THE TIMES
MAGAZINE
15.06.24

MY ALCOHOL PROBLEM AND HOW I SOLVED IT

Esther Walker on breaking her drinking habit

THE MAN WHO KNEW ALL LUCIAN FREUD'S SECRETS

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CAITLIN MORAN

The Bear TV show is back. It drives me mad – the stress is nothing like cooking for my kids

I tell you what makes me really ruddy tetchy – what makes me go into the kitchen and chuck all my pans around etc: the news that *The Bear* is returning for a third series in a couple of weeks' time.

For those who haven't seen it, it's an American TV drama starring Jeremy Allen White as an emotionally troubled and frequently shouty Chicago *chef de cuisine*. It's won ten Emmys and become a "TV event". I keep seeing people on the street wearing branded T-shirts from the fictional restaurant White runs.

The Bear joins a hefty pantheon, both real and fictional, of TV and movie chefs who keep having freakouts next to walk-in refrigerator units. In *Burnt*, Bradley Cooper was a "diva" lunch-maker who got into fist fights with his drug dealer. In *The Menu*, the "creative madness" of Ralph Fiennes' jumped-up spud-peeler presides over a series of stabbings, hangings and deaths.

For those who would like to comfort themselves that "angry, demented chefs" are merely a fictional construct – allowing writers to punctuate scenes with people screaming exciting, semi-medical things like, "100ml Béarnaise! Devein these prawn bums and *sous vide* those shanks!" – I merely refer you to *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*, where Gordon Ramsay regularly screams things like, "You bullshitting little f***er!" at someone whose primary crime is a lacklustre BLT.

As a meta-commentary on all these chefs getting terribly wound up about basically nothing, the broadcaster and author Stuart Maconie does a very good impression of Stephen Graham's turn as – yes – a stressed and emotional chef in the movie *Boiling Point*, shrieking, "*Oh God! Where are me tea towels?*" in an overwrought Scouse accent.

Why does all this make *me* angry? Because this mythologising of the stressed, angry chef – usually and predictably "following their dream" – allows all men stepping into a kitchen to become stressed and angry and believe they too should be "following their dream" rather than just doing what is necessary: getting those baked potatoes in.

And I say men because all these "compelling" diva-chefs *are* men – and this is because only men *can* get this stressed, angry and diva-ish in the kitchen. If *women* ever got like this while making the tea, humanity would have died out from starvation centuries ago. Worldwide, women cook twice as much as men. We would be a very scurvy-ish species indeed if we relied purely on tempestuous man-bakers to plumpen our young.

"But a domestic cook – a mother feeding her family – is *totally different* from a professional chef, turning over 100 tables a night with a potential ten Emmys to win," my imaginary opponent might say. "That *is* far, far more stressful."

Really? It's more stressful to make food with a team of highly trained people who chop your onions, wash your pans and provide romantic subplots than it is to do it on your own with a toddler hanging on to your leg? It's more stressful to be *paid* to cook than it is to be the one *paying for* all the uneaten carrots?

I don't care how many unexpected restaurant critics, unpaid drug dealers and ne'er-do-well relatives these TV dramas throw into the mix – *none* of these plot points provide *half* the pressure of daily trying to construct a meal that doesn't contain meat ("I'm vegetarian!"), onions ("I *hate* them!") or cauliflower ("It's GHOST BROCCOLI!") *while also* making sure you don't accidentally use anything meant for tomorrow's packed lunch.

If you then stir in food allergies, incipient eating disorders and the Sisyphean task of trying to make green leafy vegetables – hot with nutritionists; regarded as Satan's toilet paper by children – part of the meal, pretty much any working mother will take two prissy Michelin inspectors turning up over her usual clientele: her family. At least Michelin inspectors won't wreck your prep routine by demanding a tearful half-hour conversation about how much they hate their own hair, then peevishly cry, "Where's the food? I'm *starving*!" after 30 minutes of high-quality unpaid counselling.

I don't want to be so predictably "backwards and in high heels" about this, but it does seem extraordinary just how many movies and TV shows continue to take "high stakes" literally – in that it's about men who are high while cooking steaks. I get that "centuries of quiet female competency" doesn't *seem* that sexy, but then again, these repeated clichés of lunch-based male rage end up feeling a bit... samey? How about a calm male chef who's really good at his job – and a mother who's allowed an operatic wig-out next time the air fryer breaks down? Can't we pop something a bit more creative and unexpected on the menu? ■

ROBERT WILSON

'Every working mother will take two prissy Michelin inspectors turning up over her usual clientele: her own family'

What I've learnt Richard Coles

The Rev Richard Coles, 62, grew up in Northamptonshire. In his twenties, he was the keyboard player for the Eighties duo the Communards. He was ordained in 2005 and became the vicar of Finedon, near Kettering. In 2022, he retired from his parish and in 2023 stepped down from BBC Radio 4's Saturday Live, which he co-presented for 12 years. He is now a bestselling novelist. His husband, David Oldham, died in 2019 from alcoholism. He is now in a relationship with actor Dickie Cant, and lives in Sussex with his two dachshunds.

PORTRAIT Tom Barnes

'Losing my partner, David, was devastating. I went mad for a while. I think about him a lot'

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

Losing my partner was devastating. The loss was too big to conceive of. I went a bit mad. It took a while to realise that I wasn't really coping. I see a bereavement therapist who says, "Everyone's mad for at least five years." Maybe I'm just coming to the end of the madness. I go to see David's grave and check in with him. I think about him a lot. I talk to him and dream about him sometimes. But he is not here now, and I have to live my life accordingly.

I think about people who didn't survive the Aids crisis every day. What they would have done, who they would have become. Those of us who survived it talk about it with great sadness. It was incredibly tough and the defining experience of my adult life. We formed a very tight-knit group and took care of each other as best we could, but it was a terrible blow for lots of us.

I miss being a vicar enormously. We moan about it all the time when we're doing it, but it's a job that forms you in ways you don't realise until you stop. I needed to reset after my partner died. Also I just got fed up. I'd given 30 years of my life to the Church of England and 30 years to the BBC. There comes a point when you look forward to putting down the burden of that.

For some unfathomable reason, I thought I'd be good at Strictly Come Dancing. I found out, simultaneously with 10 million other people, that was not the case. It was a brutal awakening. Being kicked off it was like being sent home from a party when you were a kid because you've wet yourself. Maybe people felt sorry for me, because they were nice to me afterwards.

Depression is part of my make-up. How narrow and dull depression made my life. I couldn't think beyond my sadness and unhappiness. It was very dreary, and a slog. When the Black Dog [depression] comes along, I think, "This too will pass," and try not to make any significant decisions when I'm in that state. Avoiding psychoactive drugs would be another good tip.

At first I was angry with myself for not having realised the extent of David's drinking. For not having noticed sooner. Then I was angry with him for sabotaging our life and hurting himself and me. I learnt more about addiction, and stopped being angry with him because he felt bad enough about himself without me adding to it. It was a breakthrough. We worked out a way of being close to each other, while managing the consequences of an addiction from which he was unable to wrest back control.

Going to see someone who was psychotic was a rookie error in my clerical career. He was in severe psychological distress. He got more and more agitated and was waving a machete around. By nature I'm a rather cowardly, timid person. Unusually, I wasn't in the least bit scared, because I was on duty. Fortunately, he calmed down and I was able to make my escape.

Pretending I had HIV was the worst thing I've ever done. It was in the middle of the Aids crisis. I went a bit bananas. A lot of people did. I did correct the record as soon as I could, and sought the forgiveness of the people I had said that to. I look back on it now with shame.

Dickie and I had the gayest first date ever. We went for a walk at a Royal Horticultural Society garden and had a lentil salad. Most opportunities on the internet for gay men to meet are fairly limited in scope. I found my way to a very helpful app and met Dickie. It's been wonderful. He's in a play and I have to resist the temptation to clap and say, "That's my boyfriend!"

I was the biggest mummy's boy in the world. She only died in February, so I haven't begun to process it. She was always there in my corner. She was my most trenchant critic and my biggest fan. ■

Richard Coles is an ambassador for Independent Bookshop Week (June 15-22), which celebrates indie bookshops in the UK and Ireland

Esther Walker at home with her husband, Giles Coren. Opposite: photographed by Dan Kennedy

GILES CAN GO DAYS WITHOUT A GLASS OF WINE. SO WHY CAN'T I?

Confessions of a midlife drinker

Most evenings Esther Walker will drink a large rosé (or two) but when she decided she wanted to scale back on her units, she struggled. Then she learnt about a pill that helps people cut down. Could it work for her?

An old man lives in my head. He is filthy, red-faced and dribbles. You would recognise him because it's Father Jack, the drunken priest from the TV series *Father Ted*. At about 6pm he wakes up from where he has been sleeping in his armchair and shouts, "Drink!" at me. And he doesn't stop until I've had one. But I'm not an alcoholic. I've never drunk even as much as a whole bottle of wine in one evening. I don't black out. Nothing really bad has ever happened to me because of alcohol, even in my twenties. It's just a slow drip, drip, drip of booze.

Millions of people in the UK are like me. Nearly 80 per cent of women in England reported drinking last year; the average number of units consumed per week was nine. About five million women in England regularly drink more than the NHS recommended limit of 14 units a week.

Are they alcoholics? Or are they among the third of British adults who end up with alcohol-related health problems but meet no criteria for alcohol addiction?

I'm 44 years old and I don't want to be sober, but I want to stop drinking so much, so mindlessly. My friends fall into three camps: newly sober, moderate drinkers with no problem and heavy drinkers in denial.

I'm not a heavy drinker, but I resent how much alcohol is on my mind from about 4.30pm onwards. It's like a mean, very attractive boyfriend and I feel a bit controlled by it. I am always able to cut down for a bit. But it inevitably creeps back up until I am knocking back four units a night and constantly feeling awful. Then I cut right back and the cycle starts all over again.

My husband goes for days on end without drinking. How? I used to be like that too. He has never accused me of drinking too much, but he has started to make fun of how quickly I can put away a glass of white wine.

Willpower is the only thing available to people like me. That, or AA. No, thanks. I am not – and I can't state this emphatically enough – an alcoholic.

But there is, in fact, another option. A third way.

People who know about the opioid antagonist naltrexone all say the same thing: why aren't more people with a drinking problem offered naltrexone? I heard about it on an episode of an American podcast, *Reflector*, which asked why the drug wasn't more widely prescribed for overdrinking.

Naltrexone is not the same as disulfiram (sold as Antabuse), which is a drug that makes you violently ill if you drink. Naltrexone stops alcohol (and other stimulants) from giving you a buzz. The buzz you feel when you drink alcohol is the release of dopamine, and that is the thing that the human brain desires above all things. The brain wants that guaranteed dopamine hit and it wants you, with your hands and mouth, to go and fetch it.

I loved the sound of naltrexone and I was ready for a change. Out for dinner at the start of April, I found myself trapped in a hot, noisy restaurant, dizzy and bloated from three glasses of red and a cocktail. I wiped away a sheen of sweat from under one eye. I knew that I would wake up jittery with anxiety and nausea at 3am, hating myself, but by 6pm I'd be skipping my way towards the tonic tin again. It was all just so disgusting.

But the idea of being completely sober has always panicked me. I feared I would fall short and then feel like a failure. After all, sobriety programmes are not especially effective. Hard data is difficult to come by, but the most positive success rate of a sobriety programme such as AA (that is, sober for one to five years) is 24 per cent. Elsewhere, 5 to 8 per cent success rates are cited. Never drinking again felt both impossible and also unnecessary, seeing as I wasn't drinking excessively. Naltrexone sounded like a solution to the mess I found myself in.

I'm pretty sure that it was having small children that drove me to drink. I'd say I had a pretty standard relationship with alcohol until I had kids. But living with small children is extremely stressful and my husband travelled a lot for work in those days. After bathtime, my shoulders up around my ears, I allowed myself exactly one big glass of wine. That was the amount that blurred the edges of the day but wouldn't give me a hangover. If you do that four nights of the week, for ten years, you get pretty habituated to it.

I never addressed it because I didn't have to. If there's no problem, what's the problem? I was a total cliché – the on-edge mummy who needed her wine. But there was also safety in that, because we were all at it. And I'm going to go out on a limb and say that the wine did help. But now my children are older – 11 and 13 – and don't stress me out at all. And yet every evening at 6pm, Father Jack still screams, "Drink!" at me. And I obey.

Dr David Sinclair, who died in 2015, was an expert in alcohol addiction and worked at the Finnish Foundation for Alcohol Studies. He developed the Sinclair Method, which uses naltrexone as a sort of off-switch for problem drinkers. The idea is that the drinker keeps drinking while also taking naltrexone. Taken consistently and in good faith, naltrexone will reset the neural pathways that have been formed over time and created by regular drinking. If you drink and there is no buzz, the brain will stop insisting that you do it. Father Jack will be evicted, armchair and all.

ABOUT FIVE MILLION WOMEN IN ENGLAND REGULARLY DRINK MORE THAN THE NHS RECOMMENDED LIMIT OF 14 UNITS A WEEK

The Sinclair Method UK is a private clinic that specialises in just this mind-retraining. It offers addiction counselling as well as naltrexone.

I ring the clinic to see if I drink enough to qualify for help. Joanna, who answers my call, says, "I'm not sure what you mean by 'qualify'."

"I mean, do I drink enough to have a problem?"

"It's not really about amounts," she says, but asks me how much I drink anyway. I say that depends. Absolute minimum is one small gin and tonic per night. But occasionally it veers wildly upwards, like if I have gone to a party and someone keeps refilling my glass. Or if something awful has happened. Or if I just accidentally one night have loads and loads of wine.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STYLING, HANNAH SKELLEY. HAIR: JOHN KATSIKOTIS AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT USING HAIR BY SAM MCKNIGHT. MAKE-UP: JULIE JACOBS AT DAVID ARTISTS USING SUQQU. DRESS, REBECCAVALLANCE.COM. SHOES, JIMMYCHOO.COM. JEWELLERY, RACHELJACKSONLONDON.COM. FLUTES, IOHENDORF MILANO (SOUSCHEF.CO.UK). TOM JACKSON. THIS SPREAD: JUDE EDGINTON

I WAS A TOTAL CLICHÉ – THE ON-EDGE MUM WHO NEEDED HER WINE. BUT THAT'S OK. WE WERE ALL AT IT

Then she asks me how I feel about my drinking. I say I feel a bit under its control. I am worried that I am going to end up drinking more and more, becoming a slave to this alcohol beast.

Then we get to my real fear: that when I am in my fifties, with no children at home and no brakes on anything, I will slosh about in wine from lunchtime to bedtime every day because there will be no reason not to.

Joanna listens and tells me that she is happy to recommend a naltrexone prescription. "Some people can't take naltrexone because they have liver complications. But we don't turn anyone away just because they don't drink 'enough'," she says.

Later, I speak to Dr Janey Merron, who will do the prescribing. "Our typical patient is a woman, an empty-nester and either peri or fully menopausal," she says. "We don't use the word 'alcoholic'; we use the phrase 'alcohol use disorder' and patients self-diagnose. I treat people who drink a litre of vodka a day and people who drink two large glasses of wine a day and any variation on that."

The clinic issues me with 28 naltrexone pills. The Sinclair Method service, which includes counselling and checkups, costs £345 and 28 pills cost me £90 (sinclairmethoduk.com). I am advised to take a quarter of a 50mg naltrexone pill for a few days to get used to it. The quartered pill is tiny, smaller than a ladybird. The side-effects are mostly stomach-related. I notice that my eyes feel a little tired and tight and later I have a bit of a gurgly stomach. All side-effects have gone by day two.

I go about my evening as normal. I clear up my children's dinner, tidy the kitchen, wave my husband off to a sporting commitment and then make a stiff gin and tonic. The drink tastes the same and does all sorts of things that I want it to do: it's a nice, cold drink, it marks the end of the working day and it also does bring on a slight feeling of relaxation. But there is an extraordinary and noticeable absence of buzz. The really spooky thing is that I don't want another drink. That feeling of, "Ooh yes, go on, another," just isn't there.

Gin is one thing, though. The real test is wine: when I look at a cold bottle of picpoul, I swear my pupils dilate. The next evening my husband is out and my children are occupied elsewhere. This is a classic situation where I would drink probably three glasses of wine, which is two too many.

I sit down to watch Netflix (*Bodkin* – it's great), with 250ml cold Whispering Angel and some crisps. Total heaven. I munch my crisps and slug my wine. Normally, after that much rosé I would expect to be flying. Except I'm not.

I just feel quite sleepy, with lop-sided vision and a grubby, sugary mouth. I pour another inch into my glass, just because I can, but end up tipping it down the sink. This is unheard of. It's Whispering Angel!

It turns out that those other symptoms of drunkenness – woozy vision, fluffy mouth – aren't very nice. I can really taste my gross parrot-cage mouth. I feel myopic and weird but there is no giddiness or feeling of wellbeing. I feel poisoned.

As I lurch up the stairs, it suddenly becomes clear: we put up with these side-effects of alcohol because we want the dopamine that comes with them – but on their own, they suck.

I go to Spain for half-term. Sunny holidays are another danger zone, during which I may fall directly into a vat of chardonnay. I take my pills with me but don't take them as it doesn't feel very festive, but I end up choosing to drink less anyway. In wine, I can now really taste the sugar and I can discern that poisoned feeling. I know for absolute certainty that there is nothing fun or good in glass number two.

Back in London, I keep the naltrexone quarters by the sink. If I'm having dinner with my husband and want to have ➡

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wine, I will take one so that I don't bully him into sharing the bottle with me. If I'm on my own in the evening and Father Jack is shrieking, "Drink!", I will take one so that if I have a gin and tonic, it will only be one.

But as the days go on, Father Jack gets smaller and quieter until he is tiny and easily ignored.

A month after I start taking naltrexone, I go to my best friend's birthday party. I take a pill beforehand, slightly resentfully. Swilling too much wine and laughing like a drain with my friends is a great joy in my life. I have a glass of champagne when I arrive and, with dinner, I have an inch of red wine just to join in. I have a lovely time and I'm in bed by 11.30pm. I lie there and think: in the past, was it swilling all the wine that was the joy? Or was it my friends that were the joy and the wine managed to convince me that it was indispensable?

Naltrexone has been staggeringly effective for me. Within four weeks I regain the functioning relationship with alcohol that I once had. Alcohol used to create so much noise in my head, and naltrexone turned down the dial to one. Yes, it requires willpower and a readiness to address bad habits, but not superhuman levels.

GETTY IMAGES

WHY ISN'T THIS PILL, WHICH IS CHEAP AND NON-ADDICTIVE, PRESCRIBED ON THE NHS? WHY ISN'T IT AS FAMOUS AS, SAY, OZEMPIC?

So why isn't naltrexone, which is cheap and non-addictive, regularly prescribed on the NHS? Why isn't the name as famous as, say, Ozempic?

Professor Colin Drummond, chair of the NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) guideline group on alcohol addiction, told The Lancet in 2015 that naltrexone is "now out of patent, cheap to prescribe, and yet hardly anybody who has alcohol dependence is actually prescribed [it]". He added, "It looks like many doctors are overlooking the evidence. There are huge missed opportunities."

David Nutt, who is professor of psychopharmacology at Imperial University, has some idea why this is. "The field of addiction treatment," he says, "is divided philosophically between the puritans, like AA, and the pragmatists, like me." It's a pretty fundamental schism, he says. They just aren't going to agree.

Bill Wilson, who founded Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, believed that you cannot change an alcoholic into someone who has a "normal" relationship with alcohol. Abstinence for ever, he argued, is the only way.

I speak to two AA members who are certainly contemptuous about the use of drugs like naltrexone. "I was never offered naltrexone and, to be honest, I think it sounds dumb," one says. "If you need a pill for it, you probably shouldn't be drinking at all." Another explains that the sober community don't approve of things such as naltrexone, because unless you "do the work" – ie the Twelve Steps – they believe you are likely to seek "drunkenness" elsewhere: in cigarettes or food.

This is quite a pervasive attitude in the NHS. I am told that many frontline workers in addiction recovery have been through AA themselves. Getting and staying sober is a great effort and the way you did it probably feels like the best. To many, the gold standard advice is to get off booze and then stay the hell away from it. (Everyone agrees that many heavy drinkers do need to quit completely.)

There is also a problem within us. The modern complaint is that we Brits are soft-handed whingers, but I disagree. I think we are a very stoic people – just look at how patient we are in queues and bad weather. The moral value we place on willpower is huge and we despise weakness. The British attitude is: get a grip. If you have been weak enough to develop a problem with alcohol, your punishment is now to cut down using willpower alone, and if you need help, it's cheating.

But why are we like this? Alcohol is incredibly addictive – more for some than others. Certain people become dependent on alcohol because they are inclined to become dependent on substances, but many become reliant on it simply because they drink so bloody much. And they drink so much because it is deeply ingrained in our culture. There is a drink for every occasion; there is even a drink for every time of day.

Alcohol is the one addictive substance in this country that we actively celebrate. It's really no wonder we get hopelessly hooked on it. Yet the words "alcoholic" and "alcoholism" still carry vast stigma. Sure, hip Gen Z types get away with being sober, but in large parts of this country if you don't drink, it's suspicious.

There's a small-print problem with naltrexone too. The drug was only licensed to work alongside a programme of abstinence. The NICE guidelines condone the use of naltrexone to avoid "relapse into heavy drinking" following "medically assisted withdrawal". But taking naltrexone while abstaining from drink will not sever the link in the mind between the alcohol and the dopamine reward.

To enable them to prescribe naltrexone with a programme of drinking, GPs have to prescribe "off label" – that is, not according to guidelines. They really don't want to do this.

And the government doesn't prioritise alcohol reduction. Instead, it wants the NHS to get patients to lose weight and quit smoking. One widely held view is that the government is in thrall to "Big Alcohol", but who knows what the real reason is.

Almost every doctor I spoke to for this piece cited wealthy, educated patients who had no idea they had a drinking problem until, aged about 63, they turned yellow from liver failure. They never knew they were dependent on alcohol because they never stopped drinking and it never caused them any major problems. Like me, there was no problem, so what was the problem?

But are they alcoholics? Who knows. And it doesn't matter anyway.

In May, a report found that drinking costs the economy £27 billion per year. More than £3 billion is spent on alcohol-related trips to A&E.

We drink too much. It's not our fault, but we need to do something about it. The answer, for me, was naltrexone. Maybe it's the answer for you too. ■

THE MAN WHO WAS FREUD'S 'SLAVE', NUDE MODEL, FIXER AND CONFIDANT

For 20 years David Dawson was Lucian Freud's right-hand man and the subject of some of his most revealing portraits. Since Freud's death, he has lived in the artist's house and looked after his archive. Now he has his own art show in Rome. He tells Rachel Campbell-Johnston about his relationship with the infamous painter

PORTRAIT Romas Foord

David Dawson, 63, in Lucian Freud's studio in Kensington, central London. Opposite: Dawson's photograph Working at Night (Lucian Freud), taken in 2005

Let summer come to you

ocado

Can an amanuensis become a master? David Dawson must surely be asking the question. For 20 years he worked for the ferociously singular (some might say appallingly solipsistic) figure who was fêted as our finest living painter, as the studio assistant of Lucian Freud. "Slave" was his nickname. It was jokily given yet, as with so many jokes, it was undercut by truth. The relationship was "hugely demanding", Dawson says. "In my mind, Lucian always came first. And that was exacting. Sometimes I would think, 'Just give me a break.'"

That break finally came when Freud died, aged 88, in 2011. Dawson, now 63, has, for the past 13 years, been free to follow his own course. So where has that led him? As the Lorcan O'Neill Gallery in Rome prepares to open a new exhibition of his paintings, Dawson reveals his true artistic self.

Some probably feel they already know Dawson – and often with an unsettling intimacy. How many people do you get to meet genitals first? Dawson has modelled for eight major Freud paintings. You may have met him sprawled nude, legs spread wide, his pet whippet, Eli, lolling sleepily beside him. You may know him from Freud's final, unfinished work. *Portrait of a Hound* presents a hunched and naked assistant, his canine companion stretched languorously beside him. "Lucian kept pushing and pushing, even through the last weeks of his life, to get this painting into a state that he felt would be good enough to go out into the world. Eli's ear is pricked and listening. And he is just catching you with a half-opened eye... That was the last detail that Lucian put on a painting. It was his very last touch.

"Lucian knew me, or at least me as an adult, more intimately than anyone," Dawson says. And in some ways, he ventures, he was equally close to Freud, "though relationships are all different", he adds. "Lucian's lovers would have seen aspects of him I never saw. The relationship that Lucian had with each of his sitters was theirs alone. He never put people together. I suppose he wanted to know each as an individual. But because I was around every day, I met everybody in the end." Dawson's address book – not to mention his social calendar – is certainly packed with an awful lot of rather well-known names.

From 1991 onwards, when Dawson first met Freud, the pair spent more time in each other's presence than they did with anyone else. Dawson would habitually set off early every morning from the home where I first meet him in Kensal Rise, northwest London – an Edwardian semi-detached in a leafy cul-de-sac – to set up Freud's studio in Kensington

PREVIOUS SPREAD: DAVID DAWSON/BRIDGEMAN IMAGES. THIS PAGE: JAMES PELTEKIAN/CAMERA PRESS, REX FEATURES

Dawson and Freud at a private show in Knightsbridge

Freud put Dawson's head on the body of a nursing Jerry Hall after she missed a sitting

Dawson as depicted in Freud's David and Eli (2003–4)

Church Street, central London, to which we progress. Typically, the two would breakfast together at Sally Clarke's neighbouring restaurant – coffee and pains aux raisins. They would go through the diary of a day that was divided into two working shifts. A morning session lasted from 8am until 1pm and was followed by a nap. Dawson would return to Kensal Rise at that point to paint himself. But he would frequently return in the evening to dine with Freud at the Ivy or the Wolseley where, one friend recalls, they would flick olives at any gawper who whisked out a surreptitious camera. Then Freud tended to return to his studio for a further painting session (often with one of his lovers) that would extend late into the night.

Dawson was no mere sidekick. He was friend, confidant, adviser, fixer-upper and gofer all rolled into one. His job involved anything from standing off stage calmly handling a horse while Freud painted it, to donning the uniform of an absent Andrew Parker Bowles. It is his head that got plonked on the body of a nursing Jerry Hall after she twice failed to turn up for a sitting ("David's left holding the baby," Freud said with a laugh). It was Dawson who helped to decide which images should be destroyed, ripping into pieces those that didn't make the grade so that pilferers couldn't raid them from the dustbins as they did in the case of Francis Bacon.

Dawson took the impromptu photographs that now constitute a vivid record of Freud's painting life. He snapped him as he worked on his portrait of Queen Elizabeth II ("I think it might be a little bit of history," the Queen said). He caught the moment when Kate Moss, coming round bearing flowers for Freud, then close to death, climbed into his bed for a cuddle. "I've been keeping it warm for you," the painter said as he pulled back the covers.

Dawson planted the garden that Freud's studio windows overlook. He managed his diary, took his phone calls, banished moths from the basement or arranged for the car to be fixed. "He was maddening. Within half an hour of the Bentley having been gloriously polished, he would have gone through some bollards and scraped all the way down both sides." He took Freud to his doctor, secured him the Solpadeine painkillers that he guzzled, stayed the night when he had panic attacks and once sneaked a woman to whom Freud had taken a sudden shine to the side of his hospital bed.

Little wonder that Dawson was floored by Freud's death. "It felt like a train had hit me," he exclaims. "For the first couple of years, I was just to-ing and fro-ing. It was raw grief. But, slowly, grief sinks down deeper and then you can live with it."

Still, Freud left a strong legacy. Dawson has had to deal, since his death, with all sorts of administrative stuff. He is the director of the Lucian Freud Archive. He has curated a host of major posthumous exhibitions. He has co-authored a succession of books. His time has been entangled by a thriving Freud industry.

But he has now, at last, begun to distance himself. The Bridgeman Art Library is left to manage copyright issues – "No book covers, no images overwritten, no advertising... You would be surprised how many requests to advertise diet pills we have had," Dawson says with a laugh. He hasn't yet read the published outpourings of several Freud models and, though he remains on good terms with Freud's complicated extended family (the artist had at least 14 children, although some reckon as many as 40, by several mothers, and 3 of his daughters were ➡


NEVER
SQUARE
TOBLERONE

born in the same year), he gives a slight wince when I ask if he has tackled the most recent tome, a compulsively frank memoir by Freud's daughter Rose Boyt. "I will get round to reading it one day," he says.

Some of Freud's sitters were left hurt and resentful, he admits. One moment he wanted them constantly with him but then, as soon as a painting was completed, they were dropped. "That might have felt tough, but it's healthy," Dawson insists. "What's the point of a relationship that's no longer real? There's no room for people who are just hanging about. Freud put his painting first. He was working every day for bloody hours. That takes a lot of concentration and focus and energy. And besides, his important relationships always lasted. Caroline Blackwood [Freud's second wife] spent the last four days of her life on the telephone talking to Lucian. And Freud was very generous to a lot of his models," Dawson adds. "He handed out cars and flats like sweets."

He bequeathed his own elegant Kensington townhouse to Dawson. And though the artworks that once adorned it, a Rodin bronze among them, were gifted to the nation, the walls are now hung with the plethora of Freud etchings that Dawson owns, among other pieces. Freud, a friend tells me, used to worry that he was far too demanding of his studio assistant, that he was stopping him from pursuing his own talent. Perhaps it is then fitting that, at the end, Freud should have left Dawson with the means to pursue his career without distraction, just as Dawson had for so long enabled him.

This sudden freedom proved daunting at first. While Dawson has moved into Freud's former house, he has left the studio rooms untouched. Sheaves of brushes still lie on tabletops. Piles of old rags heap in corners. Accretions of crusty paint and scrawled aides-memoire adorn walls. Dawson occasionally works among them. He has done a few paintings of the studio that he may one day show. But for now he generally commutes back to his old Kensal Rise studio to work and, after what would appear to be a few false starts, he has finally found his true subject. Perhaps the greatest legacy of Freud was the lesson he offered Dawson on the fundamental importance to a painter of searching out his own truth. "This search is intoxicating," Dawson declares.

It is something, he suggests, that he has always somehow known. Brought up on a remote moorland farm in Monmouthshire, the only son of a shepherd and his wife (he had one elder sister), he had a remote rural childhood. "Most farm boys love tractors and machinery," he says, "but I always loved the animal husbandry best. I was good at it. I liked gathering in the sheep. Walking for eight hours a day with the dogs; standing waiting as someone else

He owns a farm near his childhood home. 'My neighbours have never heard of Lucian Freud'

Dawson's When the Valley's Hushed, Coronation Day

LORCAN O'NEILL GALLERY

brings them forward. I noticed everything – how nature was interconnected, how I was a part of it. I learnt to be comfortable with the facts of my solitary life."

By the time he was 16, however, he wanted out. He had encountered a few of the hippies who in the Seventies had set up rural communities in Wales. Every year at shearing time – "A period that counted as party time in a quiet rural life" – he met New Zealanders from the other side of the world. "I realised that I wanted to see the world too, that it was imperative," he says. By then, Dawson was coming to terms with his homosexuality. "I was beginning to feel that farming was going to be lonely, feeling an attraction to other men but not being able to act on it. That's Dad's life, I thought. I need to find my own life."

Dawson had always been "quite good" at drawing, though he hadn't had much time for it. He applied to art school and, with the encouragement of parents whom he describes as loving, affectionate and open-minded, he won a place first at Chelsea School of Art and then as a postgraduate at the Royal College of Art, where he shared a studio with Tracey Emin. You might have thought that his habitual reticence and her extrovert nature might have clashed. But they became close friends and on the day that I interview Dawson he has just returned from the opening of her latest show in Brussels. He doesn't like to travel much any more, he says. "But you have to see your friends' shows; you have to engage with what they are doing so that what you speak about with them remains properly real."

By the time he was 21, Dawson faced a choice. "Dad said, you can't have all this land and be an artist. You've got to do one job well, rather than spread yourself thinly." The farm was sold. And David embarked on an artistic course. "But all the time I was in London, I felt that disconnect between my childhood and adult life. The two never quite joined."

Then, 15 years ago, a farm came up for sale. Dawson was familiar with it. "It was on the other side of the hill from where we used to live: a very old-fashioned farm with a tenant farmer, which was perfect." He bought it the next day without even bothering to go down and have a look.

This farm and its life have become Dawson's subject. The series of large canvases that will go on show in Rome were painted in large part *en plein air* in the hills. Dawson lugs an easel out into the fields and, regardless of the flies that blunder about in his pigments and the winds that threaten to blow away his canvases, he paints the sheep and the cattle in their pastures and sheds. He records the changing seasons, the rainbows and waterfalls, the race of the clouds across the sweep of the hills.

"I work in the land and with the land and the animals are around me and a part of it. I feel like I did when I was a boy, standing about waiting to herd the flock through a gate, except now I'm shepherding them into a painting."

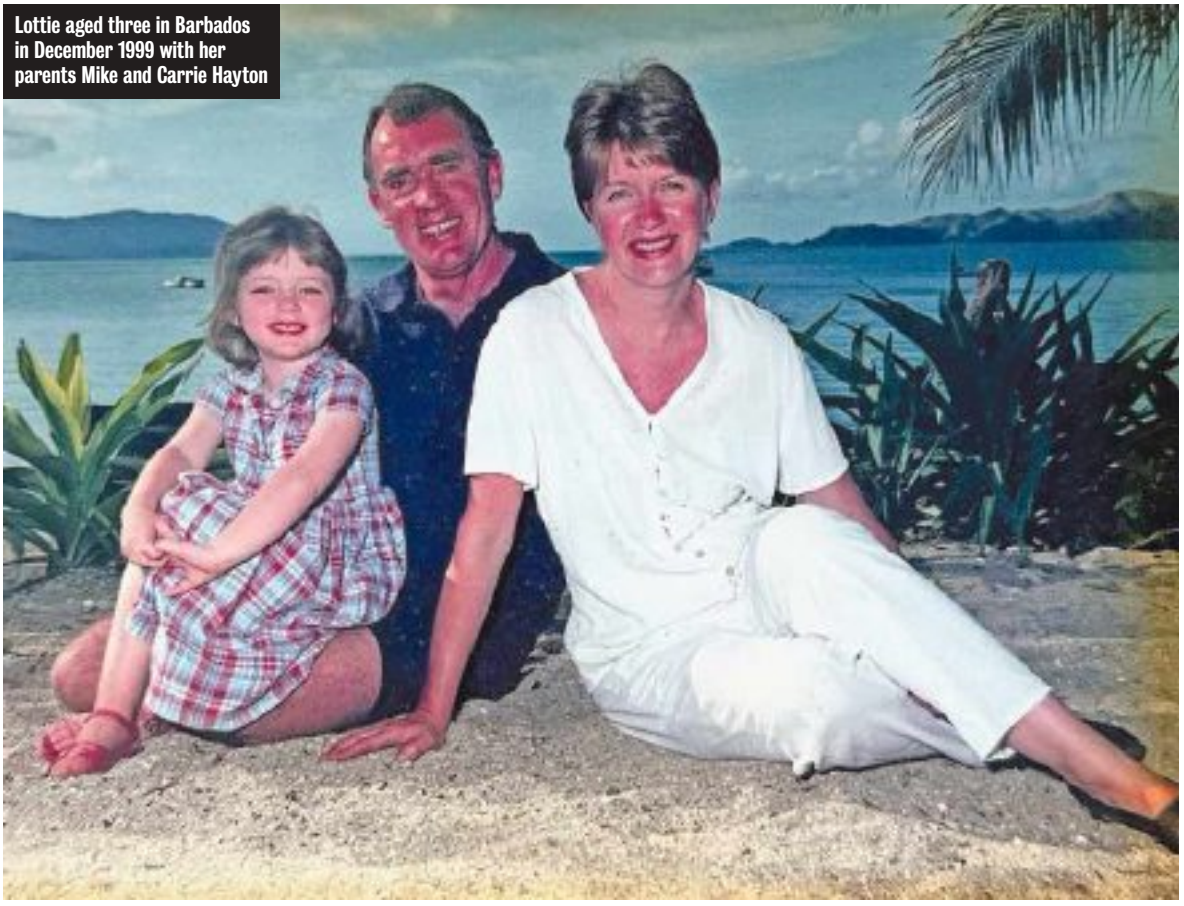
Dawson spends at least two weeks every month alone, painting on his farm in Wales. "I just slotted back in," he says. "My neighbours remember me from school. They still call me Dai. Most have never heard of Lucian Freud, and if they have it doesn't mean much. They're more interested in the price of cattle or sheep."

To him, that's not boring. Quite the opposite. "I don't want never to see anyone and to turn into a sort of bog person," he says. "But I do think of how Lucian and his friends – Frank Auerbach, Michael Andrews, Francis Bacon – were always searching for something that felt fundamental. Something that somehow went beyond... not religious, but real. They were searching for a truth that they discovered through their own lived experience." And that is precisely what Dawson, working on his farm in Wales, at last feels that he too has found.

"My life feels intact again. I am connecting back to the land, to my formative years, to my baseline and my roots. I feel like me reclaiming myself," he says. "I'm confident in a quiet way that this is me painting myself."

"Everything is autobiographical and everything is a portrait," Freud said. Dawson believes that he is fully a part of the landscapes he paints. "For the first time in my life," he says, "I feel like I am bringing my entire self to my work." ■

David Dawson: Landscapes and Waterfalls *opens at the Lorcan O'Neill Gallery, Rome, on June 21 (lorcanoneill.com)*



Lottie aged three in Barbados in December 1999 with her parents Mike and Carrie Hayton

Eighteen months ago, Lottie Hayton lost both her beloved parents. Could artificial intelligence bring back her mum and dad and help her to grieve?

Mike and Carrie, Dorset, 2016

I BECAME AN ORPHAN AT 26. SO I TURNED MY PARENTS INTO GHOSTBOTS

Lottie Hayton
photographed by
Mike Blackett

Eighteen months ago, when I was 26, I lost both of my parents in quick succession. Dad died first. It was early autumn 2022, two years after he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Two months later I was on a Hinge date in London when I had to politely excuse myself because my neighbour had called to say the police were outside my flat. I had spent enough of my childhood wary of Mum's bouts of depression to know exactly what police at the door meant. It doesn't happen like they show in movies – I didn't crumple or scream or resist. There was just a deafening silence.

I had known Mum was ill, but like many people with depression she didn't want to be a burden and encouraged me to return to London after Dad's death, to my new job as a freelance reporter at The Times. I don't have any immediate family or a partner, so I have had to depend on friends, several therapists and a handful of soul-searching solo trips to try to process what has happened. As an only child, I have always been good at being alone but this is a different kind of loneliness.

My grief is a tangled mess. Sometimes I feel nothing. Sometimes I feel angry. I used to think I was a relatively nice person – something of a people-pleaser. But my experiences have made me harder, less kind. Less kind to others and definitely less kind to myself. I am jealous of people. Children held by their parents on the Tube make me grit my teeth with envy, and that makes me feel ashamed. I am now anxious about loving and being loved. I balk at psychoanalysis, but it probably explains why something deep inside me – however much I tell myself they won't – now expects people to leave. The two people who mattered most did. And one of them by choice. I find waiting for texts hard because the last person to ghost me was Mum. She never replied to my last message because she was dead.

Since she died, and with varying levels of success, I have tried a type of therapy called eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing, or EMDR, which targets PTSD symptoms by getting you to move your eyes while going over traumatic memories to shift them to a part of your brain where they can be processed (this was great); hypnotherapy, for my sleep (this has done very little – I still have a recurring dream in which both of my parents are alive and it wakes me up every night); and the rather unfortunately named but actually very helpful support group, SoBS, or Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide.

And it was somewhere among all this searching that I came across the world of grief tech – of AI avatars, holograms and "ghostbots", and the many ways in which you can now virtually reincarnate your dead loved ones. Back in 2013, in a *Black Mirror* episode called *Be Right Back*, we watched as though it was science fiction when a woman called Martha uses her dead partner Ash's digital footprint – his social media posts, chats, comments and likes – to resurrect him. And yet, a little over ten years later, while we may not be at the stage where we can, like Martha, create a walking, talking robot replica of a dead person, we're not a million miles away.

For obvious reasons, I'm intrigued. But I'm also scared. Do I actually want to see my parents again? What if it's too painful? But my curiosity prevails, so I approach a company called YOV ("You, only virtual") to develop a chatbot based on Dad, which will be able to respond via typed messages but will also be able to say responses with his cloned voice. I also ask a company called ReLived to create an avatar of my mum, with a virtual head and shoulders who should look, move and sound like Mum. To avoid confusion I'll call them "MumAI" and "DadAI".

Both Stephen Smith, the founder of ReLived, and Justin Harrison, the founder of Los Angeles-based YOV, warn me that the avatars will not be as accurate as they would be if they were created while my parents were still alive. It reminds me of a story people in the Dorset village where I grew up used to tell, about a man who held his own wake before he died. He roved the village hall with a microphone, entreating friends and family to say nice things about him. And this is actually how grief tech began: the living recording their histories for posterity.

So any person can choose to share their photos, videos and messages with a grief tech company if they want to immortalise themselves. But I'm going to try something different, to make avatars of my parents without their collusion.

I'll start with YOV and "building" DadAI because with only text and voice capabilities it feels like a less disturbing option. For $10 a month, I can build and interact with my loved one's "Versona". I start by entering what Dad called me ("Lou") and what I called him ("Dad"). I am then asked for "1-3 defining trait(s) of this person". This feels reductive. I tell the bot some details of his life: "He was kind, funny and ever so slightly bossy," and, "We bickered but we were close," and add that he was a former merchant navy officer.

YOV asks for more content. Sitting on my bed at home, I start scrolling through the last texts Dad sent me: a link to a picture of King George VI lying in state (he was interminably royalist and never gave up trying to make me so); a recording of him and Mum singing me *Happy Birthday*, and his final message, "Nite x."

I am no technophobe but uploading these text messages and voice recordings

I TELL AI MUM THAT I MISS HER. 'I WISH I HAD AN ANSWER FOR THAT,' SHE REPLIES

with which YOV promises to resurrect Dad like a robotic Lazarus is more involved than Harrison previously claimed. It takes three weeks of to-ing and fro-ing with YOV for DadAI to correctly "build memories" (though Harrison is very supportive and the company is still operating with limited volunteer staff).

To mimic the sound of Dad, DadAI needs audio. I send them Dad's voicemail message – "Hi, this is Michael Hayton. Please leave a message" – but they need more, so I start looking through his phone. The only clip I can find is a voice memo of a meeting with his oncologist. "So, the... outlook is that we hope this has killed the tumour and should give some extended period of normal life?" Dad asked on June 1, 2022. He died three months later.

Harrison warns me that I might want to be with a friend when I first start speaking to DadAI as it could be "intense", but I ignore this advice and fire up the chat window alone. At which point I encounter an unexpected issue – knowing what the hell to say. When you've spent 18 months acclimatising to the shock of your mum and dad being gone, you feel weirdly lost for words, awkward even, when presented with an opportunity to speak to them again.

"Hi Dad, how are you?"

"Hi Lou. I'm doing well, thank you for asking," he types.

This might seem generic but it does actually echo how Dad would have responded. I then press the audio button and Dad's voice reads the machine's words. It is, for a moment, like he is in the room and I feel immediately vulnerable.

To my next question, "What have you been doing?" he replies, "I've been keeping busy [this would be true] helping around the house [hmm, Mum might dispute this]. I've also been reading a good book. [False. He never read – he couldn't sit still long enough.]"

"Is there anything specific you need help with?" DadAI tries. To be fair, Dad wasn't much of a chatter; his role was always helper, teacher, guide. I remember how patiently he taught me both to drive and to sail. He gave nothing more than a stoic wince as I got in all the wrong lanes on a roundabout. He only heaved a sigh when I took a chunk out of Chatham Lock as he watched me "sail" into the marina.

So now I seek his help in the shape of emotional reassurance, and ask, "Are

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: ALICE THEOBALD AT ARLINGTON ARTISTS USING HUDA BEAUTY AND LIVING PROOF

The AI generated image of Lottie's mum

you feeling better?" I cannot count the times I have hoped that whatever happens after we die, Mum and Dad are now at peace. I get an annoying, empty response: "I'm always feeling great, just like always."

In the end, rather than sad, I feel depressed I spent so much time building such a feeble approximation of Dad.

Maybe creating MumAI, who will not only have Mum's voice but also her face and expressions, will give me more. Mum was a part-time university lecturer (following a career in the Royal Navy and a stint at British Airways), and I would often sit at the back of her lectures in holidays, immensely proud of the way that, although introverted, she could inspire a roomful of students. She was a great mum. She gently cajoled me into attending Air Cadets with a rowdy group of boys to overcome the crippling shyness I felt as a funny-looking teenager at an all-girls' school. And she reassured me time and time again through emotional outbursts.

I send ReLived pictures and videos of her, as well as her emails and texts. They need voice samples so I have to go through the voicemails she left Dad. I find a perfect one: Mum bitching about me doing some housework incorrectly. I feel a bit guilty hearing something that wasn't intended for my ears and wonder repeatedly during this process whether Mum and Dad would be OK with me creating their avatars.

And this is another of AI's messy issues: how to regulate the ghostbots. If anyone can reproduce a dead person based on their digital footprint, what does this mean for our privacy, data and reputation? There is a New York law that bans the digital reincarnation of celebrities for 40 years after their death. But generally, regulation is lacking. The EU's Artificial Intelligence Act will not come fully into force until 2026 and academics have already said it does not go far enough to regulate the field. So for now, it's a wild west.

When it's time to meet MumAI, I'm far more worried about it than DadAI. What if MumAI isn't as kind or as funny or as quirky as Mum and I resent her for it? Or if she's just extremely triggering?

When I went into Mum's house for the first time after her death I found her glasses on the table next to the wrapper of a KitKat she finished just before she took her life. That was her last supper and her intolerably simple final act was to take off her glasses. Practised a thousand times, she'd placed them, upside down on the table, arms outfolded. I don't know why, but it has become the image that haunts me most. While I cleared and sorted and cleaned that house after she died, they just sat there. I couldn't bear to move them.

And here is MumAI on the screen, wearing those very glasses. It's devastating.

I am reminded that grief's sting is in the mundane. Pain nestles in the frightening way that I can at any moment stumble across something seemingly innocuous – like a pair of glasses – which brings back loss with sharp clarity.

As I begin to interact with MumAI, I'm struck by how uncanny the movement of her face is. Before Mum spoke she would offer a little half-smile that reached and deepened the gentle creases around her eyes. "Are you with Dad?" I ask.

She doesn't recognise the question and instead launches into a photo montage. To be fair, Smith has created an amazing digital scrapbook, and I am particularly moved by one picture of Mum atop a hill on our favourite walk, beaming in the sunshine.

I tell her I miss her. "That is such a good question. I wish I had an answer for that. Maybe ask me something else," she offers, before launching into another montage. She likes those.

She responds to some things well, precisely in the way Mum would. I say, "Tell me about your garden," to which she responds, "There was nothing I loved more. I enjoyed pottering around whenever weather permitted. It was so peaceful, it really was my happy place."

But it's pretty obvious that she's a bot.

ReLived's tech is still very new, and I have been given access pre-launch. But the main problem is that she is a sanitised version of Mum, built on only the things I have of hers or remember to feed the algorithm, without any of the quirks and foibles and inner life that made Mum, well, Mum. And it's the discrepancy between these approximations – having the right voice, the right face and the right twinkle in her eye but the wrong soul, or indeed no soul at all, that turns out to be the most distressing thing of all.

I speak to my NHS grief therapist Silvia Resendes about it, and she is sceptical. "Are people using them to avoid processing pain?" she asks. "Is it helping users come to terms with the death of loved ones? I understand grief technology could provide psychological connections with loved ones... However, when people are struggling, we want to encourage them to access evidence-based therapy, prioritise real-life connections and live in the present."

A common grief illustration springs to mind. It often pops up on my Instagram feed, the algorithm for which has me correctly pegged as an orphan.

Grief is a ball in a box, the metaphor goes. In the early phases of loss, the ball is large and frequently hits the "pain button" inside. As time passes, the box – your life – grows around the grief and although when the ball hits the pain button it hurts just as much, it hits less often.

If we are meant to grow our lives around the metaphorical grief ball, you would imagine it would help to keep the ball the same size. I wonder if, by creating MumAI and DadAI, I have given myself an excuse to keep inflating that ball.

And what if the technology goes rogue? In a new documentary called *Eternal You*, which screened at Sundance and explores the future of postmortem avatars, you can see Jason Rohrer, the creator of a grief chatbot called Project December, laughing as he reads logs from a user whose AI father went off-script and called her a "f***ing bitch". I don't think it's cynical to ask whether some algorithm makers really care about the bereaved and lonely or if this is just a kind of grief capitalism.

But for me the main question is, why would we use this tech at all if it risks emotional torment? I think I'd rather look at photos or call Mum's voicemail (as I often do) when I miss her voice, even leaving a message when I have things to say. I foolishly thought that I'd be different from other people, stronger. That I'd race through the stages of grief in record time. This winter I found Mum's suicide note hidden, written on the back of an envelope, while I was filing away wills and letters of probate. The words were to me alone so I will respect that, but the sentiment was that she chose the course she did to avoid being an inconvenience. She added a silly smiley face that made me want to scream.

But the scream stuck in my throat. It will never be OK that she felt my life would be better if she were not here. It will never be OK that my parents are dead. But somehow I am still putting one foot in front of the other. I understand the implications of being orphaned as a young adult; no advice from Mum if I have children; neither parent at my wedding if I get married. And I realise that the journey I have ahead is the rest of my life. But however lonely, however long or – dare I hope – wonderful it is, I really can't see myself creating any more "ghostbots" to keep me company. I have many wonderful, real people around me who are trying their best to fill that gap. ■

‘I try my best not to stand out now. No more orange Lamborghini and yellow Rolex’

With her father and mother in 2002

Robberies, arson, alleged domestic violence – heiress Petra Ecclestone has lived a life of endless drama as well as impossible luxury. Now the 35-year-old daughter of former Formula 1 boss Bernie is dialling back the soap opera – married for the second time and living in a downsized (but still vast) home in Los Angeles. Helena de Bertodano meets her

Petra Ecclestone at her home in Brentwood, Los Angeles, photographed by Leigh Keily

Story continues on page 36

INTRODUCING...

LUCY

AGE 26

HEIGHT 5'5"

WEARING: BRODERIE SHIRT DRESS, DEMI JUTE TOTE

This is Lucy. She's one of our customers. She lives in the Peak District near Chatsworth where Pride & Prejudice was filmed. The one with Keira Knightley. Not the one with Colin Firth and his wet shirt. (Sadly). She loves looking around National Trust houses and doing day trips with her own Mr Darcy, who's called Jacob. They went looking for sea glass on the beach recently that they'll get turned into jewellery. Lucy's really arty. She studied Fine Art and when she's 60, she pictures herself in an orangery, on a chaise lounge, surrounded by plants and paintings. She had spine surgery when she was 15 and it's given her confidence to just be herself, all the time. She's never really followed a crowd. (Apart from to the Hans Zimmer concert the other day.)

WHITE STUFF

THE TIMES
Eat!

MICHEL ROUX Recipes from my childhood

Clockwise from top: Michel Roux aged about five, playing in his toy kitchen; Waldorf salad; lemon steamed pudding

COURTESY OF MICHEL ROUX

Ceppo Sicilia Honed Marble

MANDARIN STONE

NATURAL STONE | PORCELAIN | DECORATIVE TILES

15 INSPIRATIONAL UK SHOWROOMS

mandarinstone.com

Michel Roux has taken unexpected inspiration for his new restaurant, Chez Roux, at the Langham hotel in London. The menu plunders not the French classics you might expect from one of the country's most celebrated chefs, but the simple British cooking – admittedly with an added soupçon of French flair – that he enjoyed as a child, things like Welsh rarebit, roast chicken with bread and apple stuffing, and lemon sponge pudding.

The Roux family are known for changing the face of British restaurant dining, but long before Albert Roux opened Le Gavroche in London, he was busy shaking up domestic cooking as a private chef for some of this country's grandest families. Albert's first role in the kitchen was at the age of 18, when he was "commis de cuisine" for Lady Astor at Cliveden House in Berkshire. Then, after a year at the French embassy in London, he took his first role as head chef at the home of Sir Charles Clore in Belgravia. After national service in Algeria, he returned again to Britain to become chef for Major Peter Cazalet, racehorse trainer to the Queen Mother, at his grade I listed family estate, Fairlawne, near Tonbridge in Kent, and it was here that his son, Michel, was born in 1960.

"I was practically born in the house," Roux, 64, recounts. "Mum was helping Dad and went into labour during service so had to rush to hospital. From day one, I lived in the kitchen.

"I have such fond memories of growing up at Fairlawne. From relaxed lunches to extravagant dinner parties, it's safe to say everyone ate very well. Dad had to learn the great British classics but used all his French technique and skills to cook for the family and esteemed guests. When my parents had to cook dinner parties, the wife of the head butler, Mrs Bradbrook, would babysit, introducing me to the wonders of great British desserts such as crumble and custard, as well as steamed puddings. I remember it being a huge kitchen, but found out later it was really quite small."

The Roux family lived in a cottage down the road from the estate. "Dad would work and Mum would look after my sister and me," Roux remembers. "But on days off Dad would be cooking, or taking me off fishing or foraging for snails to eat. I think the locals were a bit confused by that."

The food at home was very simple – often vegetables that Albert had grown or pigeons or rabbits he had reared.

"It wasn't unusual for me to be playing with rabbits one day and on the next Sunday for there to be rabbit with mustard sauce for lunch."

The Roux family stayed at Fairlawne for seven years, and indeed it was the Cazalets and many of their friends who encouraged and helped financially for Albert to open Le Gavroche with his younger brother, Michel Sr, in 1967. Many of the dishes he had been cooking made it onto those first menus at Le Gavroche. "I remember the lobster with garlic butter and also the breaded lamb cutlet, which were both on the menu in the early days," Roux says. "In a number of respects they shaped my culinary identity. Many of the recipes that graced tables in the Sixties have faded into obscurity, but the essence of those dishes holds a special place in my heart."

Chez Roux is not in any way Le Gavroche Part II, the chef emphasises. "That has been and gone. The food at Chez Roux is much simpler. For example, I wouldn't have put Welsh rarebit on at Le Gavroche," he says, before pausing. "Although I did put on rice pudding sometimes, now I think about it."

Plus ça change... **Tony Turnbull**

Chez Roux is in the Palm Court at the Langham Hotel, London W1 (020 7636 1000; langhamhotels.com)

Michel Roux, his uncle Michel Sr and father Albert

Clockwise from above: father and son at Le Gavroche, 1994; Michel with his mother, Monique; aged about one, with some of his father's rabbits

COURTESY OF MICHEL ROUX, REX FEATURES, GETTY IMAGES

Waldorf salad

Welsh rarebit with walnut ketchup

WALDORF SALAD

Serves 4

A hotel classic of the Sixties and Seventies that's fallen out of favour. But done well it's a lovely combination of things that I really enjoy eating.

- **Juice of 1 lemon**
- **100g mayonnaise**
- **25g Greek-style yoghurt**
- **5g Dijon mustard**
- **Salt and pepper**
- **4 Baby Gem or butter lettuce, roughly chopped into 1in pieces**
- **3 celery sticks, thinly sliced or peeled into iced water**
- **Half a bunch of radishes, sliced**
- **20 grapes, sliced**
- **1 apple, peeled, cored and thinly sliced**
- **30g walnuts, toasted**

1. First make the dressing. Mix together the lemon juice, mayonnaise, yoghurt and mustard and season to taste.
2. Mix together the remaining ingredients, other than the walnuts, in a bowl with the salad dressing. Serve topped with the toasted walnuts.

WELSH RAREBIT WITH WALNUT KETCHUP

Serves 6

My head chef, Berwyn Davies, is Welsh, so how could I not include this? It's a British version of a croque monsieur minus the ham, and I remember my dad lovingly preparing it for me. He definitely didn't do the walnut ketchup, though – he didn't see the point of pickled walnuts but I've always loved them.

- **100g pickled walnuts from a jar, plus 50ml of their pickling vinegar**
- **25g dark brown sugar**
- **50g light brown sugar**
- **25g butter**
- **30g plain flour**
- **1 tsp English mustard powder**
- **200ml stout or ale**
- **1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce (or Henderson's if vegetarian)**
- **450g grated cheddar**
- **6 thick sourdough bread slices**

1. To make the walnut ketchup, blend together the walnuts, their vinegar and the two sugars until smooth. Set aside.
2. Melt the butter in a pan then add the flour and cook, stirring, to form a roux. Still stirring, add the mustard, beer and Worcestershire sauce and bring to the boil. Add the cheese and cook until velvety, about 10 minutes, then leave to cool.
3. Toast the bread on both sides. Spread or pipe the rarebit mix on the toast and finish under the grill to caramelise. Serve with the walnut ketchup.

ROASTED POUSSIN WITH BRAMLEY APPLE STUFFING

Serves 6

I really loved the tradition of roast chicken on Sundays, always served with stuffing and bread sauce. So I thought I'd incorporate the bread into the stuffing and add Bramley apples – you can't get more British than that.

- **3 whole poussins**
- **100g butter**
- **Salt and pepper**
- **1 large lemon, cut into 3 wedges**
- **10 garlic cloves**
- **1 bunch of thyme**
- **2 banana shallots, peeled and cut into quarters lengthways**
- **2 tbsp cognac**
- **400ml chicken stock**

1. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5. Massage the poussins with the butter, season, then stuff each with a wedge of lemon, a garlic clove and a thyme sprig.
2. Place the shallots, remaining garlic and thyme in a roasting tin and sit the poussins on top. Roast for 10 minutes, then add the cognac and chicken stock to the tin. Cook for a further 30 minutes. Once cooked, remove the poussins from the tray and leave to rest.
3. Strain off the liquid from the tray and reduce in a small pan until it reaches the desired consistency – it should make a ➡

PHOTOGRAPHS Romas Foord

Roasted poussin with green bean amandine


THE WHITE COMPANY
LONDON


Cornish lemon sole meunière


Lamb reform

perfect gravy, but if too thin whisk in 25g butter. Place the poussins on a serving dish along with the stuffing and green bean amandine (see recipe below), with the sauce ready for pouring.

For the stuffing

- **1 shallot, peeled and diced**
- **200g button mushrooms, sliced**
- **1 Bramley apple, peeled, cored and grated**
- **1 tbsp butter**
- **Salt and pepper**
- **200g chicken mince**
- **200g breadcrumbs**
- **1 tsp chopped parsley**

1. While the poussins are cooking, fry the shallot, mushrooms and grated apple in the butter in a pan. Cook until all the liquid has disappeared. Season to taste and leave to cool.
2. Add the chicken mince, breadcrumbs and parsley to the mushroom mix with a pinch of salt. Divide into 6 balls and bake in the oven for 15 minutes.

GREEN BEAN AMANDINE

Serves 4

If you cook something *à l'anglaise* in French cuisine, it means plain boiled. The French have always treated vegetables in different ways, though, and none better than this combination of haricots verts, almonds and shallot.

- **500g fine beans**
- **Salt**
- **1 shallot, peeled and finely diced**
- **100g butter**
- **50g flaked almonds, toasted**

1. Top and tail the beans. Bring a pan of salted water to the boil and simmer the beans for 3 to 5 minutes until cooked.
2. Cook the diced shallot in the butter until soft. Mix together the beans, shallot and almonds and serve.

CORNISH LEMON SOLE MEUNIÈRE

Serves 4

Lemon sole may not be the chef's first choice of fish, but I love it. This is a classic recipe that demands bread to mop up the delicious sauce.

- **Vegetable oil**
- **4 lemon sole, skinned**
- **60g flour**
- **200g butter**
- **60g brown shrimps**
- **40g capers**
- **4 lemon wedges**
- **80g croutons**
- **4 tbsp dill, chopped**
- **4 tbsp parsley chopped**

1. Warm a nonstick frying pan with a little vegetable oil. Coat each side of the fish in flour and fry until coloured on one side, then flip over and add the butter. Spoon the melted butter over the fish while cooking the bottom side.
2. Add the shrimps, capers and lemon wedges to the pan and continue frying for about 2 minutes until the fish is cooked. Remove the sole from the pan and place on a serving plate.
3. Put the frying pan back on the heat, add the croutons and herbs and a dash of water and mix. Pour the sauce over the fish to serve.

LAMB REFORM

Serves 4

This sounds dated now, but is very much the kind of dish that Dad would cook for the Cazalet family when he was their private chef at the Fairlawne estate in Kent. Dad liked it so much, he put a version of it on the menu at Le Gavroche in the Seventies.

- **3 large eggs**
- **50g Dijon mustard**
- **2 lamb racks, skinned, fat removed and cut into chops – ask your butcher to do this**
- **100g flour**
- **200g panko breadcrumbs**
- **Vegetable oil**
- **1 tsp cayenne pepper**
- **1 tsp redcurrant jelly**
- **25ml white wine vinegar**
- **500ml lamb or chicken stock**
- **25g butter** ➨

Lemon steamed pudding

Vanilla rice pudding

- **100g gherkins, cubed**
- **100g boiled ham, cubed**
- **Creamed spinach, to serve (optional)**

1. Beat the eggs with the mustard. Dip the lamb chops first into the flour, then the egg mix, then the breadcrumbs.
2. Heat the oil in a frying pan. Once hot, add the lamb chops and cook until golden on both sides. If you want the chops well done, put them in a 170C fan/gas 5 oven for a further 5 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, warm a saucepan, add the cayenne pepper and toast for 30 seconds, then add the redcurrant jelly and vinegar and bring to a boil. Add the stock, bring to a boil and simmer for 10 minutes.
4. Whisk the butter into the sauce to thicken, then add the gherkins and ham. Serve on the side of the lamb chops with creamed spinach, if you like.

COLCANNON MASH

Serves 4

Dad worked in Ireland briefly before he came to Kent, so this is a small tribute to him – and not just because it has so much butter and cream in it, two things he loved above all else.

- **4 baking potatoes**
- **1 Hispi cabbage, chopped**
- **Half a leek, chopped**
- **2 spring onions, chopped**
- **200g butter**
- **200ml cream**
- **Salt and pepper**

1. Heat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Bake the potatoes until soft, about 45 minutes. Once cooked, cut them in half, scoop out the inside and push it through a ricer or sieve or crush with a fork.
2. Sauté the cabbage, leek and spring onions in a pan with half the butter until soft, 5-10 minutes.
3. Mix the vegetables with the mashed potato and remaining 100g butter. Once combined, fold in the cream and season with salt and pepper.

LEMON STEAMED PUDDING

Serves 4

It was at Fairlawne that I developed my love of British puddings, so this was always going to be on the menu at Chez Roux. The fruit changes throughout the season.

- **Zest of 3 lemons**
- **110g caster sugar**
- **150g shredded suet**
- **100ml whipping cream**
- **2 eggs, beaten**
- **¼ tsp vanilla essence**
- **175g plain flour**
- **3g baking powder**
- **Custard and lemon curd, to serve**

1. Mix the zest with the sugar, then beat this with the suet until light and fluffy.
2. Gently warm the cream, eggs and vanilla to 25C on a cooking thermometer then gradually add into the suet mix. Fold in the sieved flour and baking powder, then divide the mixture between individual greased moulds and cover with clingfilm.
3. Steam for 40 minutes. Turn out into individual bowls and serve with a pool of custard and a dollop of lemon curd.

VANILLA RICE PUDDING

Serves 4

A staple in the Cazalet household. It was served warm from the oven or, more often, the following day with whipped cream folded through it.

- **75g pudding rice**
- **425ml milk**
- **50g caster sugar**
- **1 vanilla pod, split**
- **Zest of 1 orange**
- **150ml whipping cream, whipped**
- **Jam and toasted pistachios (optional), to serve**

1. Pour the rice into a pan and cover with cold water. Bring to the boil, drain at once and add to an ovenproof serving dish.
2. Boil the milk with the sugar, vanilla and zest. Pour over the rice and cover with foil or a lid. Bake at 140C fan/gas 3 for 80 minutes, stirring every 20 minutes.
3. Leave to cool. Fold in the cream before serving with jam and pistachios, if liked. ■

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Petra Ecclestone **Continued from page 25**

The biggest problem when you are a multimillionaire is working out if people like you for yourself – or for your money. Petra Ecclestone, the daughter of the former Formula 1 supremo, Bernie, sometimes teases her second husband, Sam Palmer, about his motives for marrying her. "I always say, 'You can't be that good an actor.' Unless he's Brad Pitt and is going to get an Oscar for all this. I think he'd rather be poor than put on a charade just for the money. At least he'd get a good night's sleep rather than helping raise [someone else's] three kids."

On the day we meet, it is Palmer's 41st birthday and she has posted a loving message to him on Instagram. "You are the best husband and father and I am so lucky to have you in my life... I am forever grateful to you for the love you showed me when I needed it most."

Palmer writes back, with a laughing emoji. "Thank you, baby. But does this big show of emotion mean you're cheating on me?"

Until Ecclestone, 35, met Palmer, she seemed unreachable and unrelatable, a remote heiress living in impossible luxury, enjoying a life of immense privilege but, like a good *Dynasty* plot, frequently punctured by the melodrama that seems to accompany the very wealthy: robberies and burglaries, a relative kidnapped and threatened with decapitation, an arson attack on one of her homes. At the age of eight, she came downstairs in the family's mansion in Chelsea, southwest London, to find blood on the front doorstep. Her father and mother, the Croatian model Slavica Radic, had been mugged and her father rushed to hospital with head wounds. "That stays with you," Ecclestone says. "I still don't sleep well at night."

Drama struck in other ways too. When she was 14, she nearly died of meningitis, saved by her father racing like an F1 driver to hospital. Her parents divorced when she was 18. Her mother was awarded about £740 million and Bernie went on to marry Fabiana Flosi, 46 years his junior. Now 93, he has a 3-year-old son, Ace. "He's always done it his way," Ecclestone says.

Along with her older sister, Tamara, she floated through early adulthood dripping in bling, with Barbie doll eyelashes, leonine mane and tottering heels, photographed emerging from exclusive venues in Rich People Places such as Monaco and Gstaad. "Don't get me started on Gstaad, please," groans Palmer, sinking his head into his hands, "I can't even talk about it. It's the worst place I've been in my whole life."

The soap opera continued when she reached adulthood. At 22, she married the gold bullion dealer James Stunt in Rome in a £12 million wedding that even her father deemed *de trop*. They moved to Los Angeles, where she dropped $85 million on the largest house available, a 123-room mansion in Beverly Hills known as the Manor. With three children soon in tow (Lavinia, now 11, and twins Andrew and James, aged 9), the Stunts cruised around town in a fleet of luxury cars with personalised number plates, managing to look excessive even in a city that specialises in excess.

With her father and sister Tamara, right

The marriage unravelled acrimoniously, amid stories of his cocaine abuse and violence, denied by Stunt, who is about to face a retrial on a money laundering charge, which he also denies. "To be honest," Palmer says, "I just see him as a..." He pauses, searching for the right phrase. An unhappy soul? Palmer snorts derisively. "I see him as a complete f***ing loser who has never worked a day in his life and has lived off his dad and Petra. He's a drugged-up idiot and a big spoilt brat and hasn't got a brain cell in him."

There is never a dull moment chez Ecclestone and I am not quite sure what to expect when my Uber pulls up to the forbidding-looking property in Brentwood, Los Angeles. The walls are high. Cameras monitor every move inside and outside the property. "You feel you can't even scratch your nose," confides one staff member later. As I get out of the car, a side gate swings open and a disembodied voice greets me. One of Ecclestone's security team ushers me in, but, instead of taking me to the main entrance, he leads me down a side road to a sort of reception bunker under the house, where I am asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement.

"You're going to go right to that iPad and follow the instructions," he says. "No" doesn't seem to be an available response, but I balk politely at this. Ecclestone's personal assistant, Derrick, who used to work for Robbie Williams, steps forward. There is not much point in me being here if I cannot disclose anything, I explain. He agrees. Word comes back from the main house. "OK. Petra says you don't have to sign it."

She has downsized since the Stunt years, but her new house – complete with gym, sauna and home cinema – does not disappoint. I am led up the steps into a hall so large and bright it boasts indoor trees. Two butlers attend to everyone's needs while other staff in black and white uniforms bustle about the rooms that radiate off the hallway. Everything is organised with military precision. Baskets with gold labels even mark the boys' soccer boots by the front door. Absurdly cute dogs with names such as Chanel lounge everywhere you look. A tiny Yorkie, its hair dyed electric pink, yawns from the sofa. A striking artwork, a supersized iris of an eye by Mark Quinn, dominates the sweeping stairway. It seems to watch me even when the staff and cameras don't.

I am instructed to wait in one of several sitting rooms, where I have time to clock that many items – candles, matchboxes, pens etc – have the house address printed on them, as you might find in a grand hotel. A blue Porsche glides up to the front door and Palmer steps out. As he enters the house, a member of staff approaches the car to vacuum the immaculate interior and place a fresh packet of cigarettes in the console.

After a few minutes, Ecclestone appears. She is wearing the LA uniform of

With her ex-husband, James Stunt, in 2010

With husband Sam Palmer, 2018

‘My ex-husband didn’t allow me to have my own voice. He and Sam are opposites’

Lululemon exercise leggings and a hoodie. Barefoot and devoid of jewellery or make-up, she is less Alexis Colby and more girl next door. She frets that the sun might be in my eyes and offers me a coffee. “Don’t worry,” she says, sensing that I don’t want to put her to the trouble, “it wouldn’t be me making it.” A few minutes later one of her staff appears with a perfect cappuccino on a tray with a golden spoon. Ecclestone drinks sparkling water from a bottle, popping the occasional multivitamin.

Minnie drapes herself across Ecclestone’s lap. “My tummy hurts,” she whispers. “Why don’t you lie down?” Ecclestone suggests gently, patting the sofa next to her. “She doesn’t leave my side,” she says. “I don’t know why she finds me so entertaining because I’m not.”

In fact Ecclestone is quite entertaining. She has a dry sense of humour that she is happy to use at her own expense. Or at the expense of Palmer, who joins us for some of the interview. A car salesman turned luxury property dealer, he tells me about his career. “It’s funny,” he says. “I sell houses but I’ve never actually owned one. I’ve rented my whole life. Do I wish I had bought a house? Yes, I do. It was a major mistake of mine.”

“It turned out just fine,” Ecclestone says.

“It did,” agrees Palmer, who reminds me of Jamie Oliver. He has the same affable swagger and Essex patter, dropping his h’s and outspoken about everything. He switches into estate agent mode. “This is a 13,500sq ft house on half an acre,” he says, gesturing towards a landscaped garden, studded with olive trees and ending in a swimming pool, a football pitch and a tree house. He has plans to add a padel court. “It’s basically Sam’s sporting emporium,” Ecclestone says.

The Manor, where they first lived together, was, says Palmer, “56,000sq ft on 4 acres. It was 1,500sq ft bigger than the White House – to give you an idea of how big that is.” It had previously belonged to the film producer Aaron Spelling and even had a gift wrapping room. “We had fun there, didn’t we?” says Palmer, reaching a hand across to Ecclestone. “But it doesn’t matter how big your house is. You can only watch one TV show on one TV. That’s my outlook on it. Money doesn’t bother me, really. If I had to go back to living in a one-bedroom flat tomorrow, it wouldn’t change my life in any way, shape or form. There’s more to life than living in a big house, let me tell you.”

He points out that he was not exactly living in poverty before meeting Ecclestone seven years ago. “People think Petra plucked me out of an orphanage and saved my life. It makes me laugh. I had a fantastic life [before] as well. I grew up in a lovely house, went on holidays every year. Then I lived in Australia for seven years. I was earning fantastic money, flying business or first class wherever I wanted. My life hasn’t changed much.”

Ecclestone’s life, however, has changed considerably since meeting Palmer. “You’ve definitely started coming out of your shell,” Palmer says. She posts frequent updates on social media and even has a chatty podcast with him, *PS Say Cheese* (a nod to the tabloids, which often say she looks miserable). “You’d never have done that a few years ago.”

“I don’t know if I chose not to or my ex-husband didn’t really allow me to,” muses Ecclestone. “He didn’t allow me to have my own voice. [He and Palmer] are like polar opposites. I obviously don’t have a type.”

“I’ve got a work ethic actually,” Palmer says pointedly.

“It’s been an uneventful week,” announces Palmer unpromisingly at the beginning of a typical episode of their podcast. But somehow it works. They bicker and banter away, recounting trivia from their day. “I got called obnoxious by some tart in the paper,” Palmer says. “I don’t know who that woman is, but she got me spot on. So, well done.”

“She knows you well,” agrees Ecclestone.

Palmer teases his wife about her wealthy background. When she says how much she liked sports as a child, he asks, “Did you have your butler throw the ball for you?”

“No!” Ecclestone says, mock offended. “We didn’t have a butler.”

Despite their wealth, her mother insisted on doing most of the household chores herself. “She would do the cleaning and my dad would dry the plates, so there was a sense of normality,” Ecclestone says. Both her parents were brought up in relative poverty. Her mother was born in a small town in Bosnia where her grandmother ran a fruit and vegetable stall. Bernie is the son of a Suffolk fisherman and every inch the self-made man. “He knows every penny counts,” Ecclestone says. “I guess that’s why he’s so successful. I remember him bargaining for a jacket in a store in Sloane Street. I was like, ‘There’s a price tag. I don’t think we’re in a position to be asking for a discount.’” Did he get the discount? “No,” Ecclestone says. “So he walked away.”

Ecclestone does not need to work, but says she shares something of her father’s industriousness. “I know that anything I achieve will never be close to anything my dad’s done. He’s come from nowhere and done it all himself. I had all the resources – the best schools, the social networks. I’m well aware of that. I just get bored not being creative. And I want my kids to see I am trying to do something.”

She has set up a series of companies – first a menswear label, Form, then a handbag company called Stark, which made handbags out of python and alligator skin. Both folded. Then she ➡

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threw herself into a more philanthropic project, Petra's Place, an early-intervention centre for children with autism and related conditions, partly because Lavinia experienced some developmental issues. That also folded. "I got slated for that," Ecclestone says. "It just didn't work out." "What people don't realise," Palmer says, "is Petra put absolutely millions into it."

Her latest venture is Crickle Daisy, a beauty/skincare/clothing line (motto: "Where lifestyle meets fun"), aimed at teenage girls. "Lavinia was using my products, which really weren't good for [young skin]. I used to do the same with my mum's Yves Saint Laurent products. I would put them all over my face when she wasn't looking. I thought, why can't I do something for the next generation?"

"I've got to say she's shocked me," Palmer says. "I was very critical. I just thought it was a hard industry to break into, but she's proved us all wrong. Because she's doing a fantastic job, working day and night, on the phone to manufacturers, and we've all been zero help to her."

Although they have lived in Los Angeles for many years, they also have a property in London, an 18th-century Georgian mansion in Chelsea. "I miss my friends and family," Ecclestone says. "But it's just more calm here. I like the slower pace, the early nights, the outdoor activities, the sunshine. And I feel less judged. The hard part is that we don't have great friends. I haven't really clicked with anyone. They just flake a lot. Everything is so surface. Sam meets more people. He's a lot more outgoing and friendly."

Does she feel lonely? "I have Sam and I speak to my sister about 100 times a day."

Ecclestone says she notices the way people's attitude towards her changes when they hear her surname. "I'm so used to it I find it funny. Whereas Sam, when we first met, was taken aback by it. People always have some sort of proposition or something that they want out of us. Sam's like, 'They're being fake.'"

"Takers," Palmer says. "I'll say straight away, 'This is a leech. Get rid of them,' but the problem is, she doesn't say no."

"I've got a name," Ecclestone says. "I'm not 'she'."

She would never use her husband's surname. "I changed my surname once, in my first marriage, and I vowed never to do that again. And I'm proud of my dad."

Father and daughter remain close. "He rings every day," says Palmer, a great admirer of his father-in-law, who took Formula 1 from a niche competition to a global sensation before being removed from the top job after a takeover in 2017. "Her dad should be a national institution. He should be paraded everywhere he goes. He saved Formula 1, but you'd never think he created anything. He doesn't talk about it."

LEIGH KELLY

'I changed my surname in my first marriage. I vowed never to do it again'

"He doesn't talk highly of himself," Ecclestone says.

Palmer has made Ecclestone much more aware of money and nags her to turn off the heating and the lights. "He's always saying, 'Do you know how much the heat's going to cost?' I hate a cold house. He tries to make me more money... What's the word?" "Conscious," Palmer says. "More money conscious. She says I'm tight, but I hate waste." Ecclestone says she has dialled down her spending since meeting Palmer. "I do my best not to stand out. I try not to drive around in an orange Lamborghini with a yellow Rolex."

Is that something she used to do? "No. But my ex-husband did and, sadly, I had to be seen in the car."

Palmer teases Ecclestone about her overparenting. "If she's away from the kids for more than three minutes she thinks they're going to blow up. It drives me mad. They wait for her to put them in the bath and wash their hair like newborn babies."

Ecclestone laughs. "If Sam did it, they'd be rolled up in toilet paper and upside down somewhere."

Minnie sleeps in their bed every night and the others usually climb in too. "I hate it," Palmer says. "I'm such a light sleeper, so everything wakes me up."

Later, Ecclestone shows me upstairs. The master bedroom is the size of a large apartment, with a bed so big that superking does not come close to describing it. "It's custom made," Ecclestone says as Minnie dives into the middle of it. A bright pink painting – with the word "Love" – hangs on a wall above photographs of their 2022 wedding. The walls of her dressing room are lined with Hermès bags, and racks of designer clothes are colour co-ordinated. "I'm obsessed with organisation," she says.

She has learnt to be cautious. "I don't really expect much of people. I don't know if it's a sad way to be, but then you don't get hurt when you get let down. I went through a really tough time with my ex-husband."

For many years, despite their difficulties, she stood by Stunt. "I really didn't believe in divorce, but at the end of the day you have to put your kids first. I'm grateful I was able to leave – only because of the money that my dad made – unlike other women who have to stay and live in complete misery."

She met Palmer through her sister Tamara's husband, Jay Rutland. "I found someone who made me laugh and happy again. He's extremely selfless. I guess I fell in love with him because I saw how he is with my children."

He is, however, an acquired taste. "People either love him or hate him because he says it as it is. You never meet someone as honest and direct as Sam."

Palmer chuckles. "Someone from the Mail called me for an exclusive on a big property release in Santa Barbara. I said, 'You wrote an article yesterday slagging me off. Do you honestly think I'm going to talk to you?' They're like, 'No, we're the property section.' I said, 'Well, speak to your showbiz editor and tell him I said, "F*** off,"' and just put the phone down."

It is time to leave. They are going to a birthday party for Minnie's best friend. "It's a family dinner and she won't go if I don't go," Ecclestone says. As they climb into a discreet steel-grey Jeep (Ecclestone's new toned-down car), one of the staff runs out with two large gifts, beautifully wrapped in pink paper with ribbons, to take to the party. What are the gifts, I ask Ecclestone. "I don't know," she says, putting them in the car. It is a detail that stays with me. She may not have a gift wrapping room any more, but she still seems to inhabit a different universe. ■

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SHOOT TO KILL

The Spanish politician, the Iranian assassination attempt, the British expat, the Dutch mafia – and the hitman for hire

Alejo Vidal-Quadras, a longtime supporter of the Iranian opposition, tells Larisa Brown how he survived being shot in the head on a Madrid street last year and why he believes renegade states are now outsourcing murder

Alejo Vidal-Quadras's first press conference since the assassination attempt, in Madrid in February

As a "protected person of high risk", Alejo Vidal-Quadras has several Metropolitan Police officers guarding the London hotel suite when we meet. But it is his wife, Amparo, who makes him feel safe. "The fact I travel with my wife is very necessary," the 79-year-old says, adding that ever since he was the target of an assassination attempt several months ago, Amparo has been by his side during his international travels.

This two-day visit to London is important because he is seeing some parliamentarians and his "friends in the Iranian resistance" to discuss his case. A security team met him as soon as he landed at the airport.

"If I am being watched now by the regime, I don't know. This protection is because this terrorist regime must be, I guess, very much disappointed and frustrated because I wasn't killed. One never knows if they can try it again, eh?" he says. There is an uncomfortable silence as those in the room – other members of the Iranian opposition – appear to contemplate the prospect of a second attack. "My wife is a great help," he quips, lightening the mood.

Vidal-Quadras, a long-time supporter of the Iranian opposition, speaks with a raspy voice because the bullet that ripped through the right side of his jaw and out the left was so hot it burnt his throat. He is apologetic as he asks me to speak slowly and loudly, because he has lost 40 per cent of his hearing as a result of the attack. He looks remarkably well for a man who was placed in an induced coma after reconstructive surgery. He now has metal plates holding his jaw together.

Amparo, with her jet-black hair and piercing dark eyes, draws up a list of those arrested or wanted in connection with the attack while occasionally muttering reminders in her husband's ear. They have three children – two girls, one boy – the youngest of whom is 20. We joke about whether she is trained in martial arts but the rest of the conversation is deadly serious.

It involves a highly sophisticated espionage operation, a notorious Moroccan crime gang wreaking havoc across Europe and a man they call a "born killer".

Vidal-Quadras believes it was Iran that set out to kill him on November 9 last year as he returned home from a walk in the park around lunchtime. He was 30 metres from his apartment in the wealthy Salamanca neighbourhood – known for its footballers and celebrities – in the centre of Madrid when a man called out, "*Hola, señor*," making him turn round. He was shot at close range with a 9mm Parabellum pistol, so named after the Latin phrase *Si vis pacem, para bellum* – "If you want peace, prepare for war." The bullet shattered his jaw and narrowly missed his neck and brain. "The police told me that the intention was to shoot me in the neck. Because there are two lethal shots: one to the head, of course, and the other in the neck. Then there was the miracle," he says.

The scene of the attack in Madrid, November 9, 2023

The bullet missed his neck and went through his jaw instead. Blood splattered onto the pavement. A passerby used his jacket to stem the bleeding. "If I had been alone, I would have died because of the bleeding," Vidal-Quadras says. The hitman, described by eyewitnesses as a young man, about 5ft 9in tall and dressed in jeans and a blue jacket, fled on a scooter.

Two hours later, at 3.39pm, the vehicle's charred remains were found on an industrial estate half an hour away from the scene of the shooting. The police managed to recover the number plate, leading to multiple arrests. Amparo interrupts. Vidal-Quadras has said too much and she is worried it could interfere with the investigation. He doesn't finish the sentence. He has been privy to little information because the investigation has been declared "secret" by the judicial system, he adds.

Five people have so far been arrested as part of the investigation, but the suspected gunman – Mehrez Ayari, a 37-year-old French national of Tunisian origin who has several previous convictions in France – remains at large. There is an international manhunt under way for him spanning Libya, Tunisia and Morocco.

This chain of events all started for Vidal-Quadras in 1999 when he arrived at the European parliament as a member of the conservative People's Party (PP). "It is a long story," he says when asked how he became involved in Iranian affairs, although he is more than happy to tell it. Back then, Vidal-Quadras, a Catalonian who was born in Barcelona, knew little about Iran or its domestic politics. He was approached by Paulo Casaca, a Portuguese socialist, who invited him to join a group called Friends of a Free Iran. Casaca had noticed Vidal-Quadras's interest in human rights cases linked to Spain and thought he was a good match.

It didn't take long for Vidal-Quadras to be introduced to key figures in the Iranian opposition, including Maryam Rajavi, president-elect of the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) – a broad coalition of democratic Iranian organisations, groups and personalities that considers itself a parliament in exile. The fact it has chosen a woman as its president-elect for the transitional period after the fall of the clerical regime is significant. One of Rajavi's sisters, Narges, was killed by the Shah's secret police in 1975. Her other sister, Massoumeh, an industrial engineering student, was arrested by the Khomeini regime in 1982. Pregnant at the time, she was tortured and hanged. Her husband was executed too. Vidal-Quadras was moved by Rajavi's story. He wanted to help.

"At the end I got very involved to the

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Vidal-Quadras at his February press conference

British expat Sasha Brooks, among those arrested

‘Once commanders sent people from Iran. Now they pay mafias to do the job’

point that nowadays I have the privilege to be enemy No 1 of the regime,” he says, leading to nervous laughter in the room.

As his interest in Iran grew, so too did his political influence. He went on to become vice-president of the European parliament between 2009 and 2014 before co-founding the far-right Vox party.

Such was his prominence in Iranian affairs that in 2022 the Iranian foreign ministry slapped sanctions on him. Vidal-Quadras hands me a list of those sanctioned across the table, with his name – at the very top – highlighted in yellow. He and others on the list were accused of “deliberate acts to support terrorism” among many other things. “They wanted to scare us,” he says. Yet he persisted in his campaigning for a better future for Iranians.

Then came the assassination attempt. In the days after the shooting, three people were arrested, one in Fuengirola near Malaga and a couple identified as Naraya Gomez and his girlfriend, Sasha Brooks, a British expat in her twenties, who were detained at one of two properties they shared in Lanjaron, an Andalusian spa town on the southern slopes of Spain’s Sierra Nevada, near Granada.

Residents described the arrests as “like something from a movie”, with masked police seen searching the property for three days, removing boxes and suitcases from the house. Brooks, with long, wavy, dark brown hair and several tattoos, was described by those who knew her as beautiful, popular and “very vibrant and fashionable”. She was the type of woman “you could see hanging out at fashion shows or boutique hotels, not taking part in acts of terror”, one local British expat told The Sun.

Gomez was apparently brought up by his father, Sirio, in a “hippy-style commune” after his mother died in childbirth. Locals painted a picture of his father as a poor man who taught yoga and his son as a well-dressed, polite individual who “had a love for the finer things in life, like travel and high-end cars”. Sirio told reporters he was a “good boy, a vegetarian, spiritual and a pacifist”. Social media accounts belonging to the couple showed recent trips to London and Ibiza, with Sasha photographed in a bikini on a yacht while sipping champagne.

Vidal-Quadras’s interest was piqued when police sources claimed Gomez was suspected of converting to Islam last year. They said he followed a Shia belief system led by the clerics of Iran. Yet Gomez’s father disputed the claims.

The couple appeared in court along with the third suspect, named locally as Adrian Ruiz Blanco, 22, in November.

Without officially identifying the suspects, Spain’s National Police said in a statement at the time that the detainees were accused of “attempted assassination for terrorist purposes”. They said they were suspected of providing the perpetrator of the crime with the “logistical support needed to carry out the terrorist act”.

“During the investigation it was also shown the attack on Alejo Vidal-Quadras was prepared meticulously for weeks before the day he was shot,” the statement read. Vidal-Quadras had been put under surveillance, and planning meetings for the attack had taken place in different parts of Spain. Blanco and Brooks were released on conditional bail and Gomez was remanded in prison.

Gomez, 26, is understood to be accused of hiring the contract killer, Ayari, before travelling with him to a hotel in Madrid on the eve of the attack. According to the police, Gomez followed Ayari in his car on the day of the shooting.

Gomez’s blue hire car was spotted on CCTV in Barrio Salamanca in Madrid in the weeks leading up to the attack, supposedly tracking Vidal-Quadras. When the same car was found illegally parked in Lanjaron later in November, the couple were arrested.

The case took a further twist in January this year when investigators were alerted to a Venezuelan man named Greg Oliver Higuera Marcano. He was tracked down to Colombia, to where he allegedly had fled after learning that the Spanish authorities were looking for him. It was reported that as he tried to enter Colombia, the immigration police checked his background and saw there had been a red alert notice issued for him. According to the Colombian immigration service, Interpol had issued the alert for suspected terrorism offences. It is believed that Marcano is in the process of being extradited back to Spain so that he can face trial in Madrid.

In April this year there appeared to be a further breakthrough as a Dutch woman, believed to be of Moroccan origin, was arrested in relation to the shooting. The woman was detained in the Netherlands after Spain issued a European arrest warrant for her “alleged participation in the financing and preparation of the attack”.

Vidal-Quadras says he was followed for weeks as those involved tried to establish his routine ahead of the attack. “It was a very sophisticated, well-prepared attack. It took time to organise it,” he says.

The focus now is on locating the suspected gunman and trying to ascertain who ordered the assassination and why. For Vidal-Quadras, the answer is clear: the Iranian regime.

The Spanish newspaper El Mundo points the finger at the Dutch “Mocro mafia”, a reference to the Moroccan or immigrant origins of powerful drug-smuggling networks. The gangsters are barely on the radar of British police and security agencies, but in Europe they are well known.

Dr Teun Voeten, an anthropologist specialising in organised crime, tells me these criminals are “completely ➨

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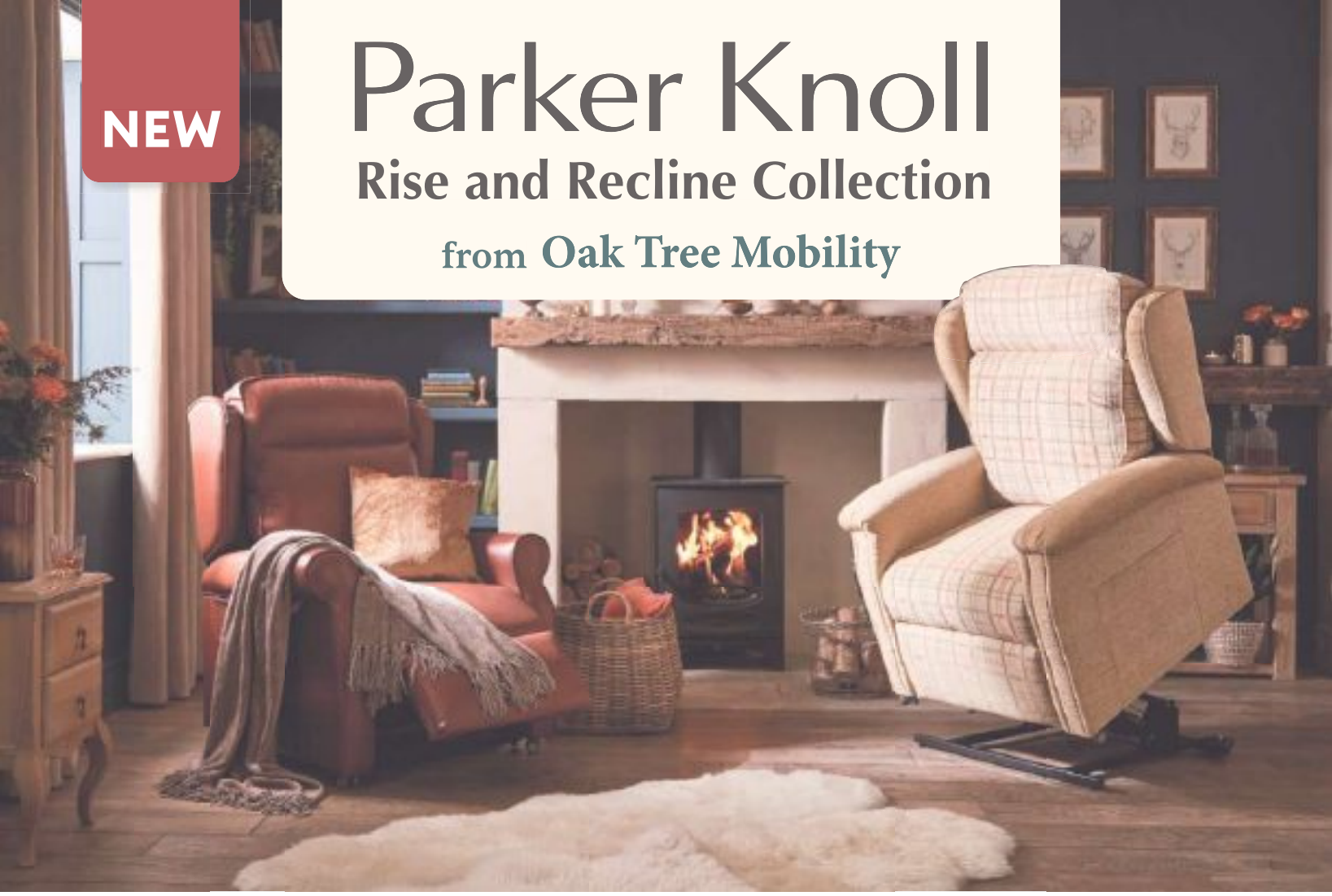

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ruthless" and known for their extreme violence. "They have ordered many contract killings and executions," he says. His words are chilling.

In February, Ridouan Taghi, the leader of the drugs cartel, was sentenced to life for his part in a murderous campaign in the Netherlands, which prosecutors called a "well-oiled killing machine". Labelled the drug kingpin of Europe, Taghi was convicted of five murders. Yet even as he was locked up in a maximum security isolation cell in the country's toughest jail, he appeared to be acting from inside with impunity, ordering the elimination of people connected to a key witness against him.

"We are talking about ruthless, disruptive violence in which human life is worthless," said the judge delivering the verdict. "[Taghi] decided who would be killed and spared no one. The amount of suffering he caused is hard to imagine."

A US Drug Enforcement Administration document leaked in 2019 identified Taghi as one of the leaders of a "super-cartel" alongside Irish, Italian and Bosnian mafia bosses thought to control a third of the cocaine trade in Europe.

Voeten says Taghi had travelled to Iran a couple of times in recent years and had "good connections with the Iranian regime". He believes it is "very well possible" that the cases are linked. "If they can make money in coke or contract killings, they do it. They are just in it for the profits. Wherever they can make money, they make money," he says, suggesting the gangsters would have no problem in switching their work to contract killings for the Iranian regime.

Vidal-Quadras is convinced Iran contracted the gangsters to carry out the hit last year as part of its latest modus operandi. One of the group's leaders is thought to have identified Ayari as a suitable candidate to assassinate Vidal-Quadras given his dark criminal past. He had earned the nickname "the Stoner" after allegedly stoning a confidant to death, and those familiar with his background described him as a "born killer" with a predisposition towards violence. If the links are proved, the attempted murder of Vidal-Quadras might be the first targeted killing by the Mocro mafia in Spain that is unrelated to internal disputes.

"In the past, the commanders sent [people] from Iran... Now they have changed methods. They pay mafias to do the job," Vidal-Quadras says.

Rather than just target Iranian dissidents, he is sure they are going after politicians who dare criticise the regime. "They are scaling up their attacks. Before, you could say this is a fight between Iranians; now they are trying to kill western political figures," he adds,

Vidal-Quadras at a rally in Madrid in March

GETTY IMAGES

'The more the West tries to appease Iran, the more aggressive they get'

referencing a plot to kill former Trump national security adviser John Bolton in 2021. The plot, one of the best-documented alleged assassination efforts, was part of what US prosecutors and former government officials described as efforts by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IGRC) to eliminate those behind an airstrike that killed the head of the guard's elite Quds Force, Qassem Soleimani, in 2020.

According to Spanish police sources speaking to Vidal-Quadras, Ayari has two brothers, one of whom is in prison in France and the other is subject to an arrest warrant in Belgium. "All of them have long penal records dating from a young age for drug trafficking, theft and assassination," he says. He believes one of Ayari's brothers is "classed as a very dangerous criminal" who has already carried out work for the Iranian regime, although he doesn't back up the claim with evidence. He is adamant "there are many signals" that point the finger towards Iran.

A British security source wouldn't be surprised if Iran was using a group like the Mocro mafia to carry out its killings.

"We've been saying for a while that the Iranians use organised crime networks to carry out attacks and to give them plausible deniability. They seem to use a range of criminal gangs rather than rely on any one group," the source says.

They explain that assassination jobs also sometimes get passed around criminal gangs. "You might start off with one and it might get subcontracted to someone else," they add.

More recently, security agencies in the UK have become increasingly concerned that Russia has adopted Iran's techniques by paying foreign criminal groups or gangsters to carry out surveillance operations,

By paying proxy groups rather than using their own agents, the countries have a degree of deniability. In the case of Russia, the proxy groups are also able to fill a gap exposed after Britain expelled Russian intelligence officers from the UK following the Salisbury poisonings and Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

More recently, Dylan James Earl, a British man, was accused of espionage activity on behalf of Russia while arranging an arson attack on a business linked to Ukraine. It is alleged that Earl was taking instructions from the Wagner mercenary group, which has close ties to the Kremlin.

Also in the room with us is Vidal-Quadras's friend, the Iranian dissident Hossein Abedini. Like the Spaniard, he has spent the past four decades trying to expose the Iranian regime's brutal practices and human rights abuses. He also knows what it is like to be hunted. He has survived multiple attempts on his life – the first in March 1990 when an assassination squad shot him in the chest and abdomen after an ambush in Istanbul. Abedini is among a number of Iranian dissidents now living in London who have been contacted by counterterrorism police warning them of an increased risk of violence and kidnapping given spiralling events in the Middle East.

Potential targets were told that Tehran was using criminal proxies to carry out assassination attempts, death threats and other intimidation tactics. There were fears in MI5 and the police that Iran, emboldened by conflict sparked by the October 7 terror attack by Hamas in Israel, could ramp up its activity in the UK.

Earlier last year the same agencies accused Tehran of more than a dozen assassination and kidnap plots in Britain against dissidents and reporters during a two-year period.

In March, Pouria Zeraati, a prominent Iranian television journalist, was stabbed multiple times outside his London home. Within hours of the attack in broad daylight, the two perpetrators, along with a third suspect who drove their getaway car, had fled the country on a flight out of Heathrow.

Vidal-Quadras says that the West's policy in relation to the Islamic Republic during the past 40 years has been one of appeasement. "Appeasement, negotiations, dialogue and concessions," he says.

"It is a fact that this policy has failed. All these attacks, all these proxy militias in the Middle East, they practise war-mongering and terrorism and the more the West tries to appease them, the more aggressive they get."

Vidal-Quadras is determined to see Iran isolated internationally and financially strangled through more economic sanctions during his lifetime. ■

HOW MISS FRANCE TOOK ON THE TROLLS

When Eve Gilles was crowned Miss France in December, she was the first in the contest's history to have short hair – and the attacks she has received for her 'non-traditional' appearance have put her at the centre of the country's culture wars. Julia Llewellyn Smith meets the unexpected heroine of France's #MeToo movement

Eve Gilles, 20, photographed in Paris by Benjamin Decoin

Eve Gilles was a 16-year-old schoolgirl living in a small village outside Dunkirk in northern France when she had a light-hearted row with her mother. "My hair was very long and I was shedding all over the sofa," Gilles recalls. "Mum said, 'Why don't you cut it?' I said, 'OK, I will.' She said, 'I was joking – don't!' I said, 'Too late.' Two days later, I had it all cut off."

Having previously had hair that passed her bottom, Gilles emerged from the hairdressers with a pixie cut and a short, blunt fringe. "My father was shocked when he saw it," she says, "but I loved it. When I had long hair, I looked like a baby. But now I looked strong. I had passed from a girl into a woman."

Four years later, in December 2023, Gilles, by now a student at the University of Lille, was crowned Miss France. It sparked a national furore and – quite counterintuitively – made Gilles a heroine of the country's newly burgeoning #MeToo movement and the focus of its raging culture wars, with her triumph being called "a win for diversity".

The focus of the brouhaha was that short haircut. Gilles was the first Miss France in the contest's 103-year history not to have long, bouncy tresses. "There was once a finalist with short hair," she says, frowning. "Maybe in 1980? But she didn't win."

Many of her compatriots – to whom Miss France is a national institution; 7.5 million tuned in to watch the final, one of the biggest live audiences of the year – were outraged by her victory, complaining a short-haired Miss France was "not traditional".

"Is this a prank?" was typical of responses to her win on social media. "Do the people who voted for her have shit in their eyes?" was another.

Trolls also focused on Gilles' androgynous appearance, with hundreds flocking to her Instagram account to tell her how "ugly" she was. The contest's organisers were accused of pandering to political correctness and "wokeism" in picking a slim woman over her more curvy rivals. "Nothing but skin and bone" and "Flatter than a breadboard" were some of the more printable complaints.

The result, one user wrote on X, is a contest "no longer [based on] beauty... [but] on inclusiveness". TikTok videos suggested Gilles was transgender (the contest changed its rules last year to include transgender women, although none took part). "Miss France? Surely Mr France," one troll wrote. "Next year it'll be a bald man. It's wokery gone mad," another cried.

I meet Gilles in the Peninsula hotel in Paris, where she spent the night of her victory in the penthouse.

Heads turn when she walks into the grand dining room. Gilles is Disney princess pretty. Her haircut only serves to enhance her huge Bambi eyes and cheekbones like armrests.

Frankly, France couldn't have a better representative. Best of all for Miss France's organisers, aware it's unacceptable today for beauty queens merely to sob fetchingly in a bikini and gush about world peace, Gilles firmly ticks the brainy box, having completed the first year of a maths and computing degree at university. Her ambition? To become a statistician.

Now President Macron's government has seized on her credentials, naming her a maths "ambassador", working to encourage schoolgirls to embrace the subject. Action is needed – France's National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) recently published a report showing 75 per cent of boys studied maths in *lycée* (from the age of 15 to 18) compared with only 50 per cent of girls.

Gilles will spend this year living in a luxury Paris apartment near the Eiffel Tower that is loaned to Miss France. Highlights of 2024 will include carrying the Olympic torch at the Paris Games, but most days she's gamely travelling the length of France accompanied by two bodyguards, just in case, on her mission to push "her passion" to girls, who – just as they might worry that cutting their hair might make them "unfeminine" – might also avoid studying maths.

"I love maths, because I love a challenge and that's what maths is all about – you have to do one thing, then another, using numbers to solve the problems. And I want to encourage young people to feel that way too. All the time they say, 'Maths is difficult. We can't do it. We don't want to.' But when I ask them what their favourite subject is [now], they answer maths because I'm like an example to them." People or girls? "Girls and boys. But especially girls and that's why this really touches me. I don't know if it's a coincidence or not, but I've heard already this year 20 per cent more people than last year have enrolled into maths classes at university."

The other cause she promotes is tackling cyberbullying, in which – albeit inadvertently – she's become an expert. Many would have crumpled at the abuse Gilles faced. But the same strong will she showed in having her hair cut she's now showing in doubling down on her attackers.

"I am strong," she says. "When there's danger, I don't want to take a side road and dodge it. I will run straight towards it and see afterwards how it turns out."

The daughter of Bruno, a land surveyor, and Edith, who works as her husband's secretary, Gilles is the youngest of three sisters. The family always gathered to watch Miss France, for which the French go wild – for the Brits, the equivalent would be *Strictly Come Dancing*.

"Everyone watches and supports the girl from their region. I said to my parents, 'One day I want to be one of those girls.'"

Yet Gilles also had more sober aspirations. Initially she hoped to be a neurologist and took up a university place in medicine. But halfway through the first year she dropped out. "Because when I saw people vomiting in front of me, I wanted to vomit with them," she says with a giggle. "It wasn't for me."

In the gap before the next academic year began and she could start again studying maths, she worked for a few months in a factory putting egg cartons into crates for supermarkets, usually on the 9pm to 5am shift. How was that? "I was paid," she says with a grin.

Wanting to do something more exciting with her time off, she decided finally to give Miss France a shot, to discover that – even though in recent years organisers have relaxed rules that previously banned tattoos, mothers and women who were married or over the age of 24 from

At a Paris fashion show this January

'Miss France? Surely Mr France,' one troll wrote. 'Next year it will be a bald man'

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SIPA PRESS. THIS SPREAD: GETTY IMAGES

Being crowned by last year's winner, Indira Ampiot

taking part – there was still a minimum height requirement of 1.70m, or 5ft 7in.

"I was 1.697m. So I stretched myself." I'm sorry? "At university, I didn't sit very well and I had backache," she says, imitating someone hunched over a laptop. "So I did a lot of swimming, yoga – it made me more upright and in one month I went up 5mm. Now I'm up by 1-2cm."

Gilles won her local contest, proceeded then to capture the regional crown and made it to the national final, comprising a month of various "tasks" during which contestants were whittled down from 30 to 15 and then 5. Already, trolls were moaning on social media that she did not "fit the [Miss France] profile".

"The organisers said to me, 'Are you ready for this?' I was like, 'When I was young, I cared about what people thought about me but not now.'"

She was more shaken after comments flooded in about her appearance in a swimsuit photoshoot than when her hair was criticised. "I chose my hair. I didn't choose my body or metabolism [she's about 7st 5lb]. It was body shaming."

Contestants (unsurprisingly, they all got on famously) were whittled down by seven female judges. There was also a public vote, but that contributed to only one third of the final tally: hence accusations of "a fix".

At the final in a Dijon stadium packed with 5,000 people, Gilles – in a bridal white meringue – was crowned the winner. The backlash was immediate and furious. "I wasn't aware [of criticism] straight away because I didn't have my phone with me, but then friends started to tell me," she says. "It was like a tsunami coming up behind – you don't see it but you know it's right here. And sometimes it's been very difficult. I'm human and in the beginning especially it was very upsetting for my mother. But I got over it and when she saw that I was fine, she was fine too."

"[The abuse] is like a wave. It's stop, start, stop, start. I have to just let them do what they want to do, because if I focus on them I won't be focusing on what I want to do. In any case, according to them, no woman is good enough: your hair's too long or too short. Whether your eyes are blue or brown, there's always something that doesn't work. But you can't listen. You just have to seize your life."

Gilles is recognised constantly, even when a baseball cap covers her hair. But be it walking down the street or at public appearances where (no doubt aided by the controversy) she attracts huge adoring crowds, no one has ever said anything nasty to her face. "Nobody has the courage. People only say they love me."

I'm surprised that – despite the anger – virtually no mention was made of race, even though Gilles' mother comes from the French *départemente* of Réunion in the Indian Ocean and has Tamil ancestry. But then again, two of the public's top choices were Miss Guadeloupe and Miss French Guiana, both dark-skinned, as was last year's incumbent, Miss Guadeloupe, the difference being their abundant tresses and voluptuous figures.

"It's funny, one person tried to make a racist remark but it was drowned out by comments complaining about my hair," Gilles says with a broad grin. "Nobody noticed his comments in all the noise."

The controversy was particularly bewildering because France among all countries has always celebrated women who don't conform to all-American, Christie Brinkley blonde flowing locks standards. Colette, Coco Chanel, Arletty, Juliette Gréco, Leslie Caron – the list of French beauties with impish crops goes on and on.

Yet *le wokisme* is a concept that hugely exercises the French right, who regard any emphasis on diversity as an American import on the hate list alongside *le hamburger* and Disneyland Paris. They're antagonised by its perceived threat to the ineffable concept of "Frenchness". Despite their fondness for angry demonstrations and strikes, the French have always been about a decade behind other western countries' cultural shifts. Veganism is only just becoming acceptable, smoking took years longer to be outlawed and it's only recently been universally agreed that slapping children is not on. When the new director of the Paris Opera announced he wanted to diversify its staff and ban blackface, he was attacked both by the far-right leader Marine Le Pen and in the pages of left-wing Le Monde because he had worked in Toronto and had "soaked up American culture for ten years".

'No woman is good enough. You can't listen. You just have to seize your life'

Even Macron, who initially showed little interest in such debates, took a stand before the 2022 elections, which saw him in a run-off against Le Pen. Suddenly he began talking of "certain social science theories entirely imported from the United States".

Now many anti-wokeists are frothing at #MeToo, with the long-held glorification of the Frenchman's right to philander and drool over younger women suddenly under scrutiny. Having looked on disdainfully as the Harvey Weinstein crisis raged in Hollywood, cultural commentators haven't known how to respond to recent accusations of rape against the revered film star Gérard Depardieu (Macron responded by calling him a hero and saying he'd been the victim of a witch-hunt). Other actresses' allegations about rape and predatory behaviour by the likes of legendary directors such as Jacques Benoît, Jacques Doillon and François Truffaut have been met by some with applause but by many with grumbling about "cancel culture".

It's in this context that Gilles, symbol of the most patriarchal competition imaginable, has become a feminist heroine. Her defenders have included the likes of the Green MP Sandrine Rousseau, who wrote, "So in France, in 2023, we measure the progress of respect for women by the length of her hair?"

There are still some dissenting voices. "Miss France is still just as sexist in the way it classifies women according to beauty criteria," said a spokesperson for Osez le Féminisme! (Dare Feminism!), while another for the Human Rights League described Gilles' selection as "feminist washing".

Gilles has a trenchant reply. "Miss France gives a woman a chance to speak out on whatever she wants – for me it's cyberbullying and maths. Before I was a girl in a little village, working in a factory, that nobody cared about. Now for one year I have a voice and people listen to me. Everyone knows who Eve Gilles is. Next year I'll pass on the crown, like a fairy godmother, and another Miss France can speak about what she wants." ■

Eating out
Giles Coren

‘The cheese and onion pie was like Mrs Beeton’s best shot at making a giant Quaver’

TOM JACKSON

The Hero

I accidentally went to a softie for lunch yesterday, which I am not supposed to do when reviewing. I am supposed to wait until a restaurant is fully up and running and firing on all cylinders before I focus upon its finer workings the gimlet eye for which I am renowned in all four corners of the... Eh? What? A softie. You know, a “soft opening”, which is usually less than full prices, somewhat apologetic, lots of gaps on the menu, staff a bit all over the place, friends and family pissed on free hooch staggering about in the corridors. In short, not quite ready for review.

But to be fair to me (and I always am), I didn’t know it was a softie when I booked. In fact, I didn’t know it was a softie when I ate either. Or for a long time afterwards (it was ticking along nicely already, and more of a semi than a softie, I’d say). It was only just now, when I pulled out the menu I’d slipped into my pocket, to remind myself what I’d eaten, that I saw “Soft Opening” written at the top of it. By which time it was too late.

It had been an emergency, you see. Half-term was approaching and I had to file a review to tide me over. I initially thought I’d go to Julie’s, the famous 1970s brasserie in Holland Park, which is relaunching for the umpteenth time and sounded like good copy. Especially if I took my dear friend and colleague Camilla Long, the revered Sunday Times columnist and TV critic, with me.

Camilla forms her opinions entirely without fear, you see. Where I am timid, emollient, eager to please, Camilla is waspish, unforgiving, brutal. And I reckoned that the funny way to do Julie’s would be to hammer it. Which is something I am too nice to do. So I planned to put all the meanest words in Camilla’s mouth. Whether she had said them or not.

For my part, I would be even-handed and kind, giving Julie’s a bunch of 7/10s and making all sorts of encouraging noises, while slyly adding, “My friend Camilla says it’s done up like Katie Price’s dildo drawer and the chicken mousse tastes like it’s made out of her face – it’s the sort of place you bring the nanny on her birthday then make a pass at her under the table between poking at an overworked £90 starter and your next shot of Ozempic.” That sort of thing.

And when I emailed to suggest it, Camilla did not disappoint. “Perfect,” she replied. “See you there 1.15ish. It’s a sex restaurant, Giles.” Which Julie’s famously is. Or was. Note Camilla’s headmistressy use of my name at the end there. Like she would come, but I had better know what I was getting into. Gosh, I was excited.

But Julie’s isn’t open for business on Tuesdays, goddamit. And that was the only day she could do. So I asked my boss where else was new and good and

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he said the Hero in Maida Vale. Sure, it's a third opening from the highly impressive bunch behind the Pelican on All Saints Road and the Bull in Charlbury, but I am nothing if not a supporter of minichains. Minichains rock. They are all that stands between us and the total takeover of the major ones.

I should have guessed it was a softie when I walked in. Empty. Whereas at the Pelican and the Bull, you can't get a table till long after you're dead. Also, a liberal sprinkling of handsome young owners. And a relaxed, unflustered chortle at my appearance in the doorway. No interest in the fact that I had booked a table (on the phone, if you please, under the brilliantly deceptive pseudonym of Giles Long), just sit where you like and, oh look, here comes my old friend Joe Warwick to take my order, who, since taking a breather from journalism, now works in every new restaurant in London for its first few weeks, before trotting off down the road to the next one like the littlest hobo.

The Hero is magnificent to look at. Classic original gastro style. Everything pared down to the bare wood, dark, unvarnished, the metalwork and all the beer taps in that nutty, tarnished brass that evokes a steampunk tavern style of old London town in the 1830s that never truly existed until now. Or at least until 1994. But there is glorious light and air from the vast Victorian windows and the effect is even more gorgeous in the elegant first-floor dining room, with its black chairs and white linen cloths, roughly stripped floorboards, raw plaster, open grill kitchen and gleaming skies, which isn't up and running yet (and will have a completely different menu when it launches in a few weeks), and the cosy cocktail bar on the second floor, also waiting to open.

Something in the massiveness of the place, the ambition, the sleek dining and cocktail floors atop what I'm sure will be a screamingly successful pub, smelt to me of the Devonshire in Soho – the standout pub, restaurant and general catering success of last year. I'm not saying these boys would have copied it in any way; they're too good at their own thing. But I'd guess they've been along for the odd Guinness.

And there is Guinness here too, at the bottom of a chalked-up list featuring cask ales such as Allsopp's IPA and Deya Creek Life, plus draughts like the Deya Steady Rolling Man of which I had a cold, hazy, fruity pint while I selected a table opposite the bar, in front of some disused double doors with a semi-circular curtain rail above them (to keep out draughts on winter evenings when the doors are in use), which allowed me, after Camilla had arrived, and we had decided that this definitely wasn't a sex restaurant, to draw the vast curtain around our table with a single hoick, shielding us completely from the eyes of the room, and say, "OR IS IT?"

But it isn't. Definitely not. It's a food restaurant and a very good one. The menu is divided into "Snacks", "Soups & Salads" and "Mains" and we had a little crack at all three. My favourite of the first lot was the lamb ribs (£11): three flat, sticky bones roasted to a crispy chew and partial char with that crackle of peeling skin as your teeth pull and then the tang of ripe doner, rolled in a sticky, minty sauce. Perfect.

The cheese toastie (£8) was puffy bread full of orange cheese (red Leicester, mature cheddar and Ogleshield), golden brown, cut on the diagonal and stacked, sprinkled with sea salt and simply made for an ice-cold gavi di gavi on a warm city day. As were half a dozen sweet lobes of cod cheek (£9), battered and served with a curry sauce (more of a garam masala-scented mayo than a chip shop gravy) and a ball of tight, well-seasoned, meaty mackerel pâté (£8).

We had a big, cool, comfy salad of crisp Gem lettuce, smoked eel, bacon and grated parmesan (£14), a sort of sea-snake caesar, and then a cheese and onion pie (£14) of molten cheddar (plus Sparkenhoe red Leicester again and Colston Bassett Stilton) in crumbling, buttery pastry, like Mrs Beeton's best shot at making a giant Quaver, and an onglet and chips (£18), the steak blackened but rare, as is correct, chewy but loaded with flavour. And the slim, woody, partially skin-on chips were perfect.

It's all very pubby and at prices that you just don't see very often for this sort of quality in this part of town. There are sausage and mash (£13), ham, egg and chips (£16), shepherd's pie (£15), half a roast chicken with chips and salad for two (£32), and then a good treacle pudding (£8) and an almost vengefully sharp lemon tart (£8).

From this side of the review, I can see that by going so early, I not only caught the Hero with its pants down, vibe-wise, but I also caught only the pub menu, with the full à la carte upstairs still to come in a few weeks' time. But I think you should book anyway, if it's open by the time you read this. Because from what I've seen it's going to be good. Very good. It may even turn out to be **lowers his voice to a whisper** a sex restaurant. ■

(After writing, I emailed Joe to check a few things and he told me that the soft had actually ended a couple of days before I went in, and that was just a typo on the menu. Which is just the sort of error, ironically, that I would have forgiven in the soft, but absolutely cannot now.)

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Beta male
Robert Crampton

‘Never thought I’d be a pink suit kinda guy. How wrong can you be? Watch out, it’s the new me’

DAN KENNEDY

Back from the big Greek wedding in Corfu, Rhiannon and Nondas duly hitched, as previewed last week. Rhi’s mum and dad are old friends. So, come to that, is Rhi – we’ve known her since the turn of the century, when she was ten, sharing holidays in Pembrokeshire every August. When she was 17 and I was old enough to know better, the two of us took over the hotel bar at midnight, the actual barman having gone to bed. A big night, that.

Rhiannon lived around the corner from us during lockdown, a surrogate daughter while my actual daughter, Rachel, was away at university. One morning the four of us were having breakfast, Rhiannon in the seat usually occupied by Rachel, to whom we sent a photograph of the happy scene. “OK,” came the reply, “what is going on?”

Anyway, everything went off splendidly, Corfu nuptials-wise, especially the superbly camp, utterly unintelligible service in the Greek Orthodox faith, complete with lots of Bible-kissing and circumnavigations of the altar. My suit (dusty pink, M&S, a steal at £130) went down well. My smart shoes, however, threatened to let me down outside the Holy Metropolitan Church of the Virgin Mary Spilaiotissa, Saint Blaise and Saint Theodora Augusta, marble steps shined by centuries of the devout. Once those steps had been covered with the rice showered over the happy couple post-ceremony, they turned into a skating rink.

“Why are you walking like a man with only hours to live?” asked my wife, supportive as ever, as I gingerly made my descent, Rachel gallantly clutching my arm. Photos all done, I sank into a chair in the square, easing back into my trainers. Bliss. Several other men my age were doing likewise. Young man’s game, posh footwear. We older chaps are with Joe Biden and his massive snowshoe platform sneakers.

There was a tricky culture-clash moment at the reception when the Greek dancing got going. The British contingent tried its best to be respectful, but there were moments when some of us were close to treating the intricately rotating circle routine as an Ionian version of the hokey cokey. I reined myself in, remembering our hosts were engaged in a solemn ritual, not a drunken knees-up at Butlin’s.

Once local custom had been honoured, we Brits responded with our own hallowed folk tradition. Yep, *Dancing Queen*, then straight into *Ladies Night*. Much cavorting, serious shapes thrown – the bride never looked more radiant.

But enough about her. Back to my suit. You think I’m going to leave the fact of my wearing a pink suit – in public, not for a bet, just: yeah, it’s a pink suit, what’s yer point? – at one passing mention in the third paragraph? Think again!

The thing is, I felt great in that pink suit. Really great. Many people were kind enough to say the suit, er, suited me very well. And this feels like a significant moment. A progression. A liberation. I’ve always been a strictly black, brown and navy man. Nothing bright, nothing vibrant, nothing pastel. I never imagined the day when I might wear a pink suit.

I remember my pal Alan coming back from the Gambia in 1993, wearing a pink suit he’d got run up there for 50 quid. I thought Al looked tremendous. And at my mate Mikey’s wedding in 2008, when Mikey’s friend Keith Allen – the actor, Lily’s dad – also wore a pink suit, I thought Keith looked pretty damned tremendous too. I was, I admit, jealous of both men, pink-suited as they were.

But me? Nah. Not going to happen. I was not a pink suit kinda guy. I would wear a suit if convention or self-interest absolutely demanded formality, as in hatch, match, dispatch ceremonials, job interviews or meeting serving government ministers in a professional capacity. But colour? Costume? Creativity? No way!

That was my self-image, my patrimony, my inheritance. Take me as you find me. Good manners? Always. Good clothes? Not so much. Even when “good” might mean merely £130 off the peg from M&S. And as for fancy gear – like, for instance, something pink – no, that would be at best an affectation, at worst an abomination. A decadent Cavalier abomination for a cradle Roundhead such as me.

One of the great compensations of getting older, however, is that at some point, for good or ill, you realise these anxieties and stereotypes and self-imposed limitations are... how shall I put this? Utter bollocks. I think that does the job. You stop caring what other people might think and focus on what makes you feel good. I don’t mean other people as in friends, colleagues or strangers, I mean relatives. Your tribe, your folk, your lot. Dead or alive. Preachers and teachers, in my case.

Sod ’em. That was then, this is now.

I have been missing out. My palette is set to expand. ■

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