the answers. I just know I exist. We're right at the tipping point and we'll move through. If we had this conversation in 20 years..."

He leaves that last thought unsaid. A change is gonna come, is the message. And he wants to be that change too. It's the irony at the heart of this *Hamlet*. So much time, so much dedication, and if the call came from Dunny-on-the-Wold tomorrow, Izzard would chuck it all in for the chance to spend his days with politico types whose idea of a card is Jacob Rees-Mogg. Izzard first floated his political ambitions in 2008 and is now four unsuccessful election bids down. He has come second in the selection process in two constituencies – Sheffield Central and Brighton Pavilion – and made two failed bids to join Labour's National Executive Committee.

One wonders what drives her, given



'The idea that trans people will have to go back into a shell? Not going to happen'

that she could indisputably be successful in so many other fields. Izzard's mentality conquers fears. Flying, by qualifying as a pilot. Shakespeare, as a dyslexic. She has run more than 100 marathons for charity, including exhausting daily stretches lasting months. Is it fear that inspires her political ambitions too?

"I do fear the right wing," she says. "Humans are very good at coming together against something. If you think of the United Kingdom it comes about because of Danegeld – the Danes were coming in. Right-wing people say, 'Right, who do we hate now? Is it the Jews, the Muslims, the Methodists or people with blue hair?' It doesn't matter who; they've just got to come up with something. People with no direction are being told whom to hate, while the people we should hate, or at least fear, are the ones who start the hatred. Hatred is more instantly grabbable in politics than love.

"I call them the simplistic politicians. People with simple ideas. If you hate these people, everything is going to be fine. Immigrants who hate immigrants. The Tory party's full of them [pompous voice]: 'Let me tell you how I, as an immigrant, will attack the immigrants.' But honesty has to count for something. Honesty in this time of Boris Johnson or Donald Trump. I don't believe in God but these are tests for humanity. Trump keeps dodging and lying. It's people without shame. We're still trying to catch up with the old lies and they've got some new ones. Trump is not articulating what he's promising, as he didn't last time, so he's promising whatever his supporters are thinking in their heads. He's vague. He can do that. He spoke about being able to shoot someone and get away with it. Not just to think that, but to say it out loud

and carry on and get into power. And then encourage an armed uprising..."

The "swirl of transphobia", as she describes it, is one of the factors Izzard must now defeat to get her parliamentary chance. A cynic would say if he suffered that in right-on Brighton, what chance beyond? Yet, to his surprise, the trans backlash was felt more fiercely on the south coast than in Sheffield. And politics can swiftly be devoid of allies if a candidate is thought unpopular.

"Look, anyone can be transphobic from anywhere and just get online. It's not me in particular that's under attack, but anyone who supports me does get hit by a wall of this stuff," Izzard says. "So if you're going to stand up and say, 'I support this person,' you need to goad yourself to do that. If you're then going to be hit by this wall of hatred from transphobic people, not just in that constituency but that whole county, that whole country, that whole continent, the whole world – and some can be robots as well – it's just a barrage. I always have to be ready for something like that, be ready to stand up for myself at any point.

"I'm not saying it affects me. I've had it for years. The fact is it can block some people's thinking or it gets into a situation where this is all certain people will be concerned about. Not all the positive things I've done; it just becomes hateful. If you're transphobic, getting a trans MP is not what you want. Then if you get one, you're probably going to get two.

"The average person will say, 'You're going to be an MP, great,' but politicians are different. Politicians have a set of criteria that they vote on and they want you to replicate them. Are you exactly representative of me? I have all this energy, I can analyse things, I can analyse systems, which is

needed in politics, and I can communicate. I think a lot of people would vote for that. But when you get to the selection process it's, 'Yes, like the energy, but do you think exactly like I do?' And if you're even slightly different, well..."

"It doesn't matter. I'll carry on. I'll get to be an MP. I've just got to keep pushing."

Until then: to be or not to be. A four-hour play is now two hours with Izzard in every role, as he previously was for an adaptation of *Great Expectations*. Izzard has a theory that Hamlet is Shakespeare's autobiographical character, and maybe she sees a little of herself in the bard too. The ferocious energy, the constant striving. Izzard was a comedian who had a separate agent for his acting from the start. No one, he points out, did it like that. So there's a constant battle for acceptance. The street performer on the comedy circuit; the comedian who wants to be taken seriously as an actor; the TV ultra-runner; the dyslexic linguist; the celebrity turned politician. "Hyper-industrious makes sense to me," Izzard says of Shakespeare. "And he's a kid who didn't go to university, against all these university kids. Nowadays we think, 'Ah, you went to university. That's quite a thing.' Back then it must have been like, 'You went to the f***ing moon?' So Shakespeare just inhaled knowledge. You've got to have an ego to get to the top, and him against all these university kids? He must have been burning. Looking at them and thinking, 'How do I get up there?'"

"I imagine him writing it like we do comedy. Seeing what works. Cut this bit; that bit's not working. So I think what we've done is accessible – keeping the beauty of the poetry, keeping the narrative, keeping the whole direction of the story. I think we serve the play, and people tell me they don't even know what Mark has cut. If Shakespeare were watching, I think he would be happy with the adaptation."

As is Izzard. "I get to play all the characters," he says. "So that's important, playing all their narrative arcs. In America, I apparently got good reviews for Ophelia and Gertrude, which as a trans person matters to me a lot, honouring the women as well as the men. We do grow up in Britain with this pantomime dame [image], where women are portrayed in these big clumpy boots, like the Ugly Sisters. That's not the essence of a woman. I'm working very hard, trying to do female characters so that people don't need signposts."

And he says that maybe knowing that Suzy Izzard opining on the essence of a woman may unleash the next round of negativity. But 1985 was 39 years ago. He's walked down a lot of streets since then. And kept walking. ■

Eddie Izzard's Hamlet runs until June 30 at Hammersmith Riverside Studios (eddieizzardhamlet.com)



DEBBIE HARRY AND ME
'WE ARE STILL VERY
CLOSE BUT I'VE BEEN
MARRIED TO SOMEONE
ELSE FOR 25 YEARS'

Chris Stein is the enigmatic Blondie guitarist whose relationship with Debbie Harry is pop music legend. He talks about hanging out with David Bowie and Andy Warhol, how heroin addiction almost destroyed him and the devastating loss of his elder daughter. Will Pavia meets him at home in New York

Debbie Harry and
Chris Stein in their Blondie
days, 1978. Opposite: at
an exhibition of Stein's
photographs in 2013



She is moving through the bar: a girl with short dark hair and a face so striking you forget what you're saying. She climbs onto a stage – a large wooden board that was mounted on top of some chairs or perhaps a pool table. So Chris Stein first saw Debbie Harry.

A bar, waiting around, a fleeting glance. It's like a Blondie song from before they were Blondie.

"It was pretty much what everybody else saw later on," Stein says.

It was the beginning of a rock'n'roll romance. Harry would dye her hair blonde and name their band after the word builders shouted at her in the street. They would tour the world; they would take a lot of drugs. She would become a disco and punk icon, a precursor to supreme blondies Madonna and Taylor Swift.

"She was very charismatic and attractive and all that stuff," Stein says.

He's quite striking himself, dressed in black, with white hair that hangs in curtains over his brow and large, rounded cheekbones. In her 2019 memoir, Harry writes of staring at a face in the crowd and feeling "drawn to him as if by a magnet".

"I appreciate her support," Stein says. Then he adds a correction. "It wasn't a crowd. It was 20 people."

He's a stickler for details. His new memoir, *Under a Rock*, is chock-full of them: the time Iggy Pop shot a bullet hole in one of his gold records; the time a guitarist's hair caught fire. There's David Bowie propositioning his girlfriend, Phil Spector poking his revolver into Harry's boot and saying, "Bang!"; there's the Australian tour manager who developed a stutter after a motorbike crash in which he woke up embedded in a horse. "Yeah, Ray," Stein says. "He told us that story."

He's perched on a square section of a huge grey sofa in his flat in the West Village, New York. There's a crowd of animals around us. Well, he'd correct me about that. It's not a crowd. It's four cats and two dogs, surrounding us in this vast room like an audience. Teddy, a Havanese, is stretched out beside me. A seventh member of the entourage, a French-terrier cross named Simon, who is a noted troublemaker, has been corralled in a dog home for the day. "Otherwise he would be here," Stein says, "producing chaos."

Stein's manager had warned me that I would be entering "an animal house". I thought this was a reference to the 1978 film and started to imagine scenes of wild debauchery. But he just meant that Stein and his wife have a lot of pets. Also lots of art and photography. In the hallway, there's semi-hallucinogenic wallpaper featuring a tiger's face and shelves of books and curios. There's a porcelain plate of the sort that usually commemorates a

Harry and Stein with their Blondie bandmates in 1979



WHEN HE FIRST SAW HARRY, 'SHE WAS VERY CHARISMATIC AND ATTRACTIVE AND ALL THAT'

coronation or a wedding, with the c-word written across it in an ornate font. There's a Warhol silkscreen print of an electric chair.

"But you know what? I've got the skull he painted," he says. "I've got the actual skull. That's not here. It's upstate," he says, meaning their house in the country.

You probably shouldn't tell people that, I say. You might get burgled.

"We have guns," he says.

In the next room there's a colossal Basquiat that is probably a fake. The founder of Peloton, who used to live in the penthouse upstairs, left it in the rubbish.

Stein gets me some fizzy water. It comes in a tall silver can from a brand called Liquid Death. Even the water here is a little bit rock'n'roll.

In his book, Stein compares the moment that he met Harry to the time that a car nearly hit him outside a knick-knack shop in Greenwich Village. He and a friend were staring through the window at a plaster statue of a squatting monkey holding a human skull. Then they moved down the street. Moments later, a motorist – "Some poor bastard [who] had a heart attack and lost control or something" – smashed into the window where they had been standing.

"I'm a firm believer in the circular nature of time and the idea that the future casts shadows into the past," Stein says. "Maybe I was just attracted to this gorgeous girl who was a good singer, and maybe fate had conspired to put me in this spot at that particular moment."

If this sounds a little grandiose, you should know that plenty of people are

obsessed by Stein's relationship with Harry. Quite recently, in *NME*, someone referred to it as their "doomed romance", as if they were the Heathcliff and Cathy of rock music.

Stein is a little bemused by it. In his book he writes that they were together for a decade or so and then fell "out of sync", acknowledging, as he does it, the tremendous demand for a more detailed explanation.

"We are still very close," he says. "But I've been married for 25 years now."

It must be quite odd, I suppose, to have people constantly asking about your ex-girlfriend.

"Yeah," he says. "Well, my wife puts up with it. She does."

When they met, Harry was part of a girl group called the Stilettoes and worked at a hair salon in New Jersey. Stein was from Brooklyn, back when it was better known for mobsters than hipsters.

Stein's father, a salesman for a paint company, died when his son was a teenager, and Stein and his mother, an artist, bounced between different flats. Stein, who became a hippy and a dedicated stoner, began taking psychedelic drugs with gusto and experienced psychotic breaks that eventually landed him in a psychiatric ward. Afterwards he was eligible for various government benefits that helped pay for art school and the rent on a Manhattan flat. Officials from social security got in touch too, saying he was eligible for payments because he had lost his father – enough to buy "a lot of pot", an official from the department



Stein photographed at home in New York by Aaron Richter

assured him cheerfully over the phone.

He went to San Francisco. He was at Woodstock, naturally, “tripping pleasantly” on a tab of acid and watching streams of people pass by. “I was in all these f***ing situations that were relative to the culture and music,” he says.

And he became part of the punk scene on the Lower East Side, living for a while with Eric Emerson, a larger than life figure who starred in Andy Warhol films. Emerson’s girlfriend was in the Stilettos, which is how Stein came to be in the bar where he was smitten by the sight of Debbie Harry.

In her memoir, *Face It*, Harry recalls seeing a chap “with long hair and kohl around his eyes and a sort of ripped-up glamour”, while, “I probably looked like I came from some preppy suburban cocktail party.”

Stein volunteered to fill in as a guitarist with Harry’s band; the two of them then split off into their own group, taking a bass player and a drummer with them and playing under various names.

She struck him as very together, with her job at the hair salon and her 1967 Camaro, in which she drove back and forth to New Jersey. She had a stalker too, an ex-boyfriend calling her at all hours, threatening her, following her and breaking into her flat one night armed with a gun, which he pressed against her cheek while trying to force himself on her. The police said they could do nothing. It was only after he called once and Stein picked up and spoke to him that he seemed to back off.

“People say, ‘That was the time,’” Stein explains. “That’s the f***ing phrase they use... But it’s probably just as dire out there today.”

Harry often sounds almost blasé about it. When she bleached her hair blonde and builders and truck drivers started yelling, “Hey, blonde!” at her in the street, her reaction was: good name for a band.

She also describes coming home one night with Stein and being assailed, at their door, by a large man with a knife who tied them both up and raped Harry. He then stole guitars and Stein’s camera.

“In the end the stolen guitars hurt me more than the rape,” she writes. “I mean, we had no equipment.”

Stein, describing the same attack, sounds angrier. “All these years later I still want to kill this person, Not a good feeling.”

As Blondie took off, Harry became the focal point. A photograph of her in a see-through mesh shirt became the poster for their first album. “It got back to us that people thought those posters were for a massage parlour when they saw them around Times Square,” Stein says.

Stein, who had studied photography at art school, took her portrait for magazines. Harry recalled that he did this very slowly

and deliberately. “I knew... I had a good face but I was always unsure about my body,” she wrote in *Face It*. “Chris made me look better. He had these voyeuristic leanings, staring at me fixedly for hours in the heat of the lights... Chris and I always ended up in bed together after a shoot.”

Stein thinks that by today’s standards they were really quite prim and proper with her image. “I dunno if prudish is the right word, but we didn’t put out nudes or... that kind of stuff,” he says. “I mean, we probably could have been a lot ruder with her presentation.”

They went on tour with Bowie and Iggy Pop. Bowie gave Harry some advice on how to work a stage, Stein says: divide it into three parts and make sure to distribute yourself evenly across them. He also asked, “Can I f*** you?” Harry responded like an English teacher to a pupil who requests to use the lavatory. She said, “I don’t know, can you?”

I imagine there are men who would be threatened by this: David Bowie, global superstar, asking to sleep with your girlfriend.

“She told me at the time,” Stein says. “She didn’t seem like she was going to follow through then and there. She didn’t at the time tell me he had pulled his dick out.”

Harry told this story in her memoir. She said Bowie was always doing this and that it was perfectly fine and actually rather charming.

“He was a professional,” Stein says. “So it’s just business. Not personal.”

Iggy propositioned her too, I read.

“Again, that was the climate of the time,” Stein says. “He had a girlfriend with him on the whole tour.”

More tours followed and a succession of hits: *Heart of Glass*, *The Tide Is High*, *Hanging on the Telephone*. They pumped out disco numbers with charmingly homespun subjects. A ballad called *Fade Away and Radiate* was all about Harry falling asleep in front of the television. Stein wrote *Sunday Girl* about a missing cat, or at least he got it out of his head and onto a tape. “I never learnt to read music,” he says. You would think they would now be rich as Croesus, but they were not well advised.

Returning from a six-month tour, packed with press and television appearances and with their cover track *Denis* high in the charts all over Europe, they had to ask Stein’s uncle to co-sign for the lease on a New York flat as they still had neither bank accounts nor a credit card. Instead, their manager would give them a weekly allowance.

There was a legal fight involving a former band member. There was an accountant who didn’t pay their taxes during the years they were making the most money, leaving Stein owing \$100,000; it “soon became a million bucks with penalties and interest”. And



The couple with Andy Warhol in New Jersey, 1982

when they finally managed to extricate themselves from their manager, they owed him “our children’s DNA and a piece of Blondie for ever everywhere in the universe”, he writes.

He describes the night Blondie switched to a new label in a deal conducted in a tower by Central Park, the band arriving at midnight to sign the paperwork and being shunted into an empty lawyer’s office to wait “while these guys finished arguing and running up their bills”.

At 9am when they were still waiting they went out and “bought some weed, came back and got as wasted as possible”, Stein writes. “We trashed the guy’s office. We threw his papers around, moved furniture, made phone calls to Hawaii, then hung the phones out the window by the cords. We started fires in ashtrays. When the crew of attorneys eventually came to get us, they were just completely f***ing horrified. At least we had maintained our punk aesthetic.”

They nearly always managed this. Years later they were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame alongside the Sex Pistols. The Pistols sent a fax saying, “Piss off, we’re not coming,” Stein writes. Which was quite punk. But then Blondie trumped them by having an actual row at the podium, a former band member complaining that he wasn’t asked to play. People thought it was staged. It wasn’t.

In the midst of the touring and chaos, Stein and Harry began using heroin. Harry describes it as just the ticket if you want to stop thinking about your problems for a while. Stein writes about a neighbour who got mugged in Central Park and came round to their flat rather “banged up”. They smoked heroin with him without mentioning what it was, much in the

With his wife, Barbara Sicuranza



'WITH HEROIN YOU TRADE A LOT OF PROBLEMS FOR ONE OVERREACHING ONE'

manner that you might offer someone a cup of tea. "I think he thought it was some form of weed," Stein writes. "He definitely left feeling better."

Stein says heroin was rather like consolidating all your loans: "You trade a lot of problems and distractions for one overreaching one." Stein lost so much weight that he could fit into Harry's trousers. He also developed sores in his mouth and a skin condition caused by an immune deficiency that landed him in hospital for three months. Eventually, he was put on a methadone programme. He got off that about 20 years later.

By that time he was married to the actress Barbara Sicuranza. They had two children, Akira and Vali. Last year in May, "We lost our daughter," he says. Akira, their elder, died of an overdose at 19. "It was a terrible thing," he says.

He worries that he might somehow have glamorised his own addiction, that he might have "unintentionally communicated" this to his children.

In his book, he writes of "a tendency to present tales of personal addiction as colourful 'war stories', art produced by pain. I thought that I presented my own drug experiences in a negative light to our kids, but I'm racked with guilt that any discussions might have been misconstrued."

There's a quote in his book about how, if you are given your life again, you are likely to make all the same choices; to repeat the same mistakes. He was addicted to heroin before there were industrial-strength additives and alternatives.

"There's this epidemic now," he says. But when he first encountered heroin, "It was amusing and easy and we looked up to our heroes, [William] Burroughs and Lou Reed and all these people," he says. "It wasn't like it was definitely going to kill you."

In the park, "I would see people outside nodding out," he says – falling asleep after a dose. But there were not "these visuals that you see nowadays".

He was in his fifties when he had children. "Akira was such a great character," he says. "We just couldn't..." He breaks off. "She had tremendous anxieties and she was numbing herself. It's a long story. I've been in therapy about it."

She was taking fentanyl, the synthetic opioid that is 50 times as strong as heroin.

"She wasn't forthcoming about her stuff with me. She just didn't discuss her problems except very superficially. She was in and out of rehab, the whole thing."

His voice is quiet. "I feel like she was in a burning building and I couldn't save her from it," he says. "Because it was going on for years with her addictions and struggles."

Her name is spelt out in a neon sign in the hallway. On the wall there's a black and white photograph that Barbara took of Akira bundled up in a coat and hood on the pavement outside their building. It's snowing; it looks as if she is walking past the camera lens and away down the street.

"We have made friends with Drena De Niro, Bob's daughter, who lost her kid a month later," Stein says. That was also to an accidental drug overdose involving fentanyl. "We sort of came together with that," Stein says. "But it's so hard."

His younger daughter, Vali, comes in while we are talking. She is at the same art school that Stein went to. She has long black hair and wears a red sleeveless shirt and green trousers with silver buckles and rings on them. She sets herself up at an easel in the next room working on a portrait of Toby, one of the cats.

Then Barbara arrives too. She's tall, with long dark hair with a hint of purple in it, and she's rather charismatic. When Stein is having his photograph taken and we are talking about whether he should smile or not, she says, "I know how to make him smile," and pulls up her top and flashes him.

I keep thinking of a theory that was said to have been espoused by Jane Fonda that some people, regardless of their actual gender, are "masculine-masculine", "feminine-masculine" or "feminine-feminine". Marriages, friendships, political alliances all work better, so the theory went, regardless of gender or sexuality, if one partner has some masculine traits and the other some feminine ones.

"Yeah, I get it," Stein says. "I certainly have a feminine component. Debbie and my wife both have masculine components for sure."

They're living now in this enormous place that is actually two flats knocked together after years when they could not afford to live in Manhattan. This happened about ten years ago when he finally got his finances in order, Stein says.

It was just as another New Yorker, Donald Trump, was gearing up for a run for the presidency. Stein and Barbara happened to have the same doctor as Trump, Dr Harold Bornstein, the fellow who became famous for predicting that Trump would be "the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency" and later acknowledged that Trump had dictated the statement, which he had signed.

"He was a great guy," Stein says. Once, in his office, Stein suggested that the doctor ought to surreptitiously dose Trump with LSD. The doctor's wife, apparently thinking that the surgery was bugged, shouted, "That would be illegal," Stein says.

What would be the effect of giving Trump LSD, I ask. I mean, what would be the point?

"That's a really good question. I don't know," Stein replies. Once, years earlier, "Debbie met him for a minute. She said she thought she was way too short for him, thank goodness."

Stein credits his recent financial stability in part to his new manager, Tommy Manzi. He began selling Stein's photographs in a New York gallery. "The one I sell most is just the close-up of Debbie with the mirror shades," he says. "It's the image she used on the cover of her memoir."

I ask him about her comment that he is a voyeur.

"I definitely have voyeuristic tendencies," he says. "I don't know how. I mean, I wasn't actively walking around looking at people's windows."

But he did go through their bins. There's a story in his book, from when he was at art school, about how he and a friend took to rooting through the bins of a business across the road that blew up people's photographs into posters. The company rephotographed these private images, making negatives that they chucked away. Stein and his buddy developed them, gaining a "behind the scenes" view of America's psyche: lots of photographs of people's cars and children and also lots of sexual pictures, some of them quite grotesque, that someone wanted poster size, hanging on their wall.

Stein nods. He wasn't sure if the story would make sense. He's glad it made an impression. "Some of these things are so weird," he says. "I was concerned with trying to present a concise version of what the f*** was going on." ■

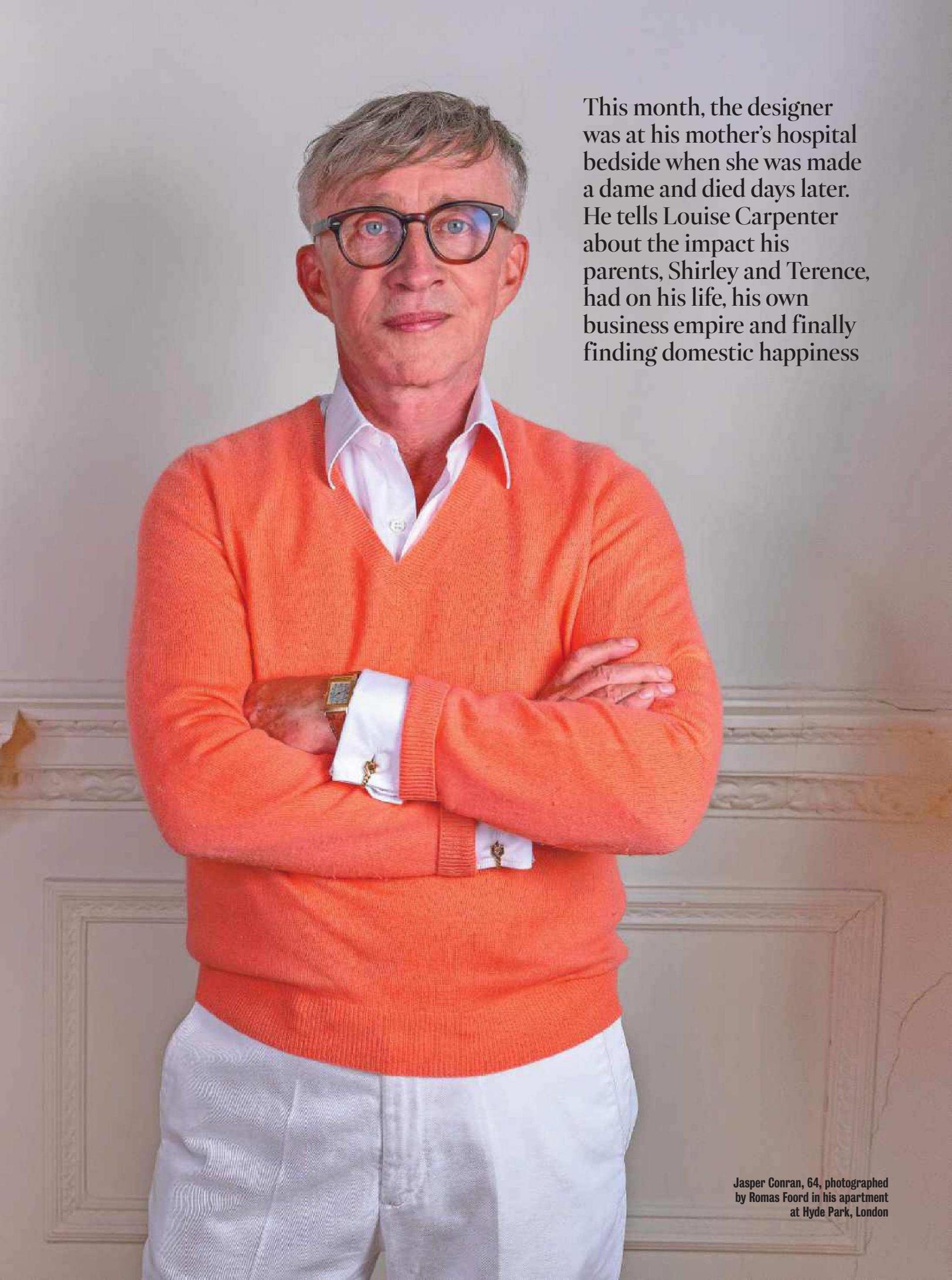
Under a Rock by Chris Stein (Corsair, £25) is published on June 6. To order a copy go to timesbookshop.co.uk. Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

'A nurse told Debbie my illness was potentially fatal' Exclusive extract in *The Times* on Monday

AT HOME WITH JASPER CONRAN

How I found love at 52, and
my mother Shirley Conran's
extraordinary legacy





This month, the designer was at his mother's hospital bedside when she was made a dame and died days later. He tells Louise Carpenter about the impact his parents, Shirley and Terence, had on his life, his own business empire and finally finding domestic happiness

Jasper Conran, 64, photographed by Romas Foord in his apartment at Hyde Park, London



With his mother, Shirley Conran, in London in 1985

As the feminist author, journalist, designer and campaigner Dame Shirley Conran was dying in her London hospital bed this month, having succumbed to pneumonia at the grand age of 91, it was her youngest son, the designer Jasper Conran, 64, who sat at her bedside with his brother, Sebastian, and reminded her of her phenomenal legacy. After a post about her health, messages flooded in to his Instagram account.

"I just sat next to her reading out the messages. When you are stuck in hospital wondering how to communicate, it was wonderful." "Shirl girl," Conran wrote in the wake of her death, "has flown away, a lark ascending."

In that same hospital room in St Mary's, Paddington, a few days earlier, Conran had watched as Sir Kenneth Olisa, Lord-Lieutenant of Greater London, invested Shirley with her damehood, awarded for her charity Maths Action. It was set up two decades ago (when she was in her seventies) to dispel the myth that maths was not suited to the female sex, a message that is still vital now.

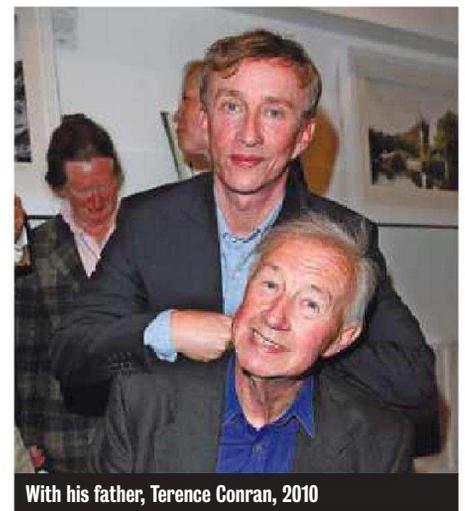
"I think it's ironic that she got her damehood for mathematics, because she could have got it for feminism," Conran says.

Back in 1975, Shirley had helped millions of women with her feminist bestseller *Superwoman*, articulating that life was too short to stuff a mushroom. Ditch the chains of perfection, she shouted. Even in her 1982 bonkbuster *Lace*, which defined a new genre of novel and made

Conran very rich in the process (more bonkbusters followed), the messaging was female power, a battle cry to women everywhere. As if leading by example, when she visited the young Jasper Conran at his Dorset prep school, long since divorced from his father, the design giant Sir Terence Conran, Shirley Conran roared down the drive in a sports car, skidding to a halt and dismounting in a crochet dress without underwear.

"As an eight-year-old, I was absolutely horrified," Conran says today, simultaneously laughing and wincing at the memory. "I think if I look at her main achievements, the things that I am really proud of, it is that she saw postwar women were supposed to have a house, have children, have a husband, be a sex goddess and have a full-time job. Essentially she saw that this package, which had been sold to women as a sort of liberation, was just more chains. What she did as a feminist was not burn her bra but work out the facts. She had huge resentment towards the fact that, as she saw, men got away scot-free. All her messaging was how to help women and girls. They were subtle and clever messages, important ones. And she was the one in the Seventies and Eighties saying to women, 'I know what you are going through. I understand. You are not going mad.' And putting the information down for them. This is before the internet, when women had nowhere to go [for help]. I have tremendous pride in those achievements."

We are talking in Jasper Conran's London apartment near Hyde Park. The word "flat" doesn't really do it justice, although he does use that word for the



With his father, Terence Conran, 2010



Conran at home in London, with Minnow

‘What my mother did as a feminist was not burn her bra but work out the facts’

property upstairs, which he also owns. Can I poke around there too? “Absolutely not,” he says. There’s a gym there, where he does weights every day with a trainer.

The apartment is quite possibly among the most exquisitely designed places I have ever seen, but then I haven’t been to his two hotels in Morocco, L’Hotel Marrakech (a thing of splendour) and Villa Mabrouka, which opened in Tangier in June last year

and was bought from the Yves Saint Laurent Foundation. There is also the farmhouse in Bettiscombe, Dorset, set in beautiful grounds, not that far from the sea, which he bought from his stepmother, Caroline. Finally, after decades of pursuing and creating beauty in a series of grand houses (Ven House, Somerset, and New Wardour Castle, Wiltshire, being the most recent two), only to sell and move on, Conran calls Bettiscombe home. “I’m not moving. I think [for years] I was looking for ‘home’. Trying to create ‘home’. It was a pursuit, but it was also an intense act of creation. I’ve lived with a lot of concrete mixers, electricians and plumbers in my time.”

In 2015, Conran married his husband, the artist Oisín Byrne. It changed his life. “Ever since I can remember, this is what

I have wanted,” says Conran of his life today, here in the apartment or in Dorset at the weekend. He is not pointing so much to the paintings and acquisitions around us, but to what marriage has given him: loving somebody unconditionally; being loved back; emotional security; the joy of selflessness.

He talks of his relatively new-found happiness with such genuine feeling that it is very moving. “I always wanted this kind of domestic happiness,” he says of his years of searching. “The houses were wonderful, but not a substitute. It was a pleasure to live in them but fundamentally I was acting out fantasies, achieving an end goal but not achieving *the* end goal.

“I’d been searching for domestic happiness all my life. I’d begun to think it would never happen. Now, it is everything ➤

This image and right: inside the Jasper Conran-designed Villa Mabrouka hotel – once the private residence of Yves Saint Laurent – in Tangier, Morocco



I hoped it would be. I was 52 when I met Oisín and I knew instantly [he clicks his fingers]. We met at a wedding. It's a cliché. I hope it gives a lot of hope to other 52-year-olds.

"I think within a relationship you have to have very good manners. I am very respectful to my husband and we are thoughtful to each other. If I want to eat that bowl of ice cream, I think, 'No! I'll offer it to Oisín first.' I suppose time has given me a sort of wisdom. You get a lot of pleasure looking after a person and caring about a person. The best way is to be the reverse of selfish. It makes for a very happy life. We never fight. We never argue, ever."

Conran and I are having coffee in the kitchen. He is in his red and white stripe dressing gown, which echoes the rich colour palette of his eponymous fashion label. He is also a costume designer. He won his first Olivier award in 1991 – for his first stab at the craft – and has designed for many ballets over 30 years. The latest production, for which he is both set and costume designer, opens next month at the Royal Opera House: *Les Rendezvous/The Dream/Rhapsody*, three Frederick Ashton choreographies set to



Kristin Scott Thomas at the hotel's opening weekend, 2023

music by Mendelssohn, Rachmaninoff and Auber. This on top of managing the new venture in Tangier, hotel menus, a furniture collaboration with Next and his own label. "It can get a bit dicey at times," he admits. "A lot of plate-spinning."

But he has built a wonderful team (around 220 in all, if you count the staff in Morocco) who sit in their various groups (hotel, furniture etc) in an office in Fulham. They are like friends to him, which makes him the opposite kind of boss to his father. Terence's dictatorial style was notorious, as was his need for control. He once

shouted at a member of staff for using the lift and costing him money, picked up bits of crumpled paper out of the bin in the name of waste, and shouted at the office receptionist, "Maggie, mimosas are fine, tulips are lovely – but not in the same f***ing vase."

"I love my team," says Conran. "There is not one of them I do not adore. It's personal for me. Working for someone should be fun; you should be able to grow and get bigger. I ask myself always, 'How would it be to work for me?'" A lot of fun, I should imagine.

Jasper Conran has an arresting way of speaking, old-fashioned, saucy and conspiratorial. He could easily be dropped into a Venetian palazzo in the Thirties, an exquisitely mannered but naughty Englishman in cream linen surrounded by Italian countesses elbowing each other to get to him.

He has lots of friends of all ages, male and female. Bustling around in the background today is Kathy, Conran's housekeeper of 40 years, who first worked for Shirley before she moved to Monte Carlo, rich from her *Lace* royalties. Conran then nabbed Kathy.

They have been in this apartment

together for 30 years. So you know all the secrets, Kathy, I say. She laughs in a way that implies she does. At the very least, I go on, can you please confirm that somewhere there is a pile of dirty washing? Where are the dirty socks and underpants and the mops and the vacuum cleaner and the dog food, because I see no sign of anything other than perfection around here?

"There are piles of dirty washing, aren't there, Kathy?" Conran says.

"You're not seeing my utility room," she says. "I've got a lock on the door." Really? "No, but you can't see it."

Conran was only four years out of Parsons School of Design in New York when he took Kathy on. The flat and the people inside it are a distillation of all that is precious to him: Byrne, Kathy, a ridiculously cute wiry dog, Minnow, "and my peonies", he says gesturing to the deep pink blooms arranged on the sofa table. There is exquisite art, some old portraiture, some painted and gifted to him by Byrne for his birthday.

He neither smokes or drinks these days, because aged 64, "If it's a choice between a drink and a 28-inch waist, I'm choosing the 28-inch waist."

It is something deeper than vanity. Byrne is more than 20 years younger. Conran has now taken charge of his own appearance because "I shrank in confidence. I think as you get older, quietly, quietly, gently, you cease to exist as a person. You cease to exist."

"And I feel very strongly that one has a duty to look after oneself, especially if you are in a relationship. What happens if I had to look after Oisín? I need to be strong. Anybody who has felt that quiet eroding of self-confidence with age will understand what I am talking about. But I'm good [now] and I am very strong."

He has been known to put his biceps on Instagram, but I can't see them now. "I don't usually meet journalists in my dressing gown." He is preparing to change for the photographs.

His face is a little burnt, he says, because he left his mother's hospital room and lay on the grass to decompress and lost track of the impact of the sunshine. Her death means he is officially an orphan, "but she was 91. When you are looking down the barrel of the gun, it's not a bundle of laughs at 91."

There has been a price to having such high-achieving parents. Their gifts and talents have enriched British society and culture, but at a cost. It is a familiar trajectory for the children of powerhouses: parents who are a beacon that burns brightly for the world, but who flicker inconsistently for the closest few at home.

'My father was tough on his boys. I'm not sure he really liked me succeeding'

The recent obituaries of Shirley have mentioned Conran's so-called "estrangement" from her for a decade or so leading up to his wedding in 2015. All water under the bridge, but for a time evidence of the effects of Shirley Conran priorities. "My mother was to the core of her being a writer. She once said to me, 'You must understand that I am first and foremost a journalist.'"

"My parents were complicated, but there was a lot of love. I am immensely proud of them. Both my parents were great doers – they made millions of people's lives happier, better, more enjoyable. The impact of those two people on this country and globally was positive. When my parents had me and my brother, you just got married and had children. If it were now, I wonder if they would have paused and thought a bit? But I am proud, proud, proud to have them as parents."

Towards the end of his life, Terence said, "I don't think I was a good father and I certainly don't think I was a good husband. Too much time put into the business quite honestly and not enough time given to looking after them."

"I think my father was really quite tough on his boys, tough with us. It wasn't helpful," says Conran. "My father melted at the sight of my [half-]sister, but I just got on with it. I'm not sure he really liked me succeeding."

In 2012, Jasper was made chairman of Conran Holdings by the board and then resigned three years later



Left: Blythe shirt dress, £250, jasperconran.com. Below: Conran's Papercut wool rug, from £290, next.co.uk

in September 2015 because of a cutting remark about his suitability made by Terence to the media. Terence was supposed to have stepped down – or back – from leading the company. There was an inability to let his son take the reins (which he later admitted).

"It was the age-old story of the old lion and the young lion. It's written in the sand. What I have always had are my siblings and we all adore each other. We absolutely adore each other. And my stepmother Caroline and then my stepmother Vicki, we are all bonded. We loved my father, of course, but he could be a nightmare. That was a commonly shared experience."

One thing Conran has had to endure too is a public perception of the family empire helping him. "My parents did not give me money," he says. "They very much pushed us out and told us to get on with it. It was hard. I had to build my own business from scratch, doing the sewing and the cutting and making the patterns and I learnt every single part of it. I was working 24 hours, seven days a week. I was cross about how I was generally perceived, but life is unfair."

Conran is, at heart, a creative inspired by beauty, but with that same incredible head for business as his family. "It's rare," he agrees. He shows me photographs of costumes for previous ballet productions. He has visited the Royal Opera House workshop in Essex to oversee the sets. "Designing for the ballet is the only thing I do by myself. It reminds me that I can be self-reliant and I can stand alone. I'm also not the boss. I serve another master – and that is very nice."

Meanwhile, Villa Mabrouka is taking up a lot of his time. Its renovation was epic: "New electrics, sewerage, corroding water pipes – we had to take the whole building apart. There were moments it was like the Battle of the Somme, everything in the garden destroyed."

"There is no shadow of a doubt that there is a super-big piece of masochism running through me."

But on the journey, he found a new talent, a Bulgarian who is "one of the most talented women I've ever met".

For years he had been searching for a colour. "I have always had a pink in my mind's eye. I had never been able to find it."

"I described it to the woman using words and emotions." He pauses. "And then she painted me my pink."

It is the perfect metaphor for his life. He got his pink in the end. ■

The Royal Ballet's Les Rendezvous/The Dream/Rhapsody, with set design and costumes by Jasper Conran, runs from June 6-19 (roh.org.uk)

LIFE ON THE EDGE



For intrepid explorers who like to get stuck in, one cruise company – with sustainability at its core – invites guests to work with scientists on studies in Antarctica, says Ian Belcher

Produce sourced from South American farmers, electric Zodiacs, citizen scientist guests... a keen green environmental sensibility lies at the heart of every voyage led by cruise specialist HX Hurtigruten Expeditions.

“We practise what we preach,” says Tudor Morgan, vice-president of sustainability and industry relations. “We aim to be as sustainable as we can, investing in initiatives that have a positive environmental effect and reduce our own impact. Small actions add up.”

For Morgan, whose love of mountain wilderness was ignited by childhood visits to Wales, that means ensuring HX’s fleet is as environmentally sound as possible. It has built the planet’s first hybrid-powered expedition ships and installed electric motors on the rigid inflatable boats that transfer passengers to spectacular landing sites. HX also supports communities in the ships’ ports of call – it now buys all its Antarctic season produce in Argentina and Chile. “We’re not just reducing food miles,

we’re investing in local economies, all while serving great food on our voyages.”

Morgan’s current role builds on his personal experience of working in polar regions, from guiding youth expeditions in the Arctic to working with the British Antarctic Survey, which fulfilled his childhood dream of visiting the southernmost continent.

Aware of Antarctica’s fragile beauty – “it’s so remote, so raw: going there is as close to space travel as is possible on Earth” – Morgan wanted to join a company that would make a difference and give guests a sense of purpose. HX ticked all the boxes.

HX’s world-leading Science & Education Programme, run by Dr Verena Meraldi and her team, immerses guests in the natural world. As citizen scientists, they help to collect data on wildlife and support research

projects across the globe. In practice, this means recording information while enjoying unforgettable sightings of whales and penguins, listening to onboard scientists

share their insights or crouching over microscopes to examine newly collected phytoplankton samples.

Keen to develop the programme, Morgan and Meraldi are improving the pre-voyage educational materials and post-voyage follow-up data. They are also fostering long-term relationships with scientists in Greenland and Iceland.

It’s just one of many initiatives that make HX’s voyages memorable and impactful. Whether it’s standing in awe at a viewpoint to watch a pod of humpback whales bubble feed or kayaking past majestic icebergs, it all leads to that powerful moment when someone declares: “This really is the best day of my life!”



TUDOR MORGAN
VP OF SUSTAINABILITY AT HX



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Pout! FAKE TAN 10 BEST BUYS

Nadine Baggott picks her top easy-to-apply, affordable bronzers



What is the beauty editor's equivalent of a baker's soggy bottom? Surely it's DayGlo orange ankles or rust-coloured streaks on wrists. I have never mastered the art of self-tanning: too fussy, too smelly, too much bother. It's why you can trust me when it comes to choosing the easiest body and face tanners and bronzers. If they aren't effective and affordable, they are not worth the space on your bathroom shelf. These are the rare exceptions.

1 THE FOOLPROOF FOAM

Coco & Eve Sunny Honey Bali Bronzing Kit (£45; spacenk.com)

This comes in two shades and is the easiest self-tanner for the body you can find. It's a foam with an inbuilt guide colour, which means it's straightforward to apply, but importantly it comes with the right tools: a mitt for larger-area application and a buffing brush to blend out troublesome wrists, faces, knees, ankles (you know the drill). If in doubt, go for the lighter shade.



2 THE TRUE TONE TAN FOR DARKER SKINS

Caribé Self-Tanning Mousse (£25, in two shades; caribe.uk)

Dark-skinned women don't self-tan, right? Wrong (I remember a tanning artist telling me how Rihanna loves the glow of self-tanner), which is why Caribé is such an exciting brand. There are two shades of tanning mousse, both with a flattering soft-focus guide colour and a mitt for

ELISABETH HOFF

ease of application. C94 is for skin with olive undertones and C60 for darker skin. Both even out skin tone and give instant colour that also develops over time.

3 THE SUPERSERUM

Tan-Luxe Super Glow Hyaluronic Self-Tan Serum (£36; spacenk.com)

There is no simpler way to self-tan your face than with a slow-build hyaluronic acid serum with just a hint of self-tan, and this is the OG. Straight after cleansing morning or night simply apply a few drops to skin and the colour develops over the next few days. Keep going until you're happy with your final shade.



4 THE CREAM COLOUR FOR ALL FACES

Makeup By Mario Soft Sculpt Shaping Stick (£32, in six shades; sephora.co.uk)

Mario is the hottest make-up artist in Los Angeles, where tanned skin is essential but sun damage is a no-no. So little wonder he has created the perfect bronzing cream with a filter-like finish. It's subtle, easy to blend and there is a colour for every skin tone, each with a flattering glow but no sparkle.



5 THE GLOWTION

Bali Body Body Highlighter (£24; asos.com)

This is a pretty golden-peach cream, but before you run for the hills it can be added to a body lotion, to your self-tanner or just used subtly along shins, shoulders and collar bones (no Tin Man from *The Wizard of Oz* here).



6 THE SEAMLESS SLOW TANNER

Jergens Natural Glow + Firming Daily Moisturizer (£20.96; amazon.co.uk)

For a brief while ten years ago, this product was available on the British high street, but now you have to order it on Amazon.

I have no idea why because it is without a doubt the best slow-build daily body moisturiser with a hint of DHA (the sugar that oxidises to create the basis of all self-tanners). It has an instant subtle sheen, moisturises like the best everyday body lotion and over three days creates the prettiest, natural-looking tan.



7 THE SLEEK SACHET

Dr Dennis Gross Alpha Beta Glow Pad Self-Tanner For Face (£39 for a pack of 20 in 2 shades; feelunique.com)

We all know we should exfoliate before tanning, but what if you forget? This handy wipe is impregnated with glycolic, salicylic and lactic acids to smooth skin, hydrate and rid yourself of any old tan or dead skin build-up, then delivers a hefty dose of self-tanner while you sleep. Perfect for travel, on the go touch-ups and one-step tanning with ease.



8 THE MATTE MARVEL

L'Oréal Paris Infallible 24H Long Wear Matte Bronzer (£12.99, in three shades; boots.com)

A bronzer should be matte and flat because it is formulated to mimic a tan, not a glow (highlighter is for that). And this one comes in three shades, works just as well as a contourer/eyeliner/eyeshadow as it does a classic bronzer, and performs like a much more expensive product. The secret is to choose a supersoft large kabuki brush to buff it in.



9 THE CLEVER MIST

Isle Of Paradise Pro-Glow Spray Tan Mister (£10.50; cultbeauty.co.uk)

This brand has long had tanning waters, but this one is clever because of the 360-degree mister applicator. It means your skin is covered in a superfine mist of tanning water, minimising drips and splodges. Once empty you can refill with any other tanning water.



10 THE 20-MINUTE MASK

Self Glow By James Read Break of Dawn (£39; spacenk.com and jamesreadglow.com)

This took James Read two years to develop but it works in just 20 minutes to give the most subtle radiance and glow with the tiniest amount of DHA and a lot of humectants and skin boosters. In other words, this is skincare meets self-tan at its best and is for anyone scared of self-tanning. PS: James has the best overnight tan facial serum too. ■



Find @nadinebaggott on Instagram and YouTube where she answers all your beauty questions



TOM JACKSON, GREG MOSS

‘The kung pao chicken, probably the mostly widely known and bastardised Sichuan dish, was a revelation’

Jincheng Alley

Okay, I give up. I’ve done my best. I can’t crack them. Can’t get any love. Cannot raise a smile. I’ll just write about it now, pay my respects to a dazzling menu and some incredible cooking, and that will have to be that.

I’ve been three times to Jincheng Alley, a new Sichuan restaurant in Holborn, bang opposite the excellent Shanghai Family and hard by the always reliable Sichuan Grand, and I think now that’ll have to do. A restaurant has to be more than just a filling station, and if politeness to people like me is not part of their business plan, I shall have to respect that and move on.

Because principally, of course, this place caters to the heaving new Chinese custom base around here which began with the influx of Chinese students to UCL but has moved on from that to a better-heeled influx of tourists and itinerant Weibo-directed foodies, with prices in the £20s and £30s per dish.

I happened upon it while walking from my Fitzrovia office one morning towards Fleet Street for a meeting, and immediately knew it was gold dust. Jincheng Alley – what a name! Outside, middle-aged Chinese suits with their masks down round their chins checked the address on the sort of websites UK and US governments are desperately trying

to restrict, and in the window was a menu that offered roasted pig feet with chilli and cumin powder (£14.80), wok-fried spiced suckling pig with dried chilli (£28.90), boiled pig blood pudding, tripe, pork luncheon meat and bean sprouts in chilli sauce (£17.80), fried rabbit with fresh red and green chilli (£21.80), boiled chopped entrails of pig soup (£15.80)... Not all of which were necessarily what I fancied right that moment, but represent a clarion call to anyone with a yearning for real Chinese cuisine. So on the way back, I stopped in.

It’s elegant: pretty etched glass, nice art, clean white walls. I’m not saying I don’t love the student canteen vibes of the new-wave Chinese grub shacks, but I like a bit of posh too. This was not wall-to-wall Chinese twentysomethings face down in their phones, poking noodles into their mouth; it was wall-to-wall Chinese thirty and fortysomethings (many of them women in white Chanel), face down in their phones, plucking frogs’ legs and spicy pork kidneys from ornate porcelain vessels containing bubbling Sichuan stews and soups.

I have in the past overshot occasionally when ordering in such a place, going for the rarest-looking delicacies on the menu when all alone, and found myself staring at a whole sheep’s worth of tripe intended for a table of 12. For Sichuan portions are always huge, always for sharing and they never, ever offer to do a smaller portion if you’re alone. Not ever.

So I ordered the kung pao chicken (£11.90), probably the mostly widely known and bastardised Sichuan dish that on your local high street rarely



Jincheng Alley
 43 New Oxford
 Street, London WC1
 (07376 666858)
Cooking 8
Service 5 (the food
 does come quickly)
Vibes 5
Score 6
Price £70/head.

amounts to more than bland white breast cubes in black bean sauce with some peanuts and a splash of chilli. Here it was a revelation, a zingy dish of thigh meat marinated in shaoxing wine, stir-fried with Sichuan peppercorns and chilli, with fat, sweet spring onions, peanuts and squishy little fermented black beans. Light, complex, aromatic, divine. As with the genuine sweet and sour pork of Shenyang that I love at Noodle & Snack round the corner, this was a staple Anglo-Chinese high street filler reclaimed with joy.

With this I had another Sichuan staple, dry-fried green beans with pork and dried red chillis (£9.80), which is never not delicious and here was just that little bit better. Plus superior jasmine tea. Intensely happy-making all round. Except nobody smiled once. Or asked how I was or if I needed anything. No one cared that I was in their restaurant and might want more food or something to drink. It's always odd when one's race makes one invisible, and I suppose one should be grateful, as a white man in London, that it happens so rarely.

After many failed attempts to get the bill, I finally bit the bullet and said some of the only words of Mandarin I know, "Mai-dan," to an expressionless lady in blue rubber gloves, and she brought it instantly. So that was something. But I hadn't really hit the menu. I needed reinforcements. So the following week I returned with Marmaduke, an old Harrovian from work. He likes to travel, claimed to eat anything and seemed like a decent bet for a wingman. Alas, he was a poor call.

"Tripe?" he squawked as he picked up the menu. "Yuk! Frogs' legs? Pigs' kidneys? Oh my God, chickens' feet? That's not actually feet, is it? Ugh."

So I put down the separate specials menu where I had been ogling the "young pigeon with dried mushroom soup" and said not to worry, I'd order some much more mainstream stuff.

"Phew, thanks," he said. "Nothing too spicy."

So I ordered the braised beef brisket with bamboo shoots (£19.80), a huge tureen of wobbling meat, bone and luminous fat with lashings of fresh green and red chilli, thick, rich and nutritious. Also deep-fried ibérico pork ribs with cumin and chilli powder (£19.80), the dense, sweet barbecued meat given a frazzling Nik Nak effect by the heavy dusting of red and yellow powders, along with a stack of sauté potatoes given the same treatment. For wetness, I threw in some sweet, juicy pea shoots fried with dried scallop (£9.80) and some gorgeous crispy fried aubergine in yuxiang sauce (£9.80), a blend of soy, Chinkiang vinegar, sugar, fermented bean paste, chilli, garlic, ginger and onion that is one of the seven key flavours of Sichuan. Marmaduke just about managed to poke it down.

When I went back a third time, I expected no better reception and didn't get one. I stood in the doorway, ungreeted, the only European again, as deliveries came and went, busboys with tubs of dirties hustled up and down and the lady I'd spoken Chinese to the day before twice pushed past me with a stack of chairs.

The chic vibe was slightly waning now, although the ladies in Chanel were still there, face down in their phones, scrolling away like 12-year-olds.

Eventually, a handsome young guy dressed in that post-punky Morten Harket way that hunky Chinese boys love, asked me what I wanted and seemed a bit surprised when I said a table. So he showed me to one in the back, by the small wet kitchen and off-putting loo, among the stacked high chairs. There I ordered the cold boneless chicken feet (£10.80), which were not only an extraordinary feat of butchery (whole, white, three-toed, rubbery, scaly feet with no bones!), but the sort of thing I love, slippery, cartilaginous, slathered with a mala sauce of fiery heat and sweetness.

Also the deep-fried rice crust with yuxiang sauce (£13.80), which was a great bin lid of crunchy rice that I dipped tentatively in the sauce a few times until Morten Harket came over and said, "Better like this," and poured the sauce over the rice so that eventually it half-soaked in and you got a world of flavours and textures with the different levels of sauce saturation. It was so nice of him to try to help me enjoy my food, I almost cried.

And now at last came the young pigeon and dried mushroom soup (£29.80). The pigeon was indeed young. Very young. I think it might even be the answer to the old question about why you don't see baby pigeons. There were two of them on my small plate, which I know because when I moved a piece of parsley aside, I found their heads, decorously hidden.

The skin was thin and crispy, the meat sweet and chocolatey. Although there was not a whole lot of it attached to each tiny leg, wing and breastbone. It's probably traditional to crunch the bones and chew and suck for marrow, but I was quite full by now. And I didn't fancy the heads. Also the soup was not for me. It had a strong, barnyardy smell, which I guess came from a hefty pig stock. I'm not sure it was the greatest match for the weeny squabs.

So I ended on a bit of a down note with Jincheng Alley. It's got a great name, the dining room is jolly on a good day and the punters are attractive but permanently glued to their phones. The cooking is authentic, some of which will thrill you, some of which may scare you, but almost all of which I found exquisite. And if the staff could only find it in themselves to be just a tiny bit welcoming, I would thoroughly recommend it. ■

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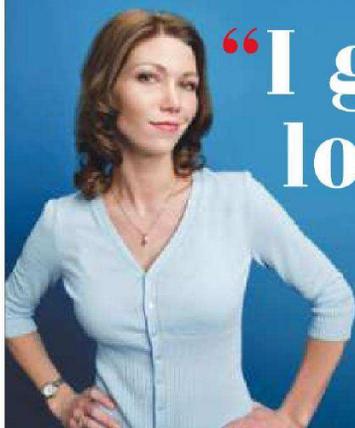
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Beta male

Robert Crampton

**'Exercising!
Eating! Being
sociable! This is
how I deal with my
(very) addictive
personality'**



DAN KENNEDY

The trick, when you have an addictive personality, is to get addicted to things that are good for you rather than things that are bad. I don't know who first coined that. I've said it so often I've half-convinced myself it was me, in the same way I sort of think I invented Bircher muesli because 20 years ago I used to make a big sludge of oats and fruit and leave it overnight, even though the record states it was a Swiss doctor, actually called Bircher, who came up with the recipe in 1900.

Anyway, I've said the thing about addictions, good not bad, so often that claiming the credit seems only fair. Even though I'm not sure the cliché stands up to much analysis, "addictive personality" sounding suspiciously like a euphemism for "greedy". But I choose to believe it is true, helping as it does to keep me on the straight and narrow.

By and large, this approach has worked well. To lose weight, I trained myself to enjoy eating large quantities of stuff that is good for you, principally vegetables. After three years I now look forward to, say, broccoli in a way I once looked forward to a cheese sandwich.

OK, maybe "look forward" would be an exaggeration, but you get the idea.

I respond well to targets. The government's five-a-day advice, for instance, ignited my competitive instinct. I try to eat 12. Reading that Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall gets through 30 varieties of veg in a week incites me to better his total. Celeriac might be a struggle.

The same goes for exercise, only more so because it's so measurable. When averages (daily, weekly, monthly, annual) and running totals and minimum outputs are at stake, they provide the incentive rather than any sense of virtue. Do I prefer lying on the sofa to lifting weights? Emphatically yes. Do I want to see my stats suffer if I stay horizontal? I do not. I lever myself upright.

I'm the same with going to my German classes, cooking dinner, keeping social commitments, reading new books rather than recycling Freddie Forsyth's canonical first four thrillers. Pretty much anything I don't much want to do but which I know is good for me is vastly more likely to be achieved if I have created a metric recording success or failure.

It's not all plain sailing. As regards literature (I use the term loosely), for instance, I've weaned myself off Alistair MacLean rereads yet still hit the Robert

Harris back catalogue fairly often. I also still listen exclusively to the Springsteen/Costello/folk/country soundtrack of my youth, with an occasional bit of Taylor or Beyoncé mixed in by my children.

Very decent of Beyoncé to make a country album, btw.

The other issue is that doing something good for you in moderation can turn, beyond a certain point of obsession, into something bad. In the first third of this year, I overdid the gym to the extent of injuring my hip and shoulder. Lots of ibuprofen and Voltarol didn't work; the only solution was rest. The plummeting averages were deeply upsetting.

Having realised in the winter I was able to do chin-ups, I started doing 5, then 10, then 20 (not all in one go), through the spring. In our park there is a set of gym bars. Young guys gather there to show off. In summer there are often a dozen or more fine specimens, shirtless, ripped, posing, once in a while even exercising.

I had this idea that, one sunny weekend around now, I'd just casually stop by, reel off a load of showy-offy moves, then stroll away to whoops of applause and cheers for the cool old guy.

What I got instead was serious pain in my elbows. As you age, the muscles may still be willing but the joints are weak. They warn, they protest. Eventually, they go on strike.

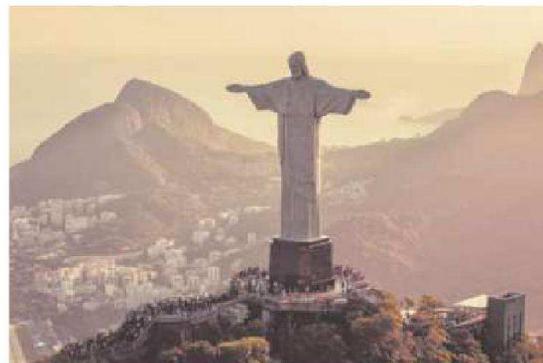
Again, the remedy is rest. But, uncannily like those college athletes in the States who got hooked on opioids initially as pain relief for sports injuries and six months later had turned into total junkies, what I did instead was hit the cod liver oil. Hard. From 500mg to 1,000mg, then from the tablets to the liquid, swigging it every time I passed the fridge.

Cod liver oil, as everyone knows, is utterly minging. So next to that bottle I kept an identically sized bottle of maple syrup, which I glugged as a chaser for the fish oil. Guess what? Within a few weeks, I'd stopped doing any chin-ups, because my elbows still hurt despite all that lubrication. And I'd stopped the fish oil, because it's horrible and also expensive.

And now I'm struggling to wean myself off what has become a fairly serious maple syrup habit. If I were Canadian, I'd be enormous.

Maybe there's something in the "addictive personality" cliché after all. ■

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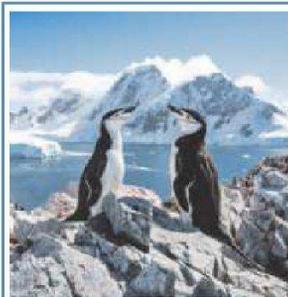
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