

THE  TIMES

MAGAZINE

29.06.24

MAN UP!

No libido, no problemo: inside the testosterone clinic

'THE CLOCK IS TICKING. I WANT A BABY BUT WORK CALLS'

Nicole Scherzinger
What I've learnt at 46
By Andrew Billen

CAITLIN MORAN
All the prime ministers I have known



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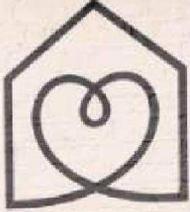
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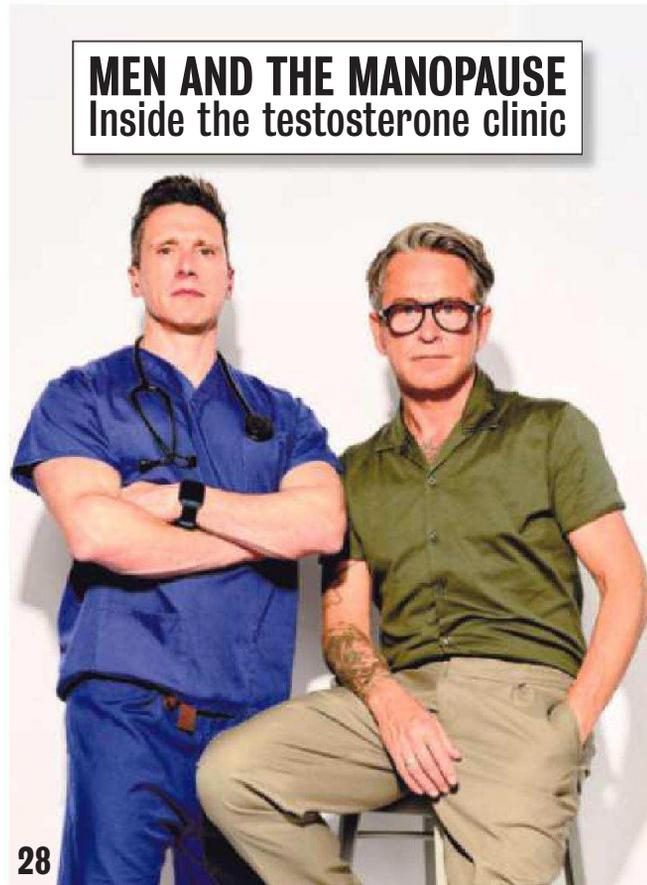
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COVER: ROBERT WILSON. THIS PAGE: EVA PENTEL, TIM JOBLING

CHOSEN BY MONIQUE RIVALLAND

‘LET’S JUST SAY, MY INTERACTIONS WITH POLITICIANS HAVE RARELY ENDED WELL’

Our columnist up close with prime ministers and several wannabes

It’s the general election next week, which I presume by now you know. They’ve not really kept it a secret.

Depending on your level of political nerdery, you may already be thigh-deep in big party plans. General election night is like the Euros final for people who listen to *Today* on Radio 4, so you might even now be rearranging the sofas in the living room around the TV, stashing crates of booze in the garden and working out what games to play to while away the hours between “10pm”, when the polls close, and “anything actually happening”, when the first results start to come in about 2am.

For those on the left, “Tory Wipeout Bingo Cards” are available online. These allow you to apply your dabber throughout the night to a grid of marginal constituencies and compete with friends to be the first to shout, “House! Of Commons majority!”

If, on the other hand, you dread this election as the potential fall of the oldest political party in the country and the rise of neo-Trotskyite milquetoasts, you will also want to be with friends to commiserate with them over this terrible series of events. I don’t want to make crass generalisations, but I presume that, in your misery, at least you’ll be enjoying much better wines than the neighbours singing *Sweet Caroline* in their garden if and when Jacob Rees-Mogg loses his seat. So there is that comfort even as you



wince at all the slurred “*pah pah pafs*”.

It’s presumed there will be a *lot* of drinking happening on Thursday. One person I know who runs a branch of Alcoholics Anonymous says she is expecting mass relapses on election night from all sides of the political spectrum.

“The left-wingers will be celebrating, the right-wingers commiserating, and the Reform voters never stopped drinking anyway.”

For myself, I enjoy election night even more than I used to, as my job means that when I see a politician on the television, often I have actually met them. This lends an extra frisson to the whole thing – like when you’re watching a travel programme and they go to the exact beach in Wales you’ve been to. Or you’re watching Crufts and have patted specific spaniels and schnauzers.

“Oh, that one was *really friendly*,” you might say. Or, “That one literally was a bitch.”

I have to say, my interactions with politicians have rarely ended well. Usually for me but sometimes for them too. I recently bumped into Ed Balls in a corridor backstage at *Lorraine*. He informed me unexpectedly that Ed Balls Day “was all your fault, Caitlin”.

“What?” I asked.

For those who don’t know about Ed Balls Day, presumably because you have not spent half your existence arsing about on social media, it marks the day in 2011 – April 28, to be precise – when Balls, then shadow chancellor of the exchequer, tried to search X, then Twitter, for a recent article about himself but accidentally tweeted “Ed Balls” instead.

This delightfully innocent Old Man Technology Struggle instantly became an iconic meme. Retweeted thousands of times and folded into all that week’s

A full-body photograph of Caitlin Moran dressed as Margaret Thatcher. She is wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a light-colored, vertically striped blouse with a large bow at the neck. Her hair is styled in a voluminous, curly blonde wig. She has a serious expression and is waving her right hand. She is holding a small, dark blue handbag with a gold clasp. The background is a plain, light grey.

I ended up running
the last 700m to
10 Downing Street
in heels, which
deeply troubled
my pelvic floor

Caitlin Moran as
Margaret Thatcher;
photographed by
Jude Edginton

topical jokes, its legacy became so enduring that Balls' showstopper creation on *The Great Celebrity Bake Off* was an "Ed Balls" cake. In 2023, The New York Times even ran a long and thoughtful piece on the phenomenon.

Following Ed Balls Day, however, Balls lost his seat in the 2015 general election, retired from politics and gave in to his seemingly inevitable fate: continuing the vibe of Ed Balls Day by doing his legendary *Gangnam Style* on *Strictly Come Dancing*.

"I saw some metrics on Ed Balls Day and you were one of the first people to retweet it," he told me in that corridor at Lorraine. "It was you that kicked the whole thing off."

Well, I gasped.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Does this mean there's a parallel universe out there where you might have become prime minister if I hadn't been pissing around on Twitter that day?"

He shrugged.

I'm sorry, Ed.

If you count "Ed Balls in a parallel universe" – which, obviously, I do – I've now met four of our prime ministers. Actually five, if Keir Starmer wins on Thursday. I have to say, David Cameron was the rudest by a long chalk. Perhaps he knew of my potential-prime minister slaying powers and wanted to shut me down fast. Crush me before I could crush him.

Can't lie – it worked.

I was at a party with Giles Coren, mucking about with the cheese buffet, when Cameron, then leader of the opposition, made eye contact with us and started to move towards us.

I felt a measure of alarm at this as, just months previously, I'd written a column in which I'd referred to Cameron's pinky peevish demeanour as being redolent of "a camp gammon robot... a C-3PO made of ham", and the phrase had kind of... caught on. I'd attended another party for which someone had *actually made a David Cameron out of ham*, which is one of the more extraordinary things I've seen. Or eaten. I consumed fully half of Cameron's delicious piggy, crumbed face.

So as Cameron reached Giles and me, I gave him a nervous "the cut and thrust of politics, huh!" smile.

Smiling back, still looking me right in the eye, Cameron replied, "I do so enjoy reading your columns... Giles," then inserted himself between us, turned his back on me and shook Giles's hand. It was a total freeze-out. He did not turn round to address me *once*. In the end, it was so rude I had to walk away, giggling.

At the time, I remember marvelling at how misrepresented public school

DAVID CAMERON



Of all the politicians I've met, he was the rudest by a long chalk. Possibly because I'd compared his face to a ham

educations are. Eton is sold as the etiquette boot camp for posh people to deal with irascible peasants, such as myself, with a breezy air of amused patronage. Cameron's descent into a full-on drive-by "f*** you" was a more, to be brisk, *Wolverhampton* way of dealing with things. It was on the lower end of a scale of responses that, at their peak, end with people pulling at each other's hair extensions in car parks. In a way, I give him respect. I suspect I would have been that petty too.

The man he was about to supersede, Gordon Brown, was much more courteous. I interviewed him in Downing Street in his last year in power and he was very understanding about the terribly anxious state I was in. Due to a series of *Clockwise*-style misfortunes, I was 20 minutes late: my printer had broken down, I'd missed my train, a taxi took ages to arrive and, when it did, it was a battered camper van that looked *exactly* like the one the Libyan terrorists drive in *Back to the Future*. This was the van in which I would be arriving at Downing Street, in one of the most heavily policed areas in Britain.

Except when I got in the van, it turned out that the driver didn't know where Downing Street was. I was furiously incredulous about this – IT'S 10 DOWNING STREET! ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS ADDRESSES IN THE WORLD! – until I realised that I too didn't really know where Downing Street was. Near the Strand?

KEIR STARMER



Starmer reminded me of my husband – a blinking stoicism in the face of me and my friends being hammered

I'd ended up running the last 700m to No 10 in heels, which had both deeply troubled my pelvic floor and triggered a sweaty armpit situation so serious, I actually had to throw away the cardigan when I got home. It smelt, simply, of fear.

Anyway, Brown was very nice, even when I referred to Bill Clinton as "Old Big Dog", commented on the president's recent weight loss and started riffing on how he was still "pretty hot", only for Brown to reply, with an anxious adherence to the facts, "Well, he's been terribly ill recently, Caitlin. *That's* why he's lost all the weight."

My conclusion: Gordon Brown – very polite to sweaty journalists but unable to engage in lubricious Girls Night Out banter.

Keir Starmer – oh dear. At this point in 2024, if you have a story about meeting Starmer at a party in 2019, before he became the leader of the Labour Party, this is the moment when your tale has its greatest value. If he becomes prime minister – after first turning around a Labour Party that was on its knees and then masterminding what looks to be a historic landslide victory – then everyone is going to want to know: what was he like? Could you tell he was a man of destiny even then? At a party, does he just finally *let go*, knock back the spicy margs and then start playing that game where you gaffer-tape stacks of cider tins to your hands while shouting, "I'm a wizard"?

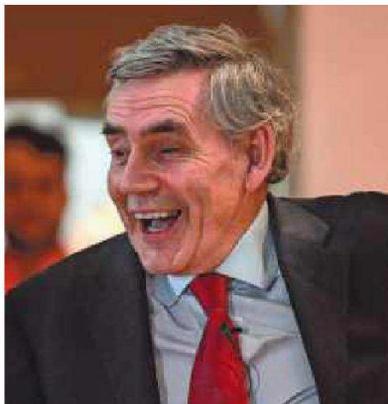
THERESA MAY



We chatted about Ocado – until I realised (too late) that I’d mistaken her for my mate’s mum

Unfortunately, everyone at the party – except Starmer – got so drunk I can barely remember anything about it, other than that a) the whole wizard thing absolutely didn’t happen, and b) many of us, clearly political visionaries, repeatedly and firmly told Starmer that Jess Phillips was going to be the next Labour leader – “It’s obvious!” – while he smiled politely. My abiding impression of him was

GORDON BROWN



Brown was polite – even when I arrived very late, with a serious sweaty armpit situation

that he reminded me of my husband, manifesting a slightly blinking stoicism in the face of so many women being so hammered with the reassuring undercurrent that, yes, he would drive us all home if we couldn’t get an Uber, as long as we promised in advance to be sick out of the window.

The one moment he really sprang into life conversationally was when the gossip turned to a prominent figure’s recent drug problem. Eschewing everyone else’s salacious tone, he delivered a concise and informative primer on the difference between class A and class B drug possession in terms of sentencing, which seemed miraculous at the time as he was the only person able to talk without slurring or resting their head on the table and moaning, “I am so wasted.”

Finally – well, the last one is my favourite. In 2010, I attended the Glamour magazine awards, the much missed A-list lady booze-up held in a tent in Berkeley Square in London. When I arrived, I realised that the invitation had bestowed upon me a great honour – perhaps the greatest honour of all. For the editor, Jo Elvin, had not only put me on her table but *next to her silver-haired old mother*.

“Jo must *really* trust me to be All Things To All People chat-wise,” I thought as I sat next to Ma Elvin. “And I will not break that trust. Lady, prepare to enter a conversational Eden.”

I was all the more keen to put Jo’s mum at ease because it was obvious she didn’t

usually come to this kind of event. While Cheryl Cole was dressed in a sexy silver nothing and Claudia Winkleman was in a cool tuxedo, Jo’s mum was in a black strapless taffeta dress in which she looked profoundly uncomfortable and was carrying a massive handbag that looked like a patent-leather haggis.

“I will be exquisitely kind to this lonely, jarringly dressed lady who knows no one else in the room,” I thought nobly.

Now, I don’t mean to boast, but I’m usually rather good at general chat. I can riff on pretty much anything. However, after 20 minutes I admit I was feeling somewhat dry. Fashion, music, literature... Jo’s mum just wasn’t biting. In the end we found a fertile place conversationally: whether there was, when you really thought about it, any material difference between Ocado and Waitrose online. We gave that a solid five minutes before triumphantly concluding that, no, there wasn’t.

Just when we were about to get into the nitty-gritty of the obvious next step – when *would* M&S Food cave in to pressure and start home deliveries too? – the awards’ host for the night, James Corden, took to the mic.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen,” he said, scanning the audience, “will you welcome to the stage to present the next award – home secretary Theresa May.”

At which point, Jo’s mum stood up and walked to the stage. She wasn’t Jo’s mum at all. She was home secretary Theresa May.

So that’s my round-up of prime ministers – past, potential and only possible in alternate realities. To be honest, as I’ve been writing this it’s made me realise what a bloody awful job it is being a senior politician. Too many people know who you are – or in the case of Theresa May, don’t. People are constantly being bitchy about your very pink face or else they’re watching you at parties to see if you get drunk.

You, meanwhile, are watching yourself to avoid any jokes that make it look as if you fancy Bill Clinton, or else you’re living with the knowledge that you can unthinkingly press “send” on the wrong tweet and end up at the mercy of millions.

So as Thursday night turns into Friday morning, I’d like to hope we can all take a moment to feel compassion towards all those – past and present – who throw their hat in the ring for one of the toughest jobs in the world. Let us for a brief minute feel a deep empathy and love for all our leaders.

Or, at the very least, sing *Sweet Caroline* in a more poignant minor key before using the recycling bin as a kettledrum and bashing it with sticks. ■

Non-stop bangers



Let summer come to you

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What I've learnt Kiefer Sutherland

Actor Kiefer Sutherland, 57, was born in London and raised in Canada by his mother. His father was the actor Donald Sutherland, who died last week. He won an Emmy and a Golden Globe for his role as Jack Bauer in the series *24*. He has also released three albums. He lives with his partner in Los Angeles and has an adult daughter from his first marriage.

Me and my dad really got to know each other after I left home at 15. My parents split when I was three and my mum, sister and I moved to Canada, so I didn't live with my dad. I would see him at Christmas and for a couple of weeks in the summer. I certainly did see him, but it was really relegated to around holidays.

I have to believe that having the same surname as my dad has helped me at times. There must have been moments where people who were friendly with my dad leant towards helping me. But I know of two specific instances where someone was not friendly with my dad and I sat in the office for four hours and never got the meeting.

I was in a hurry to grow up. I certainly wish I hadn't taken the car [he stole a car when he was a teenager]. That was just me wanting to drive and feel older. There are things I wish I had done differently, but I'm grateful for some of the things I had the courage to do. When I left home it was the first time that teenagers were playing teenagers on screen, so I did that at the right time.

I regret eating a goldfish on a dare from Kevin Bacon. We were shooting the film *Flatliners*. The three remaining fish looked at me and would scatter any time I got near the aquarium. I didn't realise that when you swallow something your whole throat constricts, so you can hear the back break.

My mother was very politically active. She worked with the Black Panther Party [which called for the arming of all African Americans] and was organising a breakfast programme so children could get fed before they went to school. There were rumours



PORTRAIT Dean Chalkley

'I do believe that having the same surname as my dad has helped me'

that there were weapons being exchanged, which proved not to be true, of course.

I remember thinking, "I wish they just had a pill for food."

I had a very limited palate in my twenties. I ate food just as a necessity, mainly because I was very busy and having to eat three meals a day seemed like a waste of time. I managed to live on chicken breast with vegetables for about a decade. Learning to cook has opened up food for me.

In the Eighties, if Robert Downey Jr got a good script but was busy, he would tell me about it.

And vice versa. It was an exciting time. Sarah Jessica Parker was his girlfriend. Billy Zane lived in an apartment across the way. We all helped each other through things.

When my daughter was born, I realised how unprepared I was.

She was so small that I was scared to hold her. I realised that being a father was not a lark; it was a real responsibility.

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

I took the films that I did in my twenties for granted. For the first ten years of my career, everything was going well. Then all of a sudden, the opportunities went away. It was devastating. I was forced to make a decision: I could either make a bunch of bad films, or I could stop for a little while until I got something I wanted to do. So I took some time off.

I roped and rodeo-ed for ten years. I had a small farm in Montana. I absolutely adored roping. Then *24* happened and I became immersed in that for another decade.

Prison is designed to make you not want to go back. [He has been to prison three times – the most recent was a 48-day sentence for drink-driving in 2007.] I had plenty of time to think about what had landed me there. I was very cross with myself with regards to the poor decisions that I was making. Then I realised, you can't beat yourself up for ever. At some point you have to move on and forgive yourself.

My tattoos are like diary entries. I have more than 15 and usually get something on a tour.

Greggs is popular with Yanks and Canadians. I like a sausage roll. My band is from the States and, when we first toured here, the first stop they would make before we even got to the hotel would be a Greggs. I think some of them only did the tour because they knew they were going to get a Greggs.

Our first tour was more than terrifying. I kept thinking my work as an actor was going to benefit me, but I'm not playing a character when I have a guitar. I wrote these songs and they're stories about my life. You're opening yourself up in a very personal way.

I don't worry about whisky hurting my vocal cords. Being able to share a drink with a great old friend really tells me I'm not at work any more. ■

Kiefer Sutherland's premium Canadian whisky, Red Bank, is on sale at masterofmalt.com (£40.67)



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**'I've taken risks in relationships.
I'm a co-dependent type'**

Nicole Scherzinger, 46, is the former Pussycat Doll who dated Lewis Hamilton. Now an award-winning role in *Sunset Boulevard* has changed her life. Both professionally and privately. Andrew Billen meets her

'I do things on my own terms now. People don't tell me what to do'

Photographed by Robert Wilson. Styling: Hannah Rogers. This page: clothes by Dolce & Gabbana. Opposite: top, Dolce & Gabbana; trousers, Schiaparelli

Once she was a pussycat, a doll, a Pussycat Doll. Now Nicole Scherzinger, after four months at the Savoy Theatre in London at the end of last year, is and may for ever remain Norma Desmond. Her incarnation of the crazed, tragic, fallen movie star at the unstable centre of Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1991 musical *Sunset Boulevard* has all but obliterated memories of those who played her before, from Faith Brown in Plymouth to Glenn Close on Broadway. With a best actress Olivier award packed in her actual or mental luggage, this autumn she will head for Broadway herself and spend nine months doing it all again.

And I mean "all". Director Jamie Lloyd's apparently bizarre decision to cast a beautiful 46-year-old pop icon as a decrepit former silent film star proved unexpectedly insightful, not only into what Desmond represents as a woman in showbusiness but into Scherzinger herself.

True, the American singer was far from a forgotten recluse haunting her own Los Angeles mansion/luxurious London rental. But Scherzinger's career did appear to be on a one-way trajectory, from raunchy pop idol whose hits, including *Don't Cha* ("...wish your girlfriend was hot like me"), became part of the soundtrack to the Noughties, to talent show panellist. Before seeing her in *Sunset*, audiences would not have been likely to make the comparison, but Scherzinger did as soon as she read the script. So loudly did Norma speak to her, so obviously did their demons pelt from the same regions of hell, that the role became her therapy.

"It's changed me in so many ways," she says one lunch hour in an east London photo studio. "It's grown me. It's evolved me. I've had to let go of a lot of insecurities and any comforts that I had. And in a lot of ways, it's healed me. It's been an amazing healing process."

What were those insecurities?

"Norma has insecurities like we all have: fears of being alone, feeling emptiness, feeling misunderstood, feeling dismissed."

And she, Scherzinger, had those too?

"Oh, for sure. That's why I was able to connect with the character so much. The reason it is a healing process is that I got to bring all that to the forefront on stage, night after night, seven shows a week. That was exhausting, but through that process I got to heal some old wounds and some of my issues."

The problem, I suggest, is that having played this diva to such acclamation, she may be mistaken for a diva herself. The audience at the Henley Festival, where she will be appearing for one night only next month, may be half-expecting her to sing not only *Salome* from *Sunset* ("If she can't

have him living/ She'll take him dead") but Aretha Franklin's *Respect* ("I got to have/ A little respect"). And in fact, among the anthems and Pussycat Dolls numbers, she will be singing Screamin' Jay Hawkins' terrifying *I Put a Spell on You* ("Because you're mine").

But this is a musing too far for her.

"I can tell you haven't watched it [the musical's revival]," Scherzinger scolds me. "Norma's not a diva. That's the old perception – her being this deranged, crazy, grasping woman. Our take on this story is a lot different. She's not a diva. She knows what she wants and she works very hard for what she wants and she has so much left to give – her career was just cut short and she was dismissed and that's difficult for her. Rejection and loneliness and emptiness are what she battles with, and not being able to fulfil her dream. So that doesn't sound like a diva to me."

Although I get that her reinterpreted Norma is not past it or deluded, merely angry that while still in her powers she has been faddishly neglected, my not having caught the new *Sunset* is not a problem we easily surmount in this interview. Scherzinger is full of regret and I am full of remorse.

As to whether Scherzinger might turn out to be a diva herself, having interviewed Lauren Bacall, Anita Ekberg and Dame Joan Collins, I am prepared for the possibility. Before I get to the studio I receive messages that she is late, but she soon turns up so I reckon we are just dealing with standard celebrity deviation. When I arrive, the shoot is still going on. To be frank, I have heard more laughter at such sessions. This one ends cordially with a handshake.

What does not discourage me, however, is that she has prepped for our interview. Sometimes publicists ask for examples of the questions we intend to ask their client, but in practice, I doubt the client even looks at them. Not so Scherzinger, who has thought through her replies and made notes and, when we get going, asks me to excuse her if she occasionally refers to them on her phone, which she does. She is taking this seriously, which I suspect is the way she treats everything. As a panellist on the American version of *The Masked Singer*, for instance, she was known as Sherlock Scherzy for her forensic interrogations of the stars hiding behind fantastical disguises. Her only dip in professionalism during our chat is when, midway through, she asks me my name – but that's fine too. It's not as if it's ever up in lights.

We are sitting on sofas in a quiet space next to the studio. I start by quoting from an old interview in which she recalled studying acting – including Stanislavski and Shakespeare – at Wright State University in Ohio. She would upset her



more realistic peers by telling professors her ambition was to get to Broadway. And now, I say, here she comes.

"Yes, many years later. I would have been probably 19, 18, 17 when I said that."

And the ambition was to perform musical theatre rather than anything else?

"Well, from the time I was six I loved Whitney Houston, so part of me wanted to be like Whitney, right? But then the other part of me... I've just always felt really at home on stage and in a theatre."

It's interesting, I say. Introverted actors I have spoken to have also talked about being "at home" on stage.

"I think I was always an introvert. I still am in a lot of ways," she says. "I couldn't care less to go on a red carpet or to an after-party. I feel more comfortable in my skin when I'm on stage. It's kind of weird."

She felt uncomfortable as a child because she felt different. Although from the age of six she was brought up in Kentucky, she had been born in Hawaii to a Hawaiian mother of Ukrainian descent. Her father, Alfonso Valiente, was Filipino. "So I didn't really look like the other kids in Louisville, in the south. They were more fair skin and blue eyes, blonde hair, and I looked a little like a brownie, you know? I was always a bit awkward and shy."

Her father left the family when she was tiny, after which her mother, Rosemary, a clerk, married Gary Scherzinger, a German-American welder. I wonder whether that early separation from her father has affected her.

"I don't know. I was so young. Obviously I've had lots of different outlets of help and therapy. They say, 'Oh my gosh, your years from three to eight really shape you.' And I guess he did leave me and my mum when I was three. I'm sure psychologically it contributed to my

As Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*



With Lewis Hamilton, 2014



With Grigor Dimitrov in London, 2016



'IT WAS DIFFICULT AT FIRST BECAUSE I DIDN'T FEEL COMFORTABLE IN MY SKIN'

abandonment issues. But I grew up with my mother, who got pregnant with me when she was 17 and had me when she was 18. Nobody comes from a perfect household, but I grew up in a lot of love, so I wouldn't have had it any other way."

Despite her Broadway fixation and early appearances in local musicals, her career was quickly hijacked by pop. First, she dropped out of Wright to tour with a rock group called Days of the New. Then, during a successful run on the talent show *Popstars USA*, she became part of a constructed girl band, Eden's Crush, who had a hit single but then disbanded. In 2003, the choreographer Robin Antin recruited her to spearhead a revamped version of a burlesque troupe called the Pussycat Dolls. In the following years the new-style Dolls released two albums and sold more than 55 million records.

"So the Dolls, it was a profoundly overwhelming experience, right?" she says. "I'm really proud of the music that the Dolls made, and I'm very proud of the little mark that we made with our group. But it was very difficult, because I was really learning about myself along the way.

"It was such a difficult time, struggling and battling your own demons and issues and always being on the road, and they never allowed sleep in our schedule. I mean, it was just a recipe for disaster, to be honest with you. It's a lot different now. They have rules set in place and, you know, it's more of a woke community now. But it wasn't like that when we were doing it. It was just kind of like, 'Work them to the bone until they're passed out.' It was just hard for me to sleep. I always had sleeping issues."



With her fiancé, Thom Evans, in 2020

Like many young women, Scherzinger already had body dysmorphia. But her new career in the Dolls accelerated these insecurities into bulimia because of the "spotlight" on her body, a body flaunted in bras that advertised both her bosom and her tiny midriff.

"In the beginning, that was my biggest issue. The other girls were dancers first. So as dancers, you dance modern, and when you're in class you're pretty much dressed in underwear. A dancer's body is the instrument; it's beautiful. That's the art. But I was a singer first. It was difficult for me in the beginning because I didn't feel comfortable in my skin."

Did she ever feel that the Pussycat look exploited her?

"No. I didn't feel exploited at all because I was in control of what I was

doing. Maybe I didn't love some of the clothes I was wearing, but I got to create a lot of the clothes and say, 'No, I want to wear trousers.' I wanted to look like will.i.am and Gwen Stefani. So I got to wear clothes that I felt empowered in and then the girls got to choose what they wanted too."

Although not very many clothes...

"But I tell you we wore a lot more, I think, than people are wearing today. The artists, I mean. Like, boy! We'd always say, 'We keep it sassy but classy.'"

Does she still have body image issues?

"I own me. I'm not in my head now about my distorted vision of what I look like or what people will think. I think that's the great thing about getting older – you don't give a shit as much. I wish I gave a shit a little more. It would inspire me to work out a little more."

She looks as if she works out a lot.

"I'm on and I'm off. I take breaks."

In 2009 the Dolls undertook a final tour and then announced a "hiatus" that would end up lasting a decade. But surely there was always a tension between Scherzinger the putative solo artist, who had delivered 95 per cent of the troupe's vocals, and the Dolls' group ethos?

"I think everybody is an individual in the group and, actually, the first person to leave was Kimberly Wyatt. Everybody had their own desires and wants, as individuals do. It's natural that people want to take that course. I wanted to do my music. I was still figuring myself out as an artist. I still am sometimes.

"But now I really want the music that I do to make a difference in people's lives. I'm not interested in doing music any more about how tight my jeans are. I'm too old for that shit. It's fun and all, but I'm in a place where everything I do now, I want it to have meaning and purpose."

She calls the "authentic" and "honest" songs she has written more recently her "warrior music". So I ask whom this warrior was fighting. She immediately concedes a frequent enemy was herself, because "you get what you tolerate".

She won't talk about her past boyfriends, who have included the singer Nick Hexum, to whom she was briefly engaged, and the Swiss footballer Pajtim Kasami. She was also once linked, perhaps fancifully, to Harry Styles. Her most famous former boyfriend, however, was Lewis Hamilton, seven years her junior, whom she met in 2007 when he was 22. During that time she was sometimes referred to in newspaper captions simply as the Formula One champion's "girlfriend". Their romance was frequently described as on again/off again, owing to their conflicting work commitments, and ended in 2015. This was reportedly followed by a relationship with the



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Bulgarian tennis player Grigor Dimitrov. "I've taken many risks in relationships. I'm quite a co-dependent type and I'm still learning the meaning of setting boundaries, and taking the risk of leaving unhealthy relationships that weren't serving me because I wanted better for myself."

Because leaving a relationship, even a bad one, can be terrifying?

"Yes. Like Norma, there's your fear of loneliness. You just want to be wanted and you want to be loved. Who doesn't want to be wanted and want to be loved and cherished?"

Professionally, the 2010s were years too often lost to reality TV shows such as *The X Factor* (on which she was instrumental in the formation of One Direction), *Australia's Got Talent* and, latterly, *The Masked Singer*, the panel of which she left to risk *Sunset* in London. She still recorded, but her solo career never reached Pussycat heights. Her first album in 2011 made some waves but the second, three years later, was a commercial if not entirely critical flop. But we did not get to hear everything. She says she has probably 15 albums written or recorded but never released. Some of the songs, she lets slip, are likely to appear in a musical she is working on "loosely based on my life".

Where she did score was at the London Palladium in 2014 playing Grizabella in Lloyd Webber's *Cats*. She was nominated for an Olivier award but the Broadway transfer was not to be. The New York Post reported that she had become entangled in a row about the prominence of her name in publicity material. A week before rehearsals began, she quit for London and *The X Factor*. Furious, Lloyd Webber said she had made him look like "an absolute twot". They have, obviously, more than made up now.

"I think that's just time, you know? Andrew has done so much for me and he's a friend. He and his family, they're dear friends of mine. And you know, he really did put a lot on the line and wanted to bring *Cats* to Broadway. But it wasn't in the cards, I guess. It wasn't in the stars.

"It's beautiful how things work themselves out. I'm honestly a big believer in just letting things go that don't serve you, in growth and forgiveness. I don't like to hold on to things, because you're the only person that suffers. I think it also brings people closer, you know? Because we've gone through so much it's a real relationship and we can be real with one another."

He must have said, "Wow!" when he saw her as Norma.

"Oh yes, I think he's said more than that."

After a brief television reunion of the Dolls on *The X Factor: Celebrity* five years ago a new tour was planned, but in 2022

it was "put on hold". Again Scherzinger got the blame, with two of the Dolls, Jessica Sutta and Carmit Bachar, claiming she had pulled out without telling them. The Dolls' prime mover, Robin Antin, is presently suing her in what appears to be a row over money. And she is suing back. The main problem, Scherzinger maintains, was Covid. But also, she is not the Doll of two decades ago.

"I've changed. If you change, the world is going to embrace you differently. And it stems from you. I had at least ten years apart from the Dolls. I had done the work and I had grown and evolved. I thought, well, you know, in this industry everything had been on everyone else's terms and never on my terms. And now I'm understanding my value.

"So we were in negotiations and everything was going well and, honestly, the lawsuit came out of nowhere. It was a complete shock and disappointment and heartbreak for me. But I'm not a victim; I'm a victor. And I stood my ground. I knew where I stood, which is

Would she like babies?

"Oh my gosh, I would love to. I've never shied away from that. I can't wait. It's like the clock is ticking. I want to have a baby but work calls. But I'm going to have to make time because, yes, I cannot wait to have children."

Has her mother been pressing her to get on with it?

"No, because my mother knows how hard I work and how passionate I am about what I do. She is a faithful woman and she just knows, everything in God's timing."

Also in abeyance is a wedding date, although the engagement was announced a summer ago. Broadway is in the way right now, "but the year after that". There have been stories that she would not be inviting the Dolls to the wedding, but when I ask Scherzinger's publicist about the rumours – I forget to put them to Scherzinger – she says the wedding is "not even planned".

Our interview ends, surprisingly, touchingly, with a hug, but not before

BABIES? 'I'VE NEVER SHIED AWAY FROM THAT. I'M GOING TO HAVE TO MAKE TIME TO HAVE CHILDREN'

why I responded with eight counter-claims. But, you know, I'm hopeful for the future. I'm very hopeful."

In her decades in showbusiness, has the status of women changed for the better?

"It's pretty obvious that women are always fighting for equality, right? But my name, Nicole, means 'victory'. So I don't ever like to be a victim. I like to focus the light on being a victor. I think that women have come a long way and I also think maybe it's not the industry that has allowed women to come a long way, but the women themselves who have done that. I'm in control of my career. I do things on my terms now. My team supports me in my decisions. People don't tell me what to do."

Since the beginning of 2020, Scherzinger has been in a relationship with Thom Evans, a former Scottish international rugby player six years her junior. She met him when he was competing on *The X Factor: Celebrity*. Apparently, at home he sings more than she does. "It's nice, because he likes a system – he's extremely organised and he's extremely on time, which is the opposite of me, so he makes me so much better in that way. I don't know if all rugby players are like this but he's the cleanest. He's OCD like me and I just love it. It's great."

The other great thing about Evans is that he likes his sleep. "He's kind of reprogramming my mind and helping me try to sleep more. I'm loving sleep now."

I hear a paean to God, whom the good Catholic Scherzinger gracefully thanked at the head of her Oliviers acceptance speech in April. She also wants to tell readers about the power of good therapists. Hers include her grandfather, who is an archbishop, a pastor, and an "intuitive coach" who has been with her for 20 years and is her "spiritual compass" and a great help with her "business stuff". To achieve our fullest potential and best life, we should all have such people on hand.

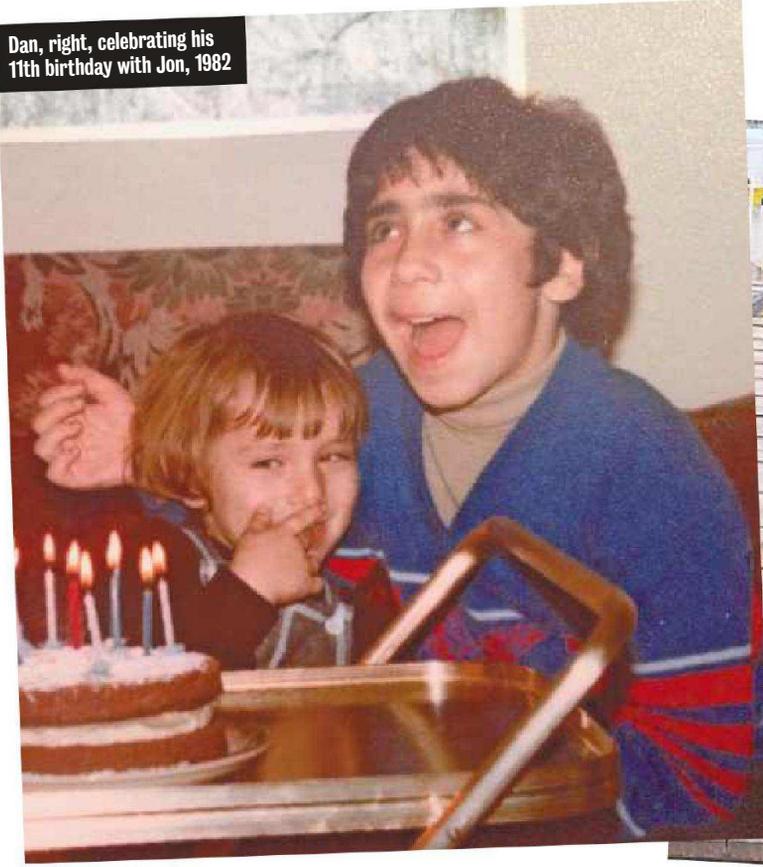
So the psychic healing of Nicole Scherzinger is not just down to a West End musical, but it is surely a big part. No, I did not see her *Sunset* but YouTube has videos of her taking a bow on its first night and on its last. In the first she looks mostly relieved, but in the last she is triumphant, commanding and utterly spent. In both her hair is awry and her black nightie drenched in blood.

"It's great when you do the work," she says. "You have to do the work and you've got to look ugly in the face and sometimes you've got to look ugly while you're doing it, which is what I've done in this character. There were tears, blood and lots of snot. Never did I think I'd get to that moment."

But she did and there she was: bloodied, bowing, victorious. ■

Henley Festival presented by Westcoast runs July 10-14. Nicole Scherzinger performs on July 10 at 9pm. For ticket information, go to henley-festival.co.uk

Dan, right, celebrating his 11th birthday with Jon, 1982



Dan in 2008



I LOST MY BIG BROTHER. HE WAS MY BEST FRIEND. COULD I HAVE SAVED HIM?



Jon in Count Binface guise for the London mayoral election this year

Jon Harvey, 44,
photographed by
Matt Crockett



Jon Harvey is best known as Count Binface, the 'novelty politician' who is standing against Rishi Sunak in the general election next week. But there is a personal tragedy behind the comedian's public persona – the sudden death of his beloved older brother at 43. Here he describes the worst day of his life

Some of my favourite tales end with death. At the end of the *Star Wars* trilogy, Darth Vader dies. At the end of the *Back to the Future* movies, the DeLorean dies. At the end of the latest *Ghostbusters* movie, the integrity of the franchise dies. But this story begins with death. Because for those of us left behind, that's how it happens. Death strikes first, and then we have to pick up the pieces and learn to cope. Nearly a decade has passed since my darkest day, but these are still the most difficult words I've ever had to write: I used to have an older brother.

Seven simple words, one unbearable truth, which has just become harder than ever. Because suddenly it's true in more ways than one. My brother Dan passed away unexpectedly in 2015, when he was only 43. He was nine years older than me, old enough to be almost like a second dad as well as a sibling. Last month, I turned 44, and that means I've reached a new, hateful milestone – an age that my brother never got to see.

This sour quirk of grief is rarely discussed, but it must be a tragically common sensation. If you're feeling it right now as you read this, my heart goes out to you. If my experience is anything to go by, it's a real mind-melter. Am I the older brother now? Are my memories invalidated? Will my life be forever tainted by this extra shot of sadness? Do I need to recalibrate Dan – how I fitted in his life, and how he fits in mine. It's brought all the pain back, somehow sharper too, like a 4K UHD reissue of a horror film. I'm having to live it, and fight it, all over again.

It was just before 9am on Tuesday, June 9, 2015, when the world caved in. It was one of those summer mornings when sunlight bathes London in gold and optimism. In the backstreets of Kensington, birdsong blended with the soft hum of a vacuum cleaner wafting out of a pub and the gentle clank of empty swings in the children's playground. Normal things. But normality was a universe away for me. I was standing outside Dan's flat and I was very scared.

What was now full-blown terror had begun 36 hours earlier as a nagging concern. Dan had been due to join us at Mum's house for Sunday lunch but didn't show up. Had he fallen asleep at home? Maybe his shonky old mobile phone had given up the ghost. Perhaps he'd just decided to go off grid for a bit. For Dan this wasn't entirely out of the ordinary. He had a habit of not replying to messages and his timekeeping was erratic at best. Unless Crystal Palace Football Club was involved, that is. Dan was an ardent Palace supporter. In a quarter of a century as a season ticket-holder, he barely missed a

kick-off. That wasn't ideal for me, being a Tottenham fan. But then again, there are much worse things an older brother can be into. Just ask Prince Edward.

The unanswered texts and calls continued into Monday. I tried to carry on as normal. In the evening I even went on a Tinder date to see a play, which ended in a kiss by the ticket barriers at Leicester Square Tube. But my mind was several zones away. (Sorry, Daisy.) At 10.30pm my mum called. "I'm worried," she said. So was I. Still there was silence from Dan. We needed to find him. I tried to keep us both calm and offered to go over to his flat straight away if she thought that was best. But if everything was OK, as we obviously hoped it was, then he'd probably be asleep and wouldn't hear me knocking. So what if instead I went over there first thing in the morning? Mum agreed and we said goodnight.

Half of me stayed rational, refusing to entertain dark thoughts. The other half was racing. Reassuring words were offered by housemates, but they just bounced off me. Come dawn I found myself sitting on the loo, shaking and googling, "What to do if you find a dead body".

Once I'd reached Dan's minuscule studio flat – a Kensington aberration, it sat on a street of millionaires like a pimple on a supermodel – I started contemplating how to break in. But there was no need. For some reason the front door to the building was ajar, so I ran up the stairs, banged on his door and yelled his name. No response. I phoned his mobile and pushed my ear up against the door to listen. It rang. And rang. "I'm here, bro," I shouted. "I'm calling 999. If you can hear me, help's coming." No response. I dialled emergency services and explained the situation, my voice dry and breaking. The operator told me the police and an ambulance were on their way.

Until they came, I didn't really know what to do. My brother either was or wasn't on the other side of that thick wooden door and he either was or was not alive. Schrödinger's sports fan. All I could do was wait. I headed back downstairs, wedged the house door open with a phone book, and sat on the steps outside. I felt very small.

It was an excruciating hour before the police arrived. (The ambulance never did.) Two constables turned up. I swallowed hard, told them what I knew, and they followed me upstairs. They had a portable battering ram and they asked me to stand aside. A brief smash and the first policeman forced his way in.

"Is he in there?" his colleague asked. "Yeah, he's here."

And that was it. The only friend I'd known my whole life. He'd had the happiest happy-face I'd ever seen, soundtracked by the happiest laugh. And he was gone.



He clearly struggled with mental health issues. I just thought he was a bit unusual

Why did my brother die? By the time of his funeral, we didn't have an answer. The post-mortem result was only sent to us weeks later, so while I delivered a eulogy extolling his infectious joie de vivre, for all I knew he might have committed suicide. And while I didn't give that thought much credence, the spectre of it did lurk. Dan had had a difficult last few months. He'd quit his job at the local council, possibly after suffering some workplace bullying, and he didn't have a bean. He wasn't a picture of health either. He was a squat man with a head of short bushy black hair, two parts Danny Baker to one part Ronnie Corbett. He had a slow, shuffling walk due to the obesity he'd carried for his whole adult life. Nothing too notable about that in 21st-century Britain, but since the new year he'd put on more weight and from time to time complained of leg pains. Still, nobody thought he was in imminent danger. So what was it that actually did for him? The coroner ruled that Dan had fallen into a hypoglycaemic coma brought on by diabetes. He'd never been diagnosed with the condition.

And that disease wasn't the only complication he had that was going untreated. He clearly struggled with mental health issues too, but those had never officially been recognised either. As a kid, I didn't think too much about it. I just thought he was a bit unusual: a touch of



paranoia; talking to himself in the bathroom; compulsively checking he'd shut the front door, pulling so hard it seemed he might take the handle off. With 21st-century eyes, perhaps this could have been identified and understood as neurodiverse behaviour. But in the late 20th century, society too often ignored this kind of thing or brushed it aside as eccentricity. Dan was part of a generation whose mental wellbeing fell through the cracks of the system, or what then passed for a system. My brother's case was aggravated by a cruel double whammy: he craved privacy, yet he didn't really know how to look after himself. Sometimes I wonder how he managed as well as he did.

For nine years the fear has stalked me that there might have been more I could have done. Something I could have said that might, just might, have moved the dial, unlocked the door. While I was kissing a date at Leicester Square, was he lying in pain? Or worse? Now that I've overtaken him in age, the worry sometimes feels like it's been turned up to 11. I know I tried. I know I'm not supposed to shoulder the blame. How do you help someone who doesn't want to be helped and who's unable to help themselves? But rational thoughts keep getting crowded out. In low moments, my heart thumps with failure. The thought that I could have done something else. That I should have tried harder.

Grief is a guilt-seeking torpedo that homes in on the fault lines in your mind. In my case, that has meant wrestling with the occasions when I found Dan's company exhausting. Conceding this might serrate the clean edges of my story, and my role in it, but to share the full monstrosity of bereavement I can't exclude how the pain bounces back onto you, making you question yourself again and again.

The guilt manifests itself in another way too. How did I escape so lightly, I wonder, compared with the afflictions that blighted Dan's life? No, I must correct myself there. "Blighted" is the wrong word. They helped define who he was. A wonderful brother. A man who lived for laughter. My brilliant friend. Even so, I can't deny that he struggled in life a lot more than I have. Maybe it was my luck to be the second born. After all, there was something else in our lives that lay behind much of our childhood trauma, and which for nearly a decade Dan had to suffer alone. Dad.

Our dad was a fun-loving, gregarious, creative character who first instilled in me the pleasure of writing. We all adored him. But he was also an alcoholic. A really bad one. Never physically abusive but verbally poisonous. Corrupted by chemicals, he could be a spiteful fountain of hate. When you're a tiny kid, the idea of a baddie is supposed to be Megatron or Skeletor, not the overweight lump in the living room glowering at the TV and yelling obscenities while the rest of us cower upstairs until he falls asleep, conked out by his own rage. Dad had been damaged by his own mother's premature passing and he also died before his time, in 2005, aged just 57. He lit up our lives and he cast a huge shadow over us too: Jekyll and Hyde sponsored by Strongbow. Like so many children with an alcoholic parent, we suffered it as a secret shame and it burnt us. I stayed teetotal into my thirties until I started to believe I might not be doomed to repeat Dad's fate; Dan never let a drop of alcohol pass his lips.

I'll never know how far our father's influence damaged Dan's life. Is that what knocked him off his stride at school? Is it why he never had a romantic relationship (that I know about)? Did it cause his mental health issues? Or just exacerbate them?

All I do know is there's only one thing that's stopped me from being swallowed whole by bereavement as an adult. It's the same way we survived the pain when we were kids. We wrapped ourselves in a comfort blanket of shared passions. A Ready Brek glow of joy. For one thing, at an unfashionably young age Dan inspired my love of politics and comedy, if those aren't the same thing. He would relentlessly quote *Blackadder*, including characters like the immortal Ivor "jest ye not, madam" Biggun, candidate for the Standing at the Back, Dressed Stupidly and Looking Stupid

Dan inspired my love of politics and comedy, if those aren't the same thing

Party ("No votes"). And in 1992, he tried to get me to spend a whole night with him at the general election count at Croydon Town Hall, when I was 12 years old, "just for fun". I politely declined, but as I watched in my pyjamas as he headed out the door with that beaming smile on his face, it planted an unlikely seed.

Twenty-five years later, I fell into an improbable career as a novelty politician – the intergalactic space warrior Count Binface (né Lord Buckethead). I only did it for a laugh, but so far my political career has seen me whisked first class to New York to guest star on *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, perform to 5,000 people at Glastonbury and now I'm challenging Rishi Sunak in his Richmond and Northallerton constituency.

For Dan, a man who could quote the movie *Spaceballs* verbatim, my political sideline would have sent him over the moon and several planets. But even above sci-fi satire, the thing that Dan and I shared, and which formed the most precious and atomic bond between us, was our love of sport. Any sport. It could be the World Cup final or kabaddi highlights on Channel 4. We loved all of it.

After he died, I threw myself into this obsession and visited as many events as I could, everything from Wimbledon tennis to Wimbledon greyhounds, and even the World Rubik's Cube Championships in Paris. It became a sports odyssey that I've chronicled in a book, *A Fan for All Seasons*. It's a love letter to sport and a memorial to Dan, and the journey has given me the force field I so desperately needed to shield me from the worst of grief.

When it comes down to it, being Count Binface and championing sport are two sides of the same coin. A coin that was minted by my brother. They're both – admittedly eccentric – ways that I've been able to keep the flame burning of my best friend's mightiest passions, and in so doing to help his joy continue to radiate. Even if it's in a tiny way, it means Dan's spirit lives on. And though it breaks my heart that he'll never know it, in the past few years there has appeared another bit of him in the world. In 2021, my wife Sarah and I had a boy, and his miraculous smile is definitely Dan's. Just like his middle name.

I don't know if any of this equips me for contemplating life as the older sibling. Frankly, it's still a complete head-~~f~~***. But as long as I can keep Dan's fire flickering, I'm going to tell myself I needn't worry. I don't need to be the bigger brother. That job is still taken. ■

A Fan for All Seasons: A Journey Through Life and Sport by Jon Harvey (Vintage, £10.99). To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](https://www.timesbookshop.co.uk). Free UK standard P&P on orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

WHAT'S SO FUNNY ABOUT POSH GIRLS, LITERALLY?

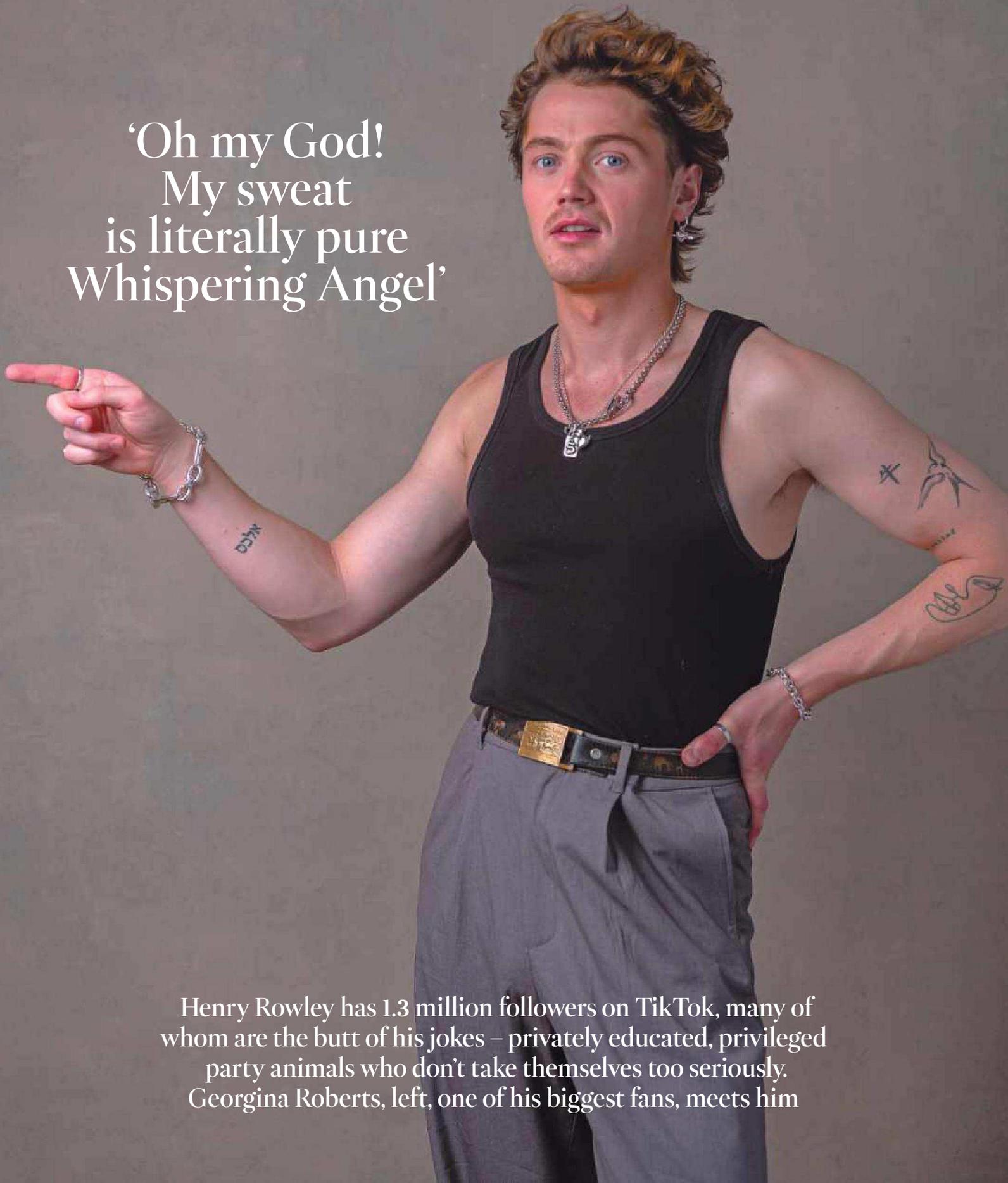


Writer Georgina Roberts, right, 28, with her friend Lara Mutafyan, 29.
Opposite: Henry Rowley, 26

Portraits: Romas Foord

**MEET THE MAN LOVED BY GEN Z
WOMEN – FOR MAKING FUN OF THEM**

**‘Oh my God!
My sweat
is literally pure
Whispering Angel’**



Henry Rowley has 1.3 million followers on TikTok, many of whom are the butt of his jokes – privately educated, privileged party animals who don't take themselves too seriously. Georgina Roberts, left, one of his biggest fans, meets him

First, it was Joanna Lumley and Jennifer Saunders swigging Bolly in *Absolutely Fabulous*. Then, it was the Kings Road glamazons of *Made in Chelsea* with their blazing arguments and bed-hopping. Most recently, in Emerald Fennell's dark aristo romp *Saltburn*, Rosamund Pike's Lady Elspeth Catton asked her husband, "Darling, where's Liverpool?"

Now, the latest generation of posh young things have a new avatar: the 26-year-old British comedian Henry Rowley. He has gone viral on TikTok thanks to his sardonic impressions of husky-voiced posh girls who start most sentences with "literallyyy", shout raspily, "No, seriously, guys, where the f*** is my vape?" and drawl, "No, no, no, I'm not even that posh."

The first time a friend sent me one of Rowley's videos and said, "This is so us," I laughed and then squirmed. He was parodying me – with painful accuracy. In one sketch titled *POV: The Posh Girl on a Hangover*, viewed 152,000 times, Rowley lies face down in a bed and says in a husky voice, "I'm not even being dramatic, like, I think I'm gonna die. Like, I really want a Maccies [McDonald's]." Stumbling to a sauna he says, "Oh my God! My sweat is literally pure Whispering Angel. I'm literally sweating out rosé."

I have definitely said something along those lines after a heavy night out, and the voice he puts on is a dead ringer for mine (after years of smoking and vaping). And I'm not the only one. "Henry's videos personally attack me, but they are priceless. Unfortunately, I relate to the posh girl character the most. He takes the piss in a witty way, which makes me laugh at myself," says Lara Mutafyan, 29. "One girl was talking about her pony at my friend's hen do – she was definitely a 'Minty' [Rowley's name for his posh-girl alter ego]. His hangover uni sketches really remind me of when me and the girls tried to cure our hangovers by drinking rosé."

I am meeting Rowley for breakfast at Caravan in King's Cross, near his home. He's wearing all black, from his boots to his leather jacket, and a knitted sweater vest that reveals tattooed arms. He is bedecked with silver rings, earrings, bracelets and necklaces.

He comes across as faultlessly polite, self-deprecating and funny. When I drop my notebook on the floor, he pretends to read my notes and asks, "Why have you written 'twat'?" He slips in and out of his characters' voices during our conversation as he nibbles a giant pain au chocolat.

On Instagram he is followed by former *Made in Chelsea* stars including Louise

Thompson and her *I'm a Celebrity*-winning brother, Sam, Sophie Hermann and Miles Nazaire. Posh people like them (and me) clearly don't mind laughing at caricatures of themselves, while his other followers love to hate poshos. "A lot of my audience are like, 'Yeah, f*** all them poshos.' Then there are loads of people who are like, 'That's so me.'"

So who are Minty and her friends in real life? I suppose you could call us "the new posh". My poshest friends don't wear red chinos, own labradors or go horse riding. They live in Hackney in east London, deejay in their spare time, love Houghton and Glastonbury festivals and drink natural ("natty") wine at wine bars in Dalston. They are more comfortable at a drum'n'bass rave in Tottenham than they are at Ascot races.

Rowley pictures most of his characters living in east London too. Even Tatler, "the posh people's bible", declared Hackney to be the new "borough du jour" in May. "Once upon a time, it was all about west London," the magazine stated. "But now, the glitterati have swapped Portobello for Broadway Market."

I am that stereotype. I grew up in southwest London and went to a private girls' school in Hammersmith before moving to Dalston after university in 2018 because I thought it was cool. I have both been and met Rowley's characters. "The relatability is definitely a key factor. With characters like the Soho House ones or posh people or DJs, it's things we've all experienced," he says.

Rowley's audience is mostly aged between 18 and 35, but he has a surprisingly large following among the over-fifties too. Who are they? "Posh mums," he says, smiling. "I did a show recently and there was an army of six really good-looking posh mums. Afterwards they were like, 'Oh my gosh, we love you so much. We always send our kids your stuff because they're at uni and they're just like your characters. Can we get a photo?'"

It's no surprise that Rowley's posh characters parody me so accurately. He says they are "an amalgamation of every friend I made at Bristol Uni", where I also studied. We overlapped there for a year and both did English. He jokes that we were probably dancing in the now defunct Bristol nightclub Blue Mountain at the same time.

In the year I graduated, my hall of residence, Badock, was crowned "the poshest hall" by the student newspaper, *The Tab*, after it revealed that 56 per cent of its residents that year were educated at independent schools.

"Bristol girls" like me gave Rowley the inspiration for Minty's raspy low voice. "There was a girl in my first-year English class who had the huskiest voice I've ever heard. I remember thinking, 'It's freshers



Rowley and I were both at Bristol University. He is parodying me with painful accuracy

week; she's just got a sore throat.' But over three years it never went," he says. "There were more and more people like that. I was like, is this a thing? Have people smoked too much? Are they born like this? I found it hilarious." His followers will all have met a posh person like Minty at some point. "Across generations, for people who went to unis like Bristol, there was always someone like that."

One of his most relatable sketches for me, a vaping addict, is called *Posh Girl Loses Her Vape*. The skit was based on a real friend losing her Juul vape on her birthday. "She was going mental. Like, 'Where the f*** is my Juul? Who's stolen my Juul?' It turned out she was sitting on it. The next day I made a video." Did his friend not mind? "She loved it. People don't get offended."

Rowley's Bristol friends call him by his surname, which is a very boarding school trope, but he went to a private day school in Leicester. "I was the least posh in the school. But I was the only one of my mates in Leicester who went to private school, so they called me 'the

WHAT POSH GIRLS SAY NOW, LITERALLY

Literally Used for dramatic effect constantly.

Pass-agg Passive-aggressive.

Hundy P One hundred per cent.

Natty wine Natural wine.

An ick A big turn-off.

Spenny Expensive.

Afters A party at someone's house, after the nightclub closes.

B Babe.

Cozzie livs The cost of living crisis.

Situationship Having casual, infrequent sex with someone.

Maccies McDonald's.

Gassed Excited or happy.

Arvo Afternoon.

Garms Clothes.

Let me get on the aux

I want to control the music.

Delulu Someone who is delusional about their achievements/love life.

New ick unlocked

Discovering a repulsive trait in the person that you're dating.

Nervy b Short for a nervous breakdown.

Cocky Cocktail.

It's giving... It has a similar vibe or look to...

Doing it for the plot Making rash decisions and saying yes to everything in a bid to make the "plot" of your life more interesting.

Genny lec Slang for the general election.

Ghosting The person you've been dating stops replying to your messages – and never replies again.

Fit check Look at my outfit.

Profesh Professional.

A creative Someone who works (probably freelance) in a non-corporate job.

Lizzy line The London Tube's Elizabeth Line.

Sick/Dank Great or cool.

The boys The male members of a group of friends.

Peng Good-looking. Or tasty.

Merked Drunk.

Tbf To be fair.

It slaps It's really good (can be food or an outfit).

posh boy," he says. "Then I went to Bristol and suddenly I was like a street urchin. Students there were like, 'Oh wow, do you know how to roll a spliff?'"

He was born in Leicester to a doctor father and therapist mother (who did "really good impressions"). In school, he says he was "cheeky-chappy naughty". His "parents had this horrific divorce", which meant he "misbehaved a lot" and "partied".

Growing up, he always wanted to be an actor, and still does. He did theatre productions as a youngster at Curve Theatre in Leicester and constantly sends out tapes for acting roles. He was desperate to go to drama school but his father wouldn't allow it. He said, "There are so many people who don't make it. No, you're going to university."

As we talk, it becomes clear that some of the groups he sends up are people who initially "intimidated" him. "The first time I went to Soho House, everyone was so cool. I sat there really trying to fit in. I was ordering picantes," he says of the private member's club's signature drink. "Then I looked around and realised everyone's doing this. I need to separate myself and make a video on it."

Similarly, his fellow students at Bristol overawed him. "There were so many cool guys who were trying so hard. I was really intimidated in their presence," he says. "When I left uni, I began to realise there's so much pretence behind that."

For the past five years he has lived with a "loaded" university friend whose father bought him a flat in London. "I've not had stuff handed to me. But objectively I am posh, and I've had opportunities that other people won't have," he says.

Has he dated a Minty? "I dated a really posh Chelsea girl. I've definitely had 'situationships' [flings] with Minty types. But the Mintys of the world go for the finance 'rah rah rah' boys."

I know plenty of women who fancy Rowley. Ladies, I'm sorry to report that he has been in a relationship for six months. Is he aware of his heart-throb status? "No. I get told I look like Rumpelstiltskin from *Shrek* a lot in TikTok comments. They've got a point."

Rowley met his girlfriend on Instagram. She messaged a year ago. "Then she just blanked me. It turns out she just wanted to say my video was funny, but wasn't trying to chirpse [make sexual advances]." He is now "absolutely in love".

Rowley's dating videos, which riff on being on dates with "creatives", finance bros, musicians or know-it-alls, also rack up thousands of likes and ring true. In one, the "creative" boy gets a book from his bag and says, "That's embarrassing. I've brought out my *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius... Do you want to come back to my place? It's just a mattress on the floor, but I've got some really cool artwork pieces of naked women that I've drawn myself and a towel that's not been washed in four years."

My single female friends have been on Hinge dates with the men depicted in Rowley's videos. They present themselves as arty, well read, feminist, sensitive souls, but, in nearly all cases, end up "ghosting" my friends after they get a shag.

"The date is such a relatable and cringey circumstance. I hear these horror stories from friends about boys being like that on dates," he says. His biggest audience is young British women, partly because "the dates are from the female perspective.

It's not as relatable for men and they may feel more attacked by that," he says.

Is his sketch POV: *You're on a Date with a Creative* based on him? "I was on the dating scene and it's probably inspired by me, but made to be the absolute worst," he says. "In dating, you always want to show the best sides of yourself, saying stuff like, 'So, I actually love to read.'"

He read a manual on scriptwriting that advised if you want to write about someone in a negative way but don't want them to raise a court case about character defamation, just give them a tiny penis. "Because no one's going to say, 'Yeah, that's me. I'm the one with the tiny penis,'" he says. "It's like that with these characters. You make them so horrendous that no one wants to claim it."

His other dating series, called *POV: On a Date with the Walking Ick*, is almost too cringe-inducing to watch. An "ick" is slang for an immediate turn-off. Rowley's "walking ick" says, "Mmmm, you're wearing the same perfume that my sister wears," or, "God, it all looks so scrummy," or, "I do a bit of spoken word in my spare time. Would it be weird if I read you some, like right now?"

At 26, Rowley sits at the older end of Gen Z. Is he typical of my cohort? Is he addicted to his phone? Does he love vaping? "My screen time is not too bad – four or five hours. I hate vaping. I do smoke when I drink though." That being said, later he asks me, "Is it forward if I ask for some of your vape?" and puffs on my peach Elf Bar. "But obviously, I am Gen Z. I mean, my job is 'TikToker'. I can't say I'm not. Who am I kidding?"

The night before, he played a stand-up gig in Maidenhead, Berkshire. "The average age of the audience was, like, 90," he says. "I was thinking, 'Oh my gosh, I've got a whole sketch dedicated to willy jokes. This is not going to work.'"

He's returning to the Edinburgh Fringe this summer. Last year he "sensed hostility" from the established stand-ups, when he and other TikTokers played Edinburgh's Cabaret Bar. "I felt so hated. They were looking at us like, 'Oh, TikTokers,' because they've worked all their lives to get to where they are." They relaxed when he told them, "I'm actually really shit. I'm nothing like you guys."

Rowley tells me he has a tennis lesson to get to, so we hug goodbye and I tell him I'll see him at the photoshoot "in the arvo". He laughs and repeats "arvooo". He's probably recording his next skit about posh girls who say "arvo" right now. ■

Henry Rowley: *Just Literally is at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival Pleasance Courtyard Beside from July 31-August 26, ahead of an autumn tour of the UK and Ireland from October 16-November 29 (henryrowley.com)*

The **DOCTOR**

The **MIDLIFE PATIENT**



HOW TO TURN ON YOUR LIBIDO
Inside the testosterone clinic





The YOUNG PATIENT

The COUPLE

Erectile dysfunction, off sex, mood swings, poor sleep and memory loss? Meet the doctor who thinks testosterone is the answer – and the men breaking taboos by talking about it.
By Michael Odell

From left: Dr Jeff Foster, who runs a clinic that treats men with low testosterone; his patient Stephen Webb; patient turned testosterone clinic founder Alastair Kennett; Anthony and Rachael Clark Hurd. Portraits: Tim Jobling. Story continues on page 38



GOOD

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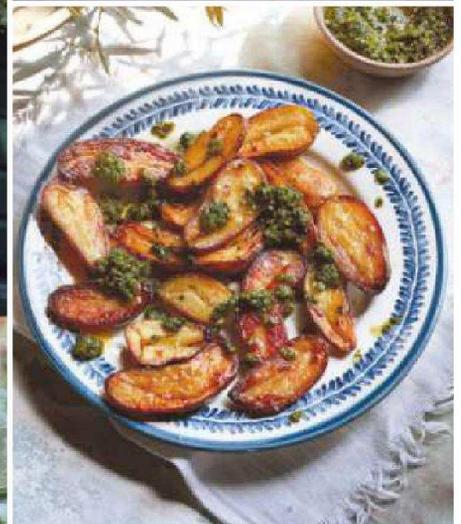
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THE  TIMES

Eat!

Five delicious summer dishes by Ben Tish

4-PAGE
PULLOUT



How to make the most moreish Mediterranean

Despite the fact that the first dish he learnt to cook was steak au poivre and his early chef jobs were in high-end Michelin-starred kitchens, Ben Tish has always felt an affinity for the sunny food of the Mediterranean. “My life changed 20 years ago when a chance opportunity arose to help at the opening of an Italian restaurant, Al Duca, in London. The all-southern Italian team were completely focused on authenticity,” he says, recalling the leafy lemons, misshapen courgettes and young artichokes that were flown in from Sardinia that morning. “It was like nothing I’d seen before. I could smell the tomatoes before they had arrived in the kitchen.”

A year later he was made head chef and began visiting Calabria, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily. There he learnt to embrace the simplicity of allowing good ingredients to dictate the menu.

Now executive chef of the Cubitt House group of restaurants, he has travelled extensively around the whole Mediterranean basin for his latest book, *Mediterra*. “These are the dishes I love to share with friends, family and customers alike,” he says. “And if I have a message, it’s not only to cook like a Mediterranean, but to eat like one too.” **Tony Turnbull**

CLEMENCE STREET MOUSSAKA

Serves 4

While mostly associated with Greece, moussaka has its roots in the Middle East where layers of aubergine, tomato and meat are baked and combined with fresh herbs, cheeses and spices. Eastern Europe also has a version that predates the Greek.

This is my version, inspired by many wonderfully vivid and sparkling Greek holidays, now regularly enjoyed at our home in east London.

- Olive oil
- 3 medium or 2 large aubergines, cut lengthways into 5mm slices
- A handful of panko breadcrumbs
- Sea salt and black pepper
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1½ tsp ground cinnamon
- A handful of mint leaves, chopped, plus extra to garnish
- 500g minced lamb
- 2 tbsp tomato puree
- 200ml dry red wine
- 400g tinned chopped tomatoes
- A handful of parsley, chopped

For the sauce

- 500ml whole milk
- 60g butter, diced
- 60g plain white flour
- 50g kefalotyri or pecorino cheese, grated, plus extra to finish (optional)



- 2 large free-range eggs, beaten
- Nutmeg, for grating

1. Preheat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Lightly oil as many baking sheets as you need to hold the aubergine slices in a single layer.
2. Place the aubergines on the baking sheets. Sprinkle with the breadcrumbs, drizzle over a little olive oil and season. Bake for about 20 minutes until they are soft, golden and tender. Do not turn off the oven when you take out the aubergines.
3. Meanwhile, heat a good splash of olive oil in a large frying pan over a medium-high heat. When hot, add the onion and fry, stirring occasionally, until it is softened but without colour. Add the garlic, cinnamon and half the mint leaves and stir for a further couple of minutes.
4. Stir in the lamb, turn up the heat slightly and brown the meat well, cooking until the mixture is quite dry. Stir in the tomato puree and wine and bring to a simmer, then add the tomatoes. Turn down the heat to low and leave to simmer for 30-40 minutes until most of the liquid has evaporated. Season well and stir in the parsley.
5. Make the sauce. Bring the milk to just below boiling in one pan and melt the butter in another saucepan over a medium-low heat. Stir the flour into the butter and continue stirring for 2 minutes, then gradually whisk in the hot milk until you have a thick, smooth sauce. Add the cheese and stir until melted. Take the

pan off the heat and leave it to cool slightly, then beat in the eggs, grate in nutmeg to taste and season with salt and pepper.

6. Arrange one third of the aubergines in an ovenproof serving dish, then top with half the lamb ragout. Repeat these layers, finishing with a layer of aubergine and the sauce spooned over the top.

7. Place the dish on a baking sheet and transfer to the oven. Bake for about 45 minutes until bubbling and well browned. Set aside to cool for 30 minutes before serving. Sprinkle over extra cheese, if you want, and garnish with the remaining mint leaves.

FRIED SQUID WITH SAMPHIRE AND PRESERVED LEMONS

Serves 4 as a starter

One of life’s true pleasures – a plate of crispy squid served alongside an ice-cold beer, preferably somewhere by the sea where it is sunny and hot.

The Cretans know how to fry squid. Baby squid are the best when split, dipped in a coarse flour and fried very quickly for a nice crunch and served piping hot.

- 400g baby squid, cleaned and cut in half, tentacles and all
- 500ml whole milk
- 4 tbsp coarse cornflour
- 4 tbsp plain white flour
- Sea salt



- Rapeseed or sunflower oil, for deep-frying
- 2 preserved lemons, drained and sliced (remove any pips)

To serve

- 30g fresh cleaned samphire
- Lemon wedges
- Shop-bought aioli or mayonnaise (optional)

1. Place the squid in a bowl and pour over the milk. Leave for an hour or so – this helps to tenderise the flesh. Mix together the cornflour, flour and 1 tsp sea salt, then set aside.
2. Heat enough oil for deep-frying in a deep-fat fryer or a heavy-based saucepan until it reaches 180C on a thermometer or until a sprinkle of flour fizzes on impact.
3. Drain the squid well and transfer to the flour mixture along with the preserved lemon slices. Toss through to coat and then shake off any excess.
4. Working in batches, add the squid and preserved lemons to the oil and fry until they are crispy and light golden brown. Drain well on a tray lined with kitchen paper and sprinkle with sea salt. Keep warm in a low oven and continue until all the squid and lemon slices are fried.
5. Serve in bowls with the samphire, lemon wedges for squeezing over and the aioli or mayonnaise, if using.



SPAGHETTI WITH DATTERINI TOMATOES, ANCHOVIES AND SAGE

Serves 4

This is perhaps the ultimate spaghetti al pomodoro – I have made a few little tweaks to add layers of extra flavour.

Good ripe tomatoes such as datterini are now readily available in supermarkets. The anchovies give a nice hit of umami while the added dash of balsamic to the sauce lends sweetness and depth (a good tip for meat ragouts as well).

- 200g ripe datterini, cherry or other small tomatoes
- 1 large fresh red chilli, stalk and seeds removed
- Olive oil
- Sea salt and black pepper
- 3 salted anchovy fillets, rinsed and very finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves
- Chopped leaves from 2 fresh thyme sprigs
- 200ml tomato passata
- ½ tsp dried chilli flakes, or to taste
- Balsamic vinegar (optional)
- 400g fresh or dried spaghetti
- A handful of sage leaves
- 30g pecorino or parmesan, finely grated, plus extra to serve
- Extra virgin olive oil
- A handful of day-old breadcrumbs, fried in olive oil until golden (optional – this is the southern Italian way)

1. Preheat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6.
2. Place the tomatoes and chilli in a roasting tin, drizzle with olive oil and season well. Sprinkle over the anchovies, garlic and thyme leaves and roast for 30 minutes or until the tomatoes are softened.
3. Transfer everything to a saucepan over a medium heat and pour over the passata. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer until the tomatoes start to break up. Season again and sprinkle in chilli flakes to taste. A dash of balsamic here is nice. Keep the sauce hot.
4. Meanwhile, bring a pan of salted water to the boil. Add the pasta and boil until just al dente. Using tongs, transfer the pasta to the sauce with a couple of ladles of the starchy pasta water. Stir and toss through the pasta to coat, adding the sage, cheese and extra virgin olive oil to taste. Give it another stir. Serve in bowls and sprinkle over more cheese and breadcrumbs, if using.

ROAST CHICKEN WITH GRAPES, WINE AND ROSEMARY

Serves 6

There's something so wonderfully comforting and therapeutic about the whole process of roasting a chicken. This exquisite Provençal version sets sweet roasted grapes and fragrantly aromatic rosemary as a backdrop to the salty chicken. ▀



PHOTOGRAPHS Kris Kirkham

- 1 red onion, unpeeled and cut into quarters
- 1 garlic bulb, cut in half widthways
- 1 oven-ready free-range chicken, about 1.8kg
- Olive oil
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 4 fresh rosemary sprigs
- Half an unwaxed lemon
- 700g seedless red or black grapes, ideally on their stalks
- 200ml dry red wine
- 300ml chicken stock (fresh or homemade is best)

1. Preheat the oven to 200C fan/gas 7.
 2. Put the onion and half the garlic bulb in a deep roasting tin. Rub the chicken with olive oil, then season all over and inside the cavity. Place 1 rosemary sprig, the lemon half and the remaining half garlic bulb in the cavity. Place the chicken on the onion and garlic and transfer to the oven. Roast for 30 minutes or until the skin has started to brown nicely and caramelise.
 3. Reduce the heat to 160C fan/gas 4. Scatter the grapes and three rosemary sprigs around the chicken and pour around the wine and half the stock. Roast for a further 45 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through – it should be crisp and golden on the outside and the juices should run clear when the thigh is pierced.
 4. Transfer the chicken to a rimmed plate, cover with kitchen foil and leave to rest for 15 minutes. Do not turn off the oven.

5. Meanwhile, strain all the juices from the roasting tin into a saucepan. Put the grapes back in the tin and return to the oven. Roast for a further 5 minutes or until they are sticky and begin to caramelise.
 6. Add the remaining 150ml stock to the pan and boil for 10 minutes or until the juices have reduced and thickened. Serve the chicken with the sticky, sweet grapes and the sauce for pouring over at the table.

SLOW-ROAST POTATOES WITH GREEN SAUCE

Serves 4; the sauce makes about 200ml

A wonderful dish from Mallorca, where potatoes are revered as much as meat or fish. It's one of my favourite potato dishes, great on its own or served with grilled meats and fish. You need a starchy potato for this. I like Pink Firs, but rattes or Charlottes are also good. The salt seems excessive, but it helps dry the potatoes and creates a delicious salty crust.

- 500g Pink Fir or other waxy, dry potatoes (see above), scrubbed
- 100g sea salt, plus extra for sprinkling
- Olive oil

For the green sauce (mojo verde)

- 100ml extra virgin olive oil
- 20ml red wine vinegar
- 1 tbsp fennel fronds
- 1 green chilli, deseeded
- 1 garlic clove

- 100g coriander sprigs
- 50g flatleaf parsley sprigs
- Half a green pepper, halved, cored and deseeded
- ½ tsp ground cumin
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. Place the potatoes in a large saucepan and cover by 3cm with cold water. Add 100g sea salt and then bring to the boil, covered. Uncover the pan, lower the heat and leave the potatoes to simmer until just tender. Drain well. When they are cool enough to handle, cut in half lengthways.
 2. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5.
 3. Place all the sauce ingredients in a blender and blitz until a coarse paste forms. Season to taste. Set aside until needed.
 4. Pour a good layer of olive oil into a roasting tray. Add the potatoes and stir them round, then sprinkle with more salt. Roast for 35-40 minutes, tossing once or twice, until crisp and golden. Drain the potatoes on a tea towel and serve with the mojo verde spooned over the top. ■

Mediterra by Ben Tish (Bloomsbury Absolute, £26) is published on Thursday. To order go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free P&P on online orders over £25. Discount for Times+ members





A SHORE WINNER

Warm welcomes, whale sharks, walks in the Valley of the Giants and on tranquil beaches – why Western Australia is one of Bill Bailey’s favourite places on Earth

You may have seen him on the four-part Channel 4 series *Bill Bailey’s Australian Adventure*, following his epic exploration of Western Australia. Still available to stream, it makes for compulsive viewing. And for anyone considering a visit, he’s full of pointers about the state’s west coast – the treasure of Oz.

“I first heard about WA as a kid thanks to my Auntie Gwen who moved to Perth with her husband in the Seventies,” says Bill. “It sounded extremely exotic to me.

“Now it’s one of my favourite places in the world. In WA, you can get away from it all – literally everything you’ve ever known. The scale of it is like nowhere else. It’s the size of western Europe. It’s the open space, the amazing skies and vistas.”

For the show, Bill travelled south to north, taking around four weeks, during the Australian winter. “The sunny days were absurdly beautiful,” he says. “White sands, impossibly turquoise waters. Just two people on the beach: a dog-walker and an influencer being followed by his own drone.”

In the southwest, he visited the Valley of the Giants, known for its treetop walk suspended 40m above ground in the canopy of huge gum trees. “It feels like the Lost World!”

Further up the coast he got to fulfil a long-held dream. “At the Ningaloo Marine Park, I finally got to swim with whale sharks – a promise I made myself 20 years ago. These benign creatures can grow to reach 60ft and live for 130 years. It was a stunning experience.”

There are around 550 bird species found in Western Australia, some of which are unique to the state. That made it even more special for this famous birdwatcher.

“One of the most beautiful is the splendid fairywren. They’re an extraordinary bright blue and you won’t see them anywhere else in the world,” he says. “The wildlife is breathtaking. Like a lot of the birds, the smiley quokkas on Rottne Island, off the coast of Perth, seem completely unbothered by humans.

You can see them snoozing beneath Moreton Bay fig trees.”

Variety is an endless notion in Western Australia – whatever you are looking for in a trip, there’s the perfect spot for you to find it.

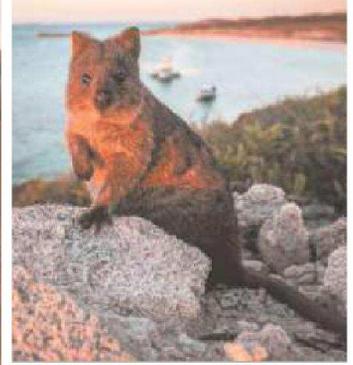
Bill says: “There are a million ways to travel WA. Perth has all the big city attractions, Margaret River has wineries, restaurants and million-year-old caves, Esperance has natural wonders – including kangaroos sunbathing on the beach – and Broome has a tropical climate and 80km of dinosaur tracks. You just need to choose.

“My welcome to WA was a personal highlight. Doc Reynolds, an Aboriginal elder, led a smoking ceremony for me. The smoke from the burning of native leaves clung to me. I felt as if it was saying, while you are here, you will be of this land. I was so moved. The landscape is not just old, but ancient – it activates a bit of the ancient part of us. The bit that likes to live outdoors, that has time to watch the sun set, to watch the sun rise. It changes your rhythms, your motivations – and it inspires you.”



Natural attraction: Cape Peron; a cute quokka; whale shark at Ningaloo Reef; Bill Bailey

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WHY I LOVE WA

by Brody Whiteman
Travel expert, Flight Centre

- It’s always summer somewhere in Western Australia. Explore Perth and the southwest in the UK winter. Go north to Ningaloo Reef and the Kimberley for perfect weather and fascinating wildlife from March to October.

- Hire a car – the space and otherworldly landscapes of the state call out for a road trip.

- At Cape Range National Park, the Yardie Creek nature walk is great for spotting ospreys, emus and wallabies. In Turquoise Bay, “drift snorkel” to see Ningaloo Reef’s coral and marine life.

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WESTERN AUSTRALIA
WALKING ON A DREAM



NOUGHT TO SIX

After six decades of shaking up Britain, beloved home and furniture brand Habitat is still going strong. So what's next?

It's difficult to imagine how different British homes would look without the existence of Habitat. Founded in 1964 by designer Terence Conran, the much-loved furniture brand was responsible for bringing modern design to the masses and introducing the public to novelties such as flatpack furniture, the wok (complete with its own instruction manual) and even the humble duvet – bedtime would never be the same again.

Beyond pioneering new product categories, the company has contributed countless classics to the canon of British design in the 60 years since opening its doors on London's Fulham Road. There's the bent-wood Larsa bistro chair, the

origami-inspired Ribbon light – a collector's favourite – and, of course, the chicken brick, a terracotta device for steam-cooking poultry that was a mainstay of 1970s wedding registries.

Now, in celebration of its 60th birthday, the company is set to revive some of the nation's most beloved archive pieces. "This anniversary has allowed us to bring iconic pieces back into the fold, reimagining some of these classics from decades past for how we live today," says Andrew Tanner, Habitat's head of design. The chicken brick, for example, has been given a sleek matt black makeover, while the Pixar-esque Bobby lamp has grown into a full floor light.

Accompanying the old faithful is a range of new products designed by Habitat's in-house team and a roster

of guest designers. Conran's sons Felix and Sebastian are contributing products alongside textile designer Margo Selby, ceramicist Silvia Kamodyová and Habitat veteran Tord Boontje.

Habitat's back catalogue also served as inspiration for many of these new releases. Just look at the Ripple rugs by Simone Brewster, which draw inspiration from the artist's paintings of the female form, as well as the brand's 1970s textile designs.

The aim is for these products to become the woks and wedding list staples of tomorrow. "Our design team was truly motivated to develop considered and practical pieces that will serve us for decades," says Tanner. With Habitat ready to revolutionise our homes all over again, here's to another 60 years.



THE RIPPLE RUGS DRAW INSPIRATION FROM THE ARTIST'S PAINTINGS OF THE FEMALE FORM



Party people
The Habitat core design
team with guest designers



CLASSICS REIMAGINED

1 RIPPLE RUG £295

Brush strokes are interpreted through tufted wool in these abstract rugs based on nude paintings by Simone Brewster.

2 LARSA CHAIR £160 FOR TWO

With its elegant steam-bent curves, Britain's answer to the Viennese bistro chair is a certified classic from Habitat's back catalogue.

3 RIBBON LIGHT £50

Beloved by flea market scourers and eBay collectors everywhere, the Ribbon metal table light returns in a special shade of "anniversary blue".

4 JACKSON 4 PIECE PASTA BOWLS £20

This splatter-finish tableware dishes up a contemporary take on Mediterranean pottery from Habitat's design team.

60
YEARS OF
DESIGN

Discover the 60th anniversary
collection at habitat.co.uk

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Men may be from Mars and women from Venus, but the real gender differences show up in how the sexes behave in GP Jeff Foster's surgery. "Women tend to say what's on their mind," Foster says. "But a lot of men are what I call anxious 'knob clingers'. They chat generally and only tell me what the real issue is when they're on their way out and clinging to my doorknob. It'll be, 'Actually, there's one more thing...' or, 'My wife said I should mention...'"

Foster's GP practice is in Leamington Spa and he's a good advert for men's wellbeing. He goes to the gym five times a week, cycles and plays football. His male patients like the fact he looks good and emits easygoing "bro" vibes. One feels you could tell him anything.

"Guys who can't get it up often wait years to do anything about it, if they do anything at all," he says. "When they walk in here, I encourage them to be brave. Tell me if you can't get erect. Not only can I give you your erections back, but a deeper look at your issues might possibly save your life."

As a male GP, he is regularly consulted about erectile dysfunction. According to research conducted by the maker of Eroxon, a topical gel which it claims can produce an erection in ten minutes, 50 per cent of all men over 40 will experience erectile issues. But what's the problem? Last year marked the 25th anniversary of the introduction of the erectile dysfunction pill Viagra and last year 4.5 million doses were prescribed in the UK – with 7,000 going to men in their nineties in 2022.

But Foster isn't sure we should be celebrating. Viagra is an example of men grasping for the quick, easy fix when the real problems may lie much deeper.

"Your penis really is the barometer for overall health and I wish men would see that," he says. "If you don't address the underlying causes of erectile dysfunction, recent data says you probably have three years until you will likely have a heart attack or a stroke."

Erectile dysfunction might have psychological or hormonal causes but, warns Foster, more often than not it indicates wider vascular damage. Impaired blood supply to the penis can in turn signal impaired blood supply to the heart. It's one of the health issues that Foster tries to communicate to medicine's hardest to reach cohort: men over the age of 40.

"Women often develop a lifelong relationship with their GP," Foster says. "They visit for the contraceptive pill, then cervical and breast scans and also when they are pregnant. Then they usually take charge of children's appointments

Michael Douglas with his partner, Davina McCall



'I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT ME AND DAVINA IN THE BEDROOM DEPARTMENT, BUT MY LIBIDO IMPROVED'

if they start a family. Men don't engage in the same way and they suffer needlessly, sometimes even die as a result."

Foster has been practising for 14 years. Three years ago he set up a clinic specifically for men called H3. It's private – a men's health MOT costs £500. He says men's health, particularly sexual health, is an overlooked area. And it's not just erections. Patients present issues in a variety of ways.

Thirty-year-old Ben Jackson walked through the door of H3 two years ago. Despite being a fitness fanatic who runs, plays rugby and does bodybuilding, he felt something wasn't right.

"I was doing all this sport yet feeling lethargic and suffering with low libido," he says. "I don't want to knock the NHS, but when I mentioned to my GP I thought I might have low testosterone he assumed I wanted it to enhance my bodybuilding, which was rubbish."

Foster's speciality is the sex hormone testosterone and the myriad symptoms arising from a deficiency. He is one of the authors of national guidelines on its prescription published last year by the British Society for Sexual Medicine.

Jackson paid for his MOT. The one-hour check-up involved completing a questionnaire about lifestyle, family medical history, diet, mental health and exercise habits. There followed a physical examination including an ECG (an electrocardiogram indicates healthy heart rate and rhythm), urine dip (urine analysis can disclose anything from liver disease and kidney stones to diabetes) and a range of blood tests.

A week later, Jackson had his results. Foster diagnosed a "free" testosterone

deficiency (overall testosterone levels may be normal but "free" testosterone – that which is not bound to proteins – is available for use building muscle, driving good mood, libido, erections etc). Jackson now pays £28 for a monthly testosterone jab.

"I sleep better and the body fat around my middle has shifted."

I speak to Michael Douglas on the set of an ITV production called *My Mum, Your Dad* (where single parents nominated by their children go on dates with each other) with his partner, the broadcaster Davina McCall. Douglas is a hairdresser with a client list that includes the actors Johnny Depp and Sienna Miller and, of course, McCall herself.

McCall has long been a vocal advocate for the better understanding of female menopause. In 2021 she hosted the Channel 4 documentary *Sex, Myths and the Menopause* and the following year published (with co-writer Dr Naomi Potter) a well-received book called *Menopausal*.

But that meant when Douglas, 50, started feeling a bit down and experiencing low libido, he wasn't sure if he should mention it. After all, a sudden drop in testosterone in middle age (sometimes infelicitously known as "late onset hypogonadism") is often confused with the so-called "manopause".

"What with some women already feeling men are encroaching on their space with regard to trans issues, I totally get it when they say, 'Oh, and now they want to barge in on the menopause with their manopause!'" he says. "But Davina was actually fascinated. She doesn't feel women's issues are being undermined if men go through something comparable. You don't just want half the population feeling good, right?"

Like many men, Douglas wasn't sure what underpinned his symptoms. His morning mood was foggy and he often lacked energy at the gym. In the evenings he didn't want to go out to socialise.

"I love my life but sometimes in the morning there was this sense of, 'I might just go back to bed.' Davina didn't notice because I tried to hide it. I'd make an effort, but if you ask a lot of men in their forties and over, it's not an uncommon experience."

One of Douglas's friends was taking testosterone shots in Dubai. He suggested Douglas did the same.

"I'm the kind of guy that says, 'I'm not injecting myself with anything,'" he says. But after consulting Jeff Foster, blood tests showed that while his overall testosterone wasn't low (the healthy scale runs from 6 to 27 nanomoles per litre; Douglas scored a 20), his free testosterone could have been better. Foster prescribed

The HUSBAND AND WIFE

'His libido went down and I think he felt he wasn't man enough for me any more'

Anthony, 64, and Rachael Clark Hurd, 40, have been together for 20 years. He is retired and is now a part-time model. They have three children and live in Portsmouth. Anthony began testosterone replacement therapy three years ago.

Anthony

Having a much younger partner, you do feel a bit insecure sometimes. In the early days there were occasions when men would hit on Rachael because they'd look at me and think he's a bit of an old fart, I must have a chance. So it has always been important to me to keep fit for her, but also for me. A few years ago I started training three times a week. But after a while, I was finding that, by Friday, I was knackered. I had also started to feel really flat and moody.

I have always been very sexually active. When you have a family, the approach is, "Quick, the kids are out!" But gradually I wasn't feeling that any more either. I remember one evening Rachael bent over the bath to turn on the taps while I was cleaning my teeth. She said, "If I had done that a few years ago you would have jumped me." She was right. I hadn't noticed the change.

Losing my sex drive knocked me for six. I started to feel a bit useless, which is not something I have ever felt in my life. When you feel a failure, that has an effect on the whole family.

Rachael would say, "I don't know why you are making such a big deal out of it. We are a couple – am I that shallow?" But she also understood that to me it was a massive deal. Even her saying to me, "I understand what you are going through. I still love you," couldn't change anything. In the end it had to be, "Let's talk about how we are going to deal with this."

A friend suggested a consultation with a clinic called Optimale. Speaking

to someone made me feel so much better. Blood tests then showed my testosterone levels were low. So I take 0.6mg of TRT on a Monday and a Friday, which costs me £100 a month. I felt transformed after a week. My mood improved and work improved because I was more focused. It's not just about keeping your muscles or "horizontal jogging" with no issue. It's about the alertness it gives you.

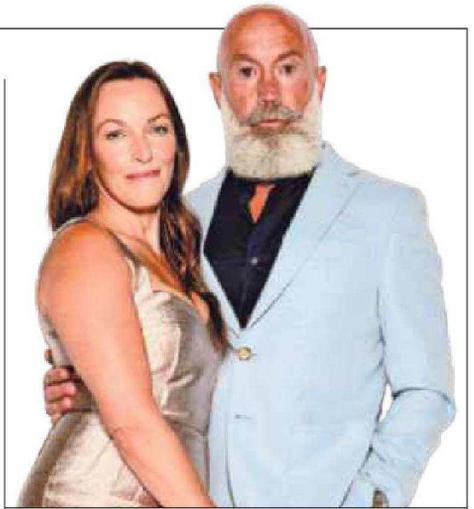
My youngest child is three, so I want to keep healthy.

Rachael

Tony is a very energetic, youthful person. Then a few years ago, things started to change. He became quite low, very moody and introverted, with little patience with the children and me. He would get stressed, then his libido went down and that really affected him. I think he didn't feel that he was man enough for me any more. It was a vicious circle. When we'd be in the mood, the pressure he put on himself would build. Then he might get some erectile dysfunction, and he would put even more pressure on himself.

We've always had a great sex life and we'd still always try, but it started to come with a niggling worry for me: if Tony doesn't fulfil what he wants to fulfil this time, I know he'll be cross with himself, embarrassed. And it won't stop there – it will be a continuous worry for him. The next time there'll be even more pressure.

I think Tony began to feel quite lost. He had been very manly with a very high sex drive, and to lose that feeling was hard for him. Being aware of the age gap between us probably didn't help. We are very open with each other so luckily, unlike some couples, we were able to talk about it. We did try Viagra, but we have three children. What are you going to do? You pop a tablet and then you hear, "Mummy, I need my bum wiping," and



Tony is left walking around with a tea towel holder. That's not a long-term solution. For us, sex isn't something we can plan out as there is always someone around who needs something.

In hindsight, the situation was declining for about a year. Then we got to a point where I said, "We are not making any headway here. Things are not improving and it's affecting your mental health. It's giving you anxiety and it's affecting me and the family, as you are not very fun to be around." We did research and TRT seemed to be the answer.

Like many women, I didn't have a clue what TRT was until then. If it was spoken about more, women could approach their husbands, or men could broach it with their wives and say, "I think this may be a problem."

After beginning treatment, his confidence came back. His muscle loss reversed, as did his tiredness. And we could have sex at the drop of a hat again. Tony quickly became the person he used to be. Less stressed, less grumpy with everyone. He was just so much lighter and happier.

Sex has never been a baby-making exercise for us. It's always been about having a connection, having an intimate time with each other. Over the years, we have really evolved as a couple and we have brought three lovely children into the world. We have grown together – and being able to talk about subjects like this has made us even closer.

a daily 5mg tablet of the drug tadalafil, a drug which temporarily increases blood flow to the penis.

"I don't want to talk about me and Davina in the bedroom department, but let's just say my libido improved. It did good things for us." Why is Douglas speaking out now? Because he believes that too many men are suffering in silence.

"Men are just not good about talking about their health," he says. "I was used to waking up each morning

and looking forward to life. Now I've got that back."

Sometimes the symptoms Foster sees are much harder to interpret. Stephen Webb, 52, is a self-described "cheeky chappie". It's partly why he was cast in Channel 4's reality TV show *Gogglebox* between 2013 and 2023. The Brighton-based hairdresser used to enjoy running but he consulted Foster in 2023 after experiencing high levels of anxiety.

"I went from running a half-marathon most weekends to this very anxious

person," he says. "I'd get stressed about driving into town and finding a parking space, anxious about answering the phone, even to friends. In terms of libido, it wasn't exactly floppy-willy time, but I lost desire there too."

Webb had been to see his regular GP and was told his symptoms were all part of growing old. He also signed up for six sessions of counselling after it was suggested he was depressed.

"I knew I wasn't depressed," he says. "And then I read the chapter on



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testosterone in Jeff Foster's book *Man Alive* and all the symptoms fitted mine."

"Testosterone affects almost every cell in your body," Foster says. "It has this reputation as the hormone that makes you angry if you have too much, but the converse is also true. Without enough, men are like postmenopausal women. It can affect sex drive, ability to gain muscle, mood, even memory."

Perhaps Foster's most extraordinary patient was a man in his seventies who was suffering with memory problems. In fact, when he went to his regular GP, he was diagnosed with dementia. That is, until his family paid for him to see Foster.

"I prescribed long-action testosterone shots every 9-12 weeks and his faculties were restored," he beams.

Middle-aged men are one thing, but millennial men (those aged late twenties to early forties) can also be affected. This is unusual, since testosterone levels generally begin to decline in men only when they reach 30 and even then at a rate of just one per cent a year. But that was not the experience of Alastair Kennett, now aged 35 and a former NHS physiotherapist. He was just 27 when he first experienced a variety of troubling symptoms.

"I would yawn all through work," he recalls. "And if I went to the gym in the evening I would just sit there, exhausted. At night it would take me two hours to fall asleep and I started to get quite bad anxiety at work. My libido was dropping. I had this feeling of depression and low mood but for no reason at all. I had a girlfriend, good friends."

Kennett took a blood test and discovered his testosterone levels were low. In fact, his brother David, two years older than Alastair, was also struggling with the same symptoms and they later discovered their father suffered a deficiency in the hormone too.

"I suspect there is a genetic element," he speculates. However, two weekly testosterone injections totalling 120mg have changed his life. "I was suddenly a lot more assertive and confident at work," he says. "My energy levels skyrocketed. I started falling asleep within about ten minutes. My brother saw the same thing."

Kennett is highly sceptical of the standard NHS response to testosterone deficiency. Many GPs, he claims, are dismissive of men's concerns. They assume they are bodybuilders wanting to build muscle and he has heard of some men being told, "You can grow a beard, so you don't have low testosterone."

It's also complicated by the fact that many symptoms present as depression and men are prescribed medication for low mood instead. "It's the kind of response that women used to hear when trying to get HRT," he says.

'IT'S THE KIND OF RESPONSE WOMEN USED TO HEAR WHEN TRYING TO GET HRT'

In 2017, a year after experiencing the benefits of testosterone replacement therapy (TRT), Kennett and his brother set up Optimale, a testosterone replacement therapy clinic. Since partnering with Manual, a London men's health startup, they have become one of the largest TRT clinics in the country, he claims, treating 5,000 men.

"We think only 1 per cent of men in the UK who have low testosterone are being treated for it," he says. "It affects a huge number of men, and most of them have no idea that this is an issue that they are facing."

Meanwhile, back in Leamington Spa, Jeff Foster has some salutary observations about young men who almost certainly do not need to worry about their testosterone or sexual performance. These are younger men still – often older Gen Z (roughly up to the age of 27) – a cohort almost too clued up about sex. Gen Z have navigated their sexual development under the warping influence of both internet porn and social media and their expectations sometimes alarm Foster.

"When I was growing up you really had to make a considerable effort to see a porno mag," he says. "Young men nowadays are bombarded with porn and therefore think they should be having sex ten times a night. Or they think their penis should be bigger. There is no doubt we are seeing younger men coming in asking for testosterone, but if you are under 30 it is very unlikely you need it."

I speak to David Joyce, 20 – not a patient of Foster's – who, after becoming anxious about his sexual performance, bought Viagra on the internet. He even considered penis enlargement surgery.

"My first serious girlfriend at uni broke up with me and I talked myself into thinking it was to do with how often we had sex and also my penis size. I thought it was something that I could fix either with surgery or supplements. A lot of boys my age think that way. The gym is where you develop this mindset that says, 'You should be shagging all night, so do what you need to do to make it happen.'"

In the end Joyce opted not to have enlargement surgery after having counselling. He now accepts there is nothing wrong with his body or his performance. "There is so much bullshit out there, it has been a nightmare talking myself back into the right headspace again," he says.

Speaking anonymously, one GP told

me she believes that the proliferation of adolescents with gender anxiety issues might be partly explained by similar sexual disinformation on social media.

"If you are bombarded with content telling you you should have a penis this size, or enjoying nonstop sex all weekend, then is it any wonder some children decide, 'I don't recognise myself in those stereotypes, so I'm opting out.'"

So when should men be worried and when not?

"For many men, having an erection is part of what makes you a guy – it makes you intrinsically masculine. So if you want to carry on and enjoy it there are options," Foster says. "For some men and their partners, declining sexual activity is not an issue. Good for them. I know my wife worries when I say this, but I hope to still be having great sex when I'm in my nineties."

Men may flock to Foster's clinic, but the "manopause" is hotly contested territory in the culture wars. Last year the broadcaster and menopause campaigner Mariella Frostrup wrote, "This is nothing short of a land grab. A ludicrous and blatant appropriation of women's midlife health problems."

"Our argument is: this is not a competition," Foster says. "If one person feels terrible and the other is OK, that can destroy a relationship. The menopause does affect all women whereas only a quarter of men are affected by testosterone deficiency, but we don't know enough about it because men are reticent about their own health. You can argue that despite having the run of medicine for the past few centuries – both as practitioners and policymakers – men still die earlier than women in all aspects of health. Part of it is genetic, part of it is lifestyle, but a part is poor planning by the health fraternity."

Foster's health MOT is expensive though. Isn't this privatisation by the back door? "You could ask your GP for all the same blood tests we do. In fact, if you go and see any consultant privately they should be offering the same principle of work in the NHS, otherwise they shouldn't be doing it. But let's face it, the standard GP appointment is about eight minutes. We take an hour and a half and the outcomes speak for themselves."

Michael Douglas sounds perky. After we speak, once he and McCall finish filming, they plan to go out to dinner.

"Before I got checked out I wouldn't have wanted to go," he says. "I've got my mojo back and, when you get to your fifties, nothing matters more than being healthy and enjoying your life. I say this to all men: the age when we suffered nobly in silence, then conked out with a heart attack, is gone. Get yourself checked out." ■

**ONE MUM, TWO DADS,
TWO HOUSES
(6,800 MILES APART),
ONE BABY**



Ellie Fazan reached 40 single and fearing she would never have a child – until she asked her friend, Eddie, left, if he would be a co-parent. The only problem? He lives in the Philippines and is in a relationship with Jack, right. What happened next? Say hello to Sid, aged one...



From left: Eddie, Ellie, baby Sid, now one, and Jack, photographed by Jooney Woodward at home in east London

They say it takes a village to raise a child. “A vineyard, more like,” jokes Eddie. He and his partner, Jack, are the fathers of my baby, Sid, and we’re having family lunch for the first time in our new kitchen in east London. Warm bread and crisp rosé are laid out on our recently installed pink and gold flecked terrazzo worktop. Meanwhile, our son has somehow got the lid off a jar of peanut butter and has his little fist inside.

Sid will turn one in a few weeks and we are basking in the joy of our modern family after combining our assets to turn a neglected former council house on the fringes of Hackney into a home. Sid and I have the top floor, with a spare room for visiting grannies; the boys have their own space, including a bathroom and a grown-up sitting room; and the downstairs is a big open-plan family space with a (wipeable) mint green floor.

Not that it is always easy. We are three fortysomething adults with our own way of doing things. We share much – a love of food, travel, hosting, family, music and, of course, Sid – but it’s the small things we trip on. Like, what time to eat: I prefer to eat early with Sid and then do his bedtime; they prefer to feed Sid and eat afterwards. Or which drawer the cheese grater should live in. I am the primary caregiver and take the lead on day-to-day decisions regarding Sid, but they have two voices that must be heard, which can at times be difficult to navigate. Eddie and Jack have been a couple for 20 years and they even share a language that I do not speak: Tagalog. Eddie is Filipino and the boys run a business in the Philippines. It’s been a huge sacrifice for them, moving their lives from a paradisiacal island there to a shabby council estate here. Every time I look out at another wet summer day, I worry this won’t work out.

It was back in 2020 that I summoned the courage to ask Eddie, one of my oldest friends, if he’d be the father of my child. We met working in a restaurant in Edinburgh 20 years ago. After university, I moved to London. Eddie met Jack and they moved to the Philippines where they started a business taking guests to the remote islands of Palawan on traditional *bangka* boats. We remained firm friends and a baby wasn’t even a consideration. Then, when I was 38, Covid put an end to years of unsuccessful dating. For the first time I faced up to the very real possibility that I’d never have a child. I discovered a hole inside me. I had so much love to give and no one to give it to. I felt a real, deep grief.

I signed up for a site where you can meet potential donors or co-parents. Most of my messages were from men who offered “natural insemination only” and

IN GREAT SPIRITS, WE ORDERED A HOME INSEMINATION KIT ON AMAZON FOR £23.99

“would drive to deliver”. I cried over wine. I made a free account at Cryos International – the world’s largest sperm bank, based in Denmark, where prices for sperm begin at around £160. I paid an additional £200 or so to see donors’ “extended profiles”. Here you can listen to voice recordings and favour certain people with a red heart icon. It felt like internet dating all over again. And I knew I wanted to have a special bond with the father of my baby and for my baby to have a special bond with that person too. In the past I’d joked with various gay friends that, “If I haven’t met someone by the time I’m 40, let’s...” One of those friends telling me that he was having a baby with someone else was my catalyst for action. So I took a deep breath and emailed Eddie.

I had no idea if he’d say yes, whether he’d want to be a donor or a dad, but I knew he’d be a great role model. I chose to overlook the fact that he lived in the Philippines for six months of the year and had Jack to consider. I wrote to Eddie that I didn’t know how involved he would want to be as a father, but it was important to me that my child had an origin story and I would like someone with whom to share the experience. I couldn’t believe it when he wrote back saying yes. “Jack and I have already been talking about a new direction for our life with children. But we felt that while a child can get full love and care from two male parents, it’s more fulfilling to be a supporting father to a child that has the love of their mother. I would love to be part of your life decision and want to be involved in any possible way. I will support whatever you need from the start.”

We didn’t enter the arrangement lightly. This may sound ludicrously idealistic, but we worked on separate manifestos for the future to check we were on the same page, then went on holiday, where in between hiking, eating and swimming, we spent time going over a co-parenting document downloaded from the internet. There is no legal basis to these kinds of agreements, but it forced us to focus on the awkward details – living arrangements, finances, childcare, schools, life insurance, wills – and felt like a good starting place. “Why don’t all prospective parents have to do this?” we joked. (But actually, it’s not a joke, is it?)

If this stage was demanding, getting pregnant turned out to be a journey that tested us to the limits. It started out well. We consulted a fertility specialist: Eddie

had A* sperm. I had a good egg reserve and decent anti-Müllerian hormone score (which can be indicative of egg quality) for someone my age. She said there was no reason we wouldn’t get pregnant easily. In great spirits, we ordered some ovulation sticks and a home insemination kit from Amazon for £23.99. The accompanying leaflet recommended lying with your legs up and watching a funny film or getting your partner to cuddle you, thus releasing pregnancy-inducing feel-good endorphins. So there we lay after injecting a syringe of sperm: three of us, my legs up, watching *The Big Lebowski*, while Jack stroked my arm. Why wouldn’t I be pregnant? Nothing happened. We tried again the next month. And the month after that. Nothing.

The mood shifted and we decided on IVF. Google informed me that even 40-year-old straight couples regularly copulating are unlikely to get pregnant within a year and IVF has only about a 10 per cent success rate for a woman at this age. But, I reasoned, they were not reflective of our situation. Most couples having IVF had fertility problems. We were doing IVF because we couldn’t have sex.

As we weren’t entitled to treatment on the NHS, we looked at private clinics where costs soon spiral into tens of thousands. At one of these I discovered I had adenomyosis and that could also affect the chances of an embryo implanting. They recommended an MRI scan. More money. More time. At another consultation with a clinic in Denmark that specialised in treating single women we were told that as Eddie wasn’t my partner, his sperm would have to be quarantined for three to six months at a cost of more than £1,000. Furthermore, as a known donor rather than my partner, Eddie would not legally be considered the child’s father.

We decided to say we were a couple from now on and found a highly recommended clinic in eastern Europe where IVF was a third of the cost in the UK. It was only once we were there signing papers that I read the small print and realised we’d chosen a country where it was illegal to treat both single women and homosexual couples. Luckily, Jack wasn’t there with us. Filling in the form I froze: I couldn’t remember Eddie’s birth date. Was he really called Eddie on his passport, they asked me. I was convinced we’d been found out and I’d be thrown into jail. And so, completely joylessly, I began the hardest year of my life, filling myself with hormones derived from human urine and Chinese hamster ovary cells. I blamed Eddie for not having to go through this. Jack did my injections (“At least one of us gets to stick something in you,” he joked), but I felt so alone.

We tried two gruelling, crushing – and failed – rounds there, followed by a third back in a London clinic. After



EDDIE, AS BIOLOGICAL FATHER, CONTRIBUTES FINANCIALLY; JACK AND I BOUGHT THE HOUSE

which I was told by a doctor – charm personified when he took our money and told us that anything was possible – that, “You’ve just passed a point where your eggs aren’t good enough any more.” Completely broken, I took six weeks off work and went on a roadtrip in America with a friend. The boys went back to the Philippines. We didn’t speak. However, we had one ray of hope left, on ice in the eastern European clinic where we were technically criminals. We decided – with no hope or expectations left whatsoever – to book in for implantation. By some miracle, it worked. We were overjoyed, but it took time for us to realign.

Sid was born at Homerton University Hospital on July 2, 2023. A beautiful elfin creature with Eddie’s brow and my dimple in his chin. I’ve never felt love like it. It was Pride weekend and London was decorated with rainbow flags in his honour. Then, three days later, he was rushed to a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) with an infection. Eddie shuttled back and forth with food and forced smiles. But as only parents were allowed into the NICU, Jack was shut out. In the end, I pleaded with the matron and she made an exception for “one mum, two dads”. It was a terrifying start to his life, from which he mercifully recovered.

Eddie, as biological father, is named on Sid’s birth certificate, conferring parental rights and responsibilities. He makes a significant financial contribution that has enabled me to take the first year of Sid’s

life off work – something my meagre self-employed maternity allowance wouldn’t have done – and will continue to make a contribution after that. Jack, who in our initial discussions saw himself more as an uncle figure, has blossomed into a loving parent. I’m only able to write this story because he’s playing with Sid, teaching him to bash his tambourine with what I hope is a clean toilet brush. As Jack’s role has no legal basis, to redress the balance, he and I have bought the new house together.

We all share cooking, household duties and childcare as much as possible, changing course when things don’t go to plan. We had thought, for example, that at six weeks I would move Sid on to a bottle so we could evenly share feeding time, but I’d underestimated the powerful urges of motherhood. I kept breastfeeding, and for ease Sid and I co-slept as well. We still do. I know both boys found this hard, becoming envious of our special bond. Although to their credit, they didn’t let it show.

It sometimes rankles that the invisible slog of parenthood inevitably falls to me. When Sid is sick, I’m up all night. Same goes for the boring baby admin like applying for our free childcare hours or folding and refolding his things. Despite bucking the norm, we’ve still fallen into the gendered motherhood trap. Even with our eyes open to it, it’s hard work to dig your way out. As Jack said recently, “We’ve come a long way since we were sitting on the sofa in your flat and I asked

the childbirth coach whether contractions hurt.” But there’s still a long way to go.

Back in January, for example, Eddie was clearly increasingly unhappy in London – who could blame him? – so we agreed the boys should go back to the Philippines to tend to their business. Sid and I joined them in February for a three-month adventure. There the boys are well established with their friends and lives. While Sid thrived there – their home is a paradise that I love too – it is remote and only accessible by boat or by foot. I was lonely. Paradoxically, parenthood has changed the dynamic between us. We are so focused on the minutiae of Sid’s life now, it can feel like our old carefree camaraderie is gone. When Sid developed an egg allergy in the Philippines it pushed me to the point of neurosis. I lay awake at night thinking about all the things that could kill him, and how we would get to a hospital in an emergency.

Now back in London, Sid is getting bigger every day and the boys can take on more childcare. Last weekend I even had my first solo trip away, four glorious days in Ibiza with my girlfriends. The boys soon go back to the Philippines, to oversee the closing of the tourist season, and they’ve filled the freezer with mum and baby sized meals. I love them being here, but I admit, I am also looking forward to time alone with Sid, when we can fall into our own rhythm.

Of course, there are still a million what-ifs and unanswered questions. What if I meet someone? Can I build a career that pays the mortgage but is flexible enough to let me and Sid spend plenty of time in the Philippines in winter, at least until school age? We agreed – before he was born – that Sid would go to school in the UK. But now he’s a real living being, I sense the boys would like us to go and live – at least for a year or two – with them, so he can properly experience life there. And what if, when Sid grows up, he wants to run away and live with his dads? As three parents, there are times we disagree: in fact, we’ve just had our first row over Sid. Something silly. I responded badly. But as friends we could talk it out over wine and resolve it.

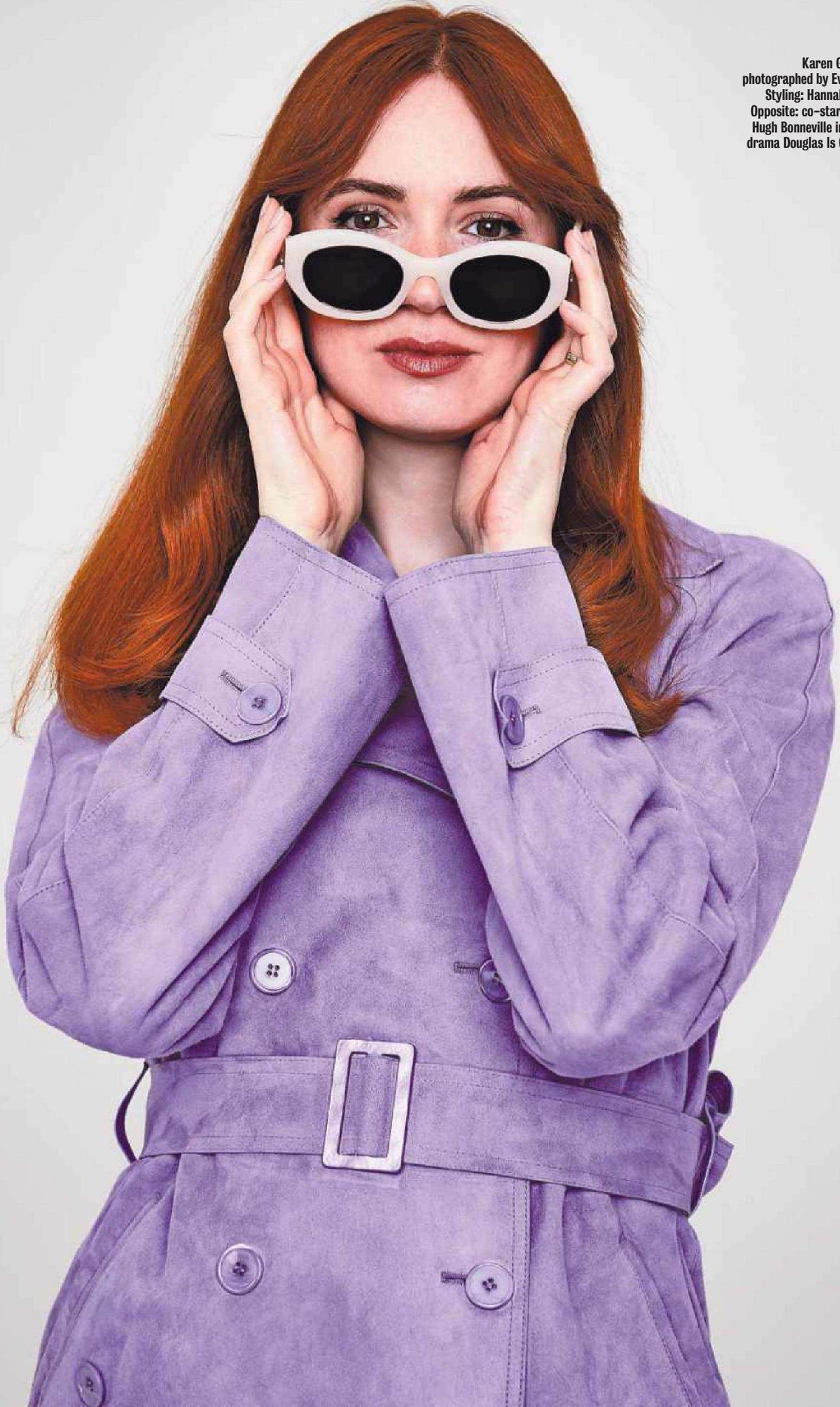
I am determined not to let these worries spoil things. My parents have been big influences in my life. I credit them with my adventurous nature, the ability to see that anything is possible. I am from a big family: my brother and both sisters have each had a baby boy this year – there are nine cousins in total – and even though I’d love for Sid to have a sibling, he’s already part of a football team. I’m proud of my queer family. Despite the challenges, I’d do it again in a heartbeat – or one of Sid’s, which are faster than mine. He is the light of our life and the centre of our global village. ■



COUNCIL ESTATE IN INVERNESS TO HOLLYWOOD HIDEAWAY (she took her mum and dad with her!)

In Britain, Karen Gillan is best known as Matt Smith's assistant in Doctor Who. But in America, she's the highly bankable star of the Marvel and Jumanji franchises – making her one of the most successful leading actors of all time. Now she's back on British screens with Hugh Bonneville in the cancel-culture drama that everyone's talking about. Stephen Armstrong meets her

Karen Gillan, 36,
photographed by Eva Pentel.
Styling: Hannah Rogers.
Opposite: co-starring with
Hugh Bonneville in new ITV
drama *Douglas Is Cancelled*



Karen Gillan is the nation's least likely superstar. Even after an hour in her company, you'd probably never guess she is the 21st most successful leading actor of all time.

As the damaged semi-android assassin Nebula, she co-starred in the second-highest grossing film to date, *Avengers: Endgame*. With all her Marvel movies, the *Jumanji* franchise and appearances in *The Big Short*, Judd Apatow's *The Bubble* and alongside Tom Hanks in *The Circle*, her roles have amassed a worldwide take of more than \$10 billion.

The only Brits more bankable in leading roles are Tom Holland and Emma Watson. At the age of 36, Gillan's box-office take outranks that of Harrison Ford, Benedict Cumberbatch, Brad Pitt, Jennifer Lawrence, Julia Roberts and Sylvester Stallone. In 2020 and 2021, she was the most googled living Scottish celebrity, averaging two million searches a month.

This fact seems to surprise even Gillan herself. "It just sounds crazy to hear that," she says. "Of course, I still have moments of awareness. Mostly you forget that what you're doing is going out into the world because it's just your job. Humans adapt really quickly, right? But then you go to a premiere and they've shut down Hollywood Boulevard and you're like, oh, yes, this is a really big deal."

But sitting in a quiet basement in a photo studio in north London, it feels like I'm talking to... well, a working-class girl from Inverness who is bright, bubbly and brimming with as many questions as answers. She landed from the West Coast of America barely 48 hours ago and has been working since she stepped off the plane. She must be exhausted, but she's upbeat, charming and curious during the shoot, recommending clothes and eagerly asking everyone for tips on plays and musicals she should see while she's here. I think I see her yawn once, but it might just be her laughing. She laughs a lot.

Now the pictures are done, she settles into a chair opposite me, pulling a large black coat over her tracksuit because the air conditioning is a little brutal. While I'm fumbling with my Dictaphone she chats about gossip from *Good Morning Britain* in an accent with no trace of mid-Atlantic twang. *Good Morning Britain?* "I watch it every day on BritBox," she says proudly. "It helps me control my homesickness."

Home is written through her like a stick of rock. She grew up on a council estate, her mum working in Tesco and her dad working in a care home for people with learning difficulties. Money was tight but her dad made her believe she was capable of achieving anything she wanted.

This mattered because Gillan was – and still is – filled with social anxiety. "I'd

go to school and be so quiet and so scared to talk to anyone because I perceived it all as a potential threat," she smiles wryly. "I'm still like that. Sometimes I'll be at a dinner party and someone asks me a question and I just go into fight-or-flight mode. I don't know why it happens. But for some reason, when I got up in front of people to act, it just melted away. Some people have a few drinks; I get on stage."

So she spent her spare time making horror films on a video camera in her bedroom and her Saturdays at a drama club. Then, when she was 13, she was watching *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* with her dad when Judith Keppel became the first Brit to win £1 million.

"My dad said, 'She's in the right headspace. A lot of people need the money and buckle under the pressure. They won't risk going all the way. You need to live in her headspace.'" She pauses and smiles at the memory. "And I have ever since. If you want to know how I got here, it's my dad. He made everything seem possible. He's my Eton, my secret weapon. Raymond Gillan. Everyone should have one of those."

This made her feel so invincible that when she was 17 she moved to London to study at the Italia Conti drama school, dropped out after two months for a part in *Rebus*, then ended up working in a pub in south London and doing a little modelling. She was still convinced she could make it. Even when, for one modelling job, she had to wear a bucket over her head as the client thought it would make sure people focused on the shoes she was wearing.

Gillan with Matt Smith in *Doctor Who*, 2012



With Dwayne Johnson in *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle*



As Nebula in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, 2013



'I'LL BE AT A DINNER PARTY AND GO INTO FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT MODE'

I tell her I'm having trouble making sense of her extreme confidence in heading to London to seek her fortune versus her terror of speaking to fellow pupils. "I know, I often think about that," she says. "Imagine a flight attendant with a phobia of flying who loves being in the air. I got over those nerves by forcing myself to do it over and over again. I'm not as confident as I was back then. I'm always comparing myself with my 17-year-old self, like, how do I get back there?"

Then she was cast as the Doctor's assistant Amy Pond in *Doctor Who* and life became very strange indeed. After she'd got the job, she went back to Inverness "with two guys from the BBC, and once they'd told my parents, one of them said something on his phone and within an hour there were journalists knocking on our door". She still seems slightly amazed. "My mum was on her lunch break from Tesco and had to get through the journalists to go back to work."

After that, Gillan's life was public

property. She went from pulling pints and modelling with her head in a bucket to being recognised on the streets and mobbed at San Diego's Comic-Con. "I was used to being a normal 21-year-old getting drunk with my friends and suddenly there were photographers following me around," she explains. "I had to be careful or going to the pub would end up being a story that I was going off the rails. I'd wanted to be a success, but *Doctor Who* is a very particular kind of success. Like, I really didn't expect to have to sign dolls of me."

Fortunately, her co-stars Matt Smith and Arthur Darvill, who played her on-screen husband, Rory, were also newcomers to celebrity. The three of them felt like a gang – friends thrown into the storm. They're still close and get together for drinks whenever they're in the same city, alongside showrunner Steven Moffat, who cast Smith and created Pond and Rory.

And Moffat is the reason she's talking to me. She's returned to British TV purely because he's written a script she loves



With her partner, the writer and comedian Nick Kocher, in 2019

– ITV’s new drama *Douglas Is Cancelled*. The show follows Hugh Bonneville’s national-treasure newscaster accused of telling a sexist joke at a wedding. He was so drunk he can’t remember what he said and everyone hopes it will all blow over. Then his co-host, Madeline, played by Gillan, starts supporting him in ways that seem certain to destroy him. Or do they?

Part of Gillan’s skill is in concealing right up until the last five minutes of the series what exactly she’s up to. The reveal is going to excite conversations and burn up the zeitgeist in the way *The Morning Show* did, but it’s a darker, subtler piece of work. After years playing action heroes, Gillan’s suddenly acting her socks off in a show that asks unexpected questions about cancel culture. Quite the shift, I say.

“It’s incredibly current,” she nods. “I mean, cancel culture has always existed to a degree, but social media has made it faster and more irrational. It’s the dopamine hit of anger and outrage. Steven Moffat says it’s only good people who can be cancelled. If you’re genuinely bad, you don’t give a shit.”

Given she started acting when she was 19 and arrived in Hollywood pre-#MeToo, I assume she has her own stories of dodgy men and uncomfortable casting sessions.

“I was definitely aware of it,” she says. “I haven’t had any first-hand experiences but you’re only ever one person removed from a story. We all knew about it. It certainly wasn’t rare. I look back and wonder about not speaking out. Is silence complicity? We could all ask ourselves that.”

Does she think the industry has changed since #MeToo? She pauses. “There’s a way to go everywhere, to be honest... I’m seeing a lot of positive

changes, which is good, and I believe in positive reinforcement and acknowledging the changes that have been made. But the way I look at it is, we’re never going to get rid of people who want to abuse power. There’s always going to be a percentage of people who are that way inclined. What we need to do is sort the systems that allow them to get into power in the first place. We need to figure out how not to give psychopaths leadership positions.”

When Gillan arrived in Hollywood in 2012 for a role in the horror film *Oculus*, it was more her loneliness that bothered her about the industry. She was 24, had everything in a suitcase, didn’t know anyone and was living in a horrible apartment that was burgled. She was homesick and found the dating scene intimidating. After six months, being cast as Nebula for the first *Guardians of the Galaxy* certainly helped, but while the success and the money stacked up, she missed her parents.

In the end, after finishing directing her first movie, *The Party’s Just Beginning*, set in Inverness in 2017, she moved them out to California to join her. Lots of movie stars buy fast cars, flashy houses or develop expensive addictions. Gillan paid to have her mum and dad nearby. They came over to look after her house while she was filming in another country and stayed, living near enough to pop in anytime.

“One of the hard things about living in the States was not being able to see them regularly, so we just thought, ‘Why does it need to be different now? We can just continue seeing each other on a Sunday.’” She smiles. “It was the least I could do for them after all the monologues they had to sit through in the living room.”

Her father loves the West Coast and helps run her fan club, while her mother, Marie, from Easterhouse, makes sure her daughter doesn’t fall prey to even the slightest American twang, but often talks about moving back to Scotland.

Gillan herself felt slightly more rooted in Hollywood when fate – in the form of the Instagram algorithm – stepped into her love life and in 2019 presented her with the comedian Nick Kocher, a writer on *Saturday Night Live* as well as one half of the sketch troupe BriTANick.

“I was so single and not meeting anyone,” she says, blushing. “I did not get on with the American dating scene. Then he was presented as a recommended friend. I looked him up on YouTube and he was funny, so eventually I just slid into his DMs. I’ve never done that before in my life.”

Her opening message was “the most boring thing ever,” she says, shaking her head. “What I received back was a writer’s fully formed response. He’d got his writer friends to gather round and I could tell. Too well constructed. Trying too hard.”

Fortunately, he made the first move to meet up in real life – “I can’t lead the way

all the time,” she says with a grin. They went for a drink, started dating and after making it through lockdown they were married in Scotland in 2022 at a wedding where Robert Downey Jr and Julia Roberts rubbed shoulders with Steven Moffat and pals from Inverness.

The couple now live in a cottage in Studio City decorated with a “cosy old pub” vibe, all floral wallpaper and built-in bookshelves so that when Gillan is on Zoom, people assume she’s back in Scotland. It also houses her collection of Karen Gillan dolls – as Amy Pond, Nebula and Ruby Roundhouse from *Jumanji*.

“I bought them all at one point from Amazon. Now, I don’t know what to do with them and it looks a bit narcissistic.”

She doesn’t have the muscles from her Marvel superhero training any more, but she keeps fit with a Pilates session every morning on a reformer machine in a small home gym. While working out she watches reality TV to sate her *Love Island* addiction. Then she’s either filming or pulling films together – she’s no Reese Witherspoon mogul, but making films, whether directing or producing, is taking up more of her time than acting right now.

We talk about the election and she carefully avoids backing any political party. “I’ve been watching *Good Morning Britain* for the highlights of the UK debates,” she says, watching me cautiously. “I just want to support the working classes. So whoever does that the best. In the arts, for instance, there are great actors out here from Eton. They’re good, but they’re all very similar. We need variety. The problem is, anyone who wants power is by definition the worst person to have it.” She smiles. “Which brings me back to my point about screening out the psychopaths.”

I watch her as she chats and wonder how she manages to be so successful and seem so unconcerned by it, to talk about class consciousness when thinking about voting and happily admit to watching *Good Morning Britain* every day. There’s a hack phrase about the upwardly mobile – you can take the girl out of the council estate, it begins. With Karen Gillan, she holds Inverness inside her as if it’s precious, something to be treasured. She plans to lure Nick back there in the end.

“I feel at home when I come back to the UK. I just really like seeing all the familiar faces on TV and feeling like I’m not out of the loop on the goings-on,” she says. “This still feels like home even though so many people that I love are over there now [in the States]. But it’ll be over one day and then I’ll come back. All my best mates are still in Inverness, so I’ll get a little cottage up in the Highlands and just do that for the rest of my life.” ■

Douglas Is Cancelled continues on ITV1 on Thursday at 9pm

10 BEST BUYS FOR FINE HAIR

By Nadine Baggott

As someone who lost a lot of volume on top during lockdown, I understand how fine and thinning hair can wreck your self-esteem. I would always recommend having a blood test to check your nutritional and hormonal levels and discover the underlying cause of hair loss, but in the meantime these products can make a visible difference.

1 THE SCIENCE-BACKED SOLUTION

Regaine for Women Extra Strength Scalp Foam (£50 for a four-month supply; [boots.com](https://www.boots.com))

This is the best product you can buy over the counter, clinically proven to work for women with hormonal hair loss by increasing blood flow to follicles and helping them to stay in the growing phase for longer. Foam is the easiest way to apply it – once a day, morning or night. Do shop around for the best price because once you start using Regaine, you will need to keep using it or your hair goes back to its old shedding pattern.



2 THE SHAMPOO WITH ADDED BENEFITS

Head & Shoulders DermaxPro Scalp Care Anti-Dandruff Shampoo (£5.99; [superdrug.com](https://www.superdrug.com))

Recent research has shown that dandruff can weaken the hair and even compromise growth, so choose a shampoo like this one to help tackle the problem at the earliest possible stage. The active ingredient, piroctone olamine, works wonders on my itchy, flaky scalp and you get great value for money with this range.



3 THE CAFFEINE 'CURE'

The Inkey List Caffeine Stimulating Scalp Treatment (£15; [lookfantastic.com](https://www.lookfantastic.com))

There is some evidence that caffeine can block the effect of a hormone called DHT in scalp cells, which can cause hair loss. The trouble is that most caffeine shampoos are washed away, so this savvy company has formulated a sleep-in scalp serum. While I am yet to be convinced of its effectiveness in female hair loss, I think at this price point it is well worth a try and could help with menopausal hair thinning.



Margot Robbie

4 THE PARTING POWER-UP

Nanogen Keratin Hair Fibres (£24 for a two-month supply; [boots.com](https://www.boots.com))

This clever powder contains tiny fibres that mimic hair growth on the scalp to instantly shrink wide partings and fill out thinning hairlines and crowns. Yes, it is purely cosmetic and won't help with regrowth, but the effect is impressive. Plus it comes in a handy shaker applicator and there are ten shades to choose from. There is also a waterproofing spray if you need it.



5 THE VOLUMISER

Vichy Dercos Technique Densi-Solutions Thickening Shampoo (£12.50; [boots.com](https://www.boots.com))

This contains a blend of sugars to instantly volumise, and a silica-like gel that bonds to damaged and fine hair to make it feel and look thicker over time. It's recommended that you use it every day, which I know might be a problem if you're suffering hair shedding, but with this special shampoo you will keep your scalp healthy and get a volume boost.



6 THE SUPER SPRAY

Living Proof Full Dry Volume & Texture Spray

(From £16; [livingproof.co.uk](https://www.livingproof.co.uk)) This is the best volumising dry spray bar none. Simply shake the can and spray about 6in from your roots, then ruffle your fingers through your hair and voilà – it doubles in size without stickiness or having to blow-dry or style. It also adds oomph for updos and post-gym days.



7 THE MAGICAL MOUSSE

Color Wow Xtra Large Bombshell Volumizer

(£24; [uk.colorwowhair.com](https://www.uk.colorwowhair.com)) Hairstylists will tell you that nothing volumises during blow-drying better than a mousse, but we tend to think of them as old-school and sticky. Well, not this one. This foam adds oomph and holding power to hair but leaves it easy to brush and comb; nor does it feel tacky to touch.



8 THE SCALP SOLUTION

RevitaLash Volume Enhancing Foam (£125; [spacenk.com](https://www.spacenk.com))

A prostaglandin analogue applied to the scalp can help extend the life cycle of your hair, allowing it to grow for longer. RevitaLash has cornered the market in lash-growth serums and now it has supersized the formula and put it into a foam to make it easier to apply to the scalp. Expensive, but worth a try if you have excessive hair shedding.



9 THE WEIGHTLESS CONDITIONER

TreSemmé 1 Minute Wow! Repair Intensive Treatment

(£4.99; [boots.com](https://www.boots.com)) Biotin is a vitamin – B7 – that few of us are deficient in, but brands love to pop it into products formulated for fine hair. That said, this is a brilliant budget conditioner. It helps to smooth, detangle and add shine without weighing down fine and thinning hair.



10 THE PUNCHY POWDER

VO5 Matt Finish Thickening Powder (£3.33; [boots.com](https://www.boots.com))

Hair powders work to absorb sebum from the scalp and coat your roots to give grip to hair. They also separate strands to give a thicker appearance. This is essentially the effect of dry shampoo, but the modern formulations come as dab-on scalp powders. This one from VO5 is the best value around.



10 BEST BUYS FOR LIPS



From plumping balms to superlight sunscreens, tinted oils to holiday creamy colours, I've got all your summer lip problems solved, sealed and shaded. Nothing high-maintenance here.

1 THE BEST FOR DRY LIPS The Ordinary Squalane + Amino Acids Lip Balm

(£8.50; theordinary.com)

This has been formulated to mimic the natural moisturising factors in healthy lips – in other words, to put back what's missing in dry, cracked or dehydrated lips. It's long-lasting, comes in a clever, squeezable round tube with a twist-off lid and works wonders. It should last you all summer and is perfect for planes, trains, holidays and beyond. What's more, there's zero stickiness.



2 THE SUPERCHIC TINT Naturium Phyto-Glow Lip Balm in Latte

(£12, in nine shades; spacenk.com)

This glossy tinted balm has been such a success that it now comes in four new Café Collection shades – Mocha, Spice, Chai and Latte are perfect for darker complexions. They all work as lip glosses, but rather than simply coating the lips they are delightfully nourishing as well.



3 THE CULT LIP OIL Clinique Pop Lip + Cheek Oil in Black Honey

(£23.50; clinique.co.uk)

The cult Black Honey lipstick now comes in a must-have oil (tinted lip oils have taken over in 2024; they are everywhere). This is light enough for lips and cheeks (ie not too oily), and the flattering blackcurrant juice shade genuinely does suit everyone.



4 THE POWER POWDER Ciaté London Velvet Cloud Weightless Lip Shadow

(£18, in three shades; ciatelondon.com)

Yes, you read that right, a lip powder. If you absolutely hate the sticky, glossy feel of most balms, this is the product for you. A weightless, creamy powder that adds a blush of colour to lips and feels truly like you're wearing nothing. Very *Bridgerton* and very beautiful.



5 THE EASIEST LIP SPF Hello Sunday The One For Your Lips SPF50 Lip Balm

(£7; spacenk.com)

I don't believe that SPF should be sold at a premium and this is by far the best value at Space NK. It is unscented, so suitable for even sun-sensitive lips. It has a glossy clear finish and stays put.



6 THE LIP LINER/STICK DUO Sculpted by Aimee Connolly Lip Duo Liner & Lipstick in Blush Blend

(£18, in eight shades; boots.com)

This clever single product contains a soft liner and matching lip colour so you never get that "Jenny from the block" old-school darker liner look. They have been chosen to be very wearable; there's nothing garish, but this nude shade is a standout low-maintenance winner for me.



7 THE PERFECT SUMMER SHADE Nars Afterglow Sensual Shine Lipstick in Truth or Dare

(£27; narscosmetics.co.uk)

A summer lipstick should be applied without a mirror, ideally on the run to somewhere you are going to have



fun. This is the perfect non-sticky formula. It comes in an angled fine bullet for ease of application and a flattering summer coral to match your tan.

8 THE MATTE MASTER Avon Ultra Matte Lipstick in Au Naturelle

(£8.50; superdrug.com)

Matte can be a hard look to carry off, but choose the right shade (and do not spend a fortune) and you can achieve the ideal finish, colour and feel on your lips without drying them out or breaking the bank. This range from Avon is now available at Superdrug and has some great shades that perform like a really high-end brand.



9 THE WATERPROOF WONDER Refy Lip Sculpt

(£18, in seven shades; refybeauty.com)

Having mastered brows, Refy has now moved on to lips, creating long-lasting products that are a genuine pleasure to wear. This is a unique product: it contains a lip liner and a sealant that locks the colour in place. This makes it great for long days in the sun at the beach, by the pool or sweaty sightseeing.



10 THE LINE ERASER MAC Prep + Prime Lip

(£22; maccosmetics.co.uk)

This is not a new product, but it is still brilliant. It is a waxy lip primer that blurs lines both on and around the lips, feels comfortable and works on its own or under lip colour. Great at hiding what are known as "smoker's lines" but actually have very little to do with the habit, and are more about lip movement from speaking and sun damage. ■

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



Eating out

Giles Coren



TOM JACKSON

‘Julie’s used to be a “sex restaurant”. And now there are cosy booths in which a couple or even a threesome could easily..’

Julie’s

My word, you chaps don’t leave it alone, do you? Months ago, literally months, I was rambling away on this page about the restaurants I had been to recently that I planned to write up in the coming weeks, such as “a good pub in Shropshire... a new Guizhou/Sichuan place in Bloomsbury and a small restaurant inside a fishmonger in north London...” and then I got on with the restaurant in hand (I think it was Oma) and gave these others no further thought.

The following week, I wrote about the Chinese, and dozens of you below the line yodelled, “What about the pub in Shropshire?” and I replied, “Yeah, yeah, I’ll get round to it,” and thought no more about it.

And the following week I reviewed the restaurant in the fishmonger and below the line there were still half a dozen of you going, “What about the pub in Shropshire?” and I sort of half came clean and said, “Look, it wasn’t all that amazing and I’ve kind of forgotten the details of it now, but it’s the Bear in Hodnet. If you’re local, go, have a pint of Shropshire Gold, avoid the hispi cabbage.”

But then, the week after that, there were STILL readers going, “What about the pub in Shropshire?” and I was getting

two or three messages a day on Instagram from people saying, “I have had no reply from the editor of The Times, so I am reaching out to ask about this pub in Shropshire...”

And I’ve been replying to all of them, “It’s the Bear Inn! It’s the Bear bloody Inn in Hodnet! It’s fine, it’s totally fine. There was some asparagus and a nice bit of ox cheek and our waitress was absolutely brilliant but I have at least six pubs within a ten-minute walk of my London front door where I can eat better, so I’m struggling to summon up the enthusiasm. But if you’re nearby, go. I don’t know your standards; it may be the best meal you’ll ever have.”

And then things went quiet for a few days. And I had time to reflect on how flattering it is that people read my reviews and pay such close attention and remember the details for all time. And I resolved to be more careful in future. But then yesterday, a big A4 envelope arrived from The Times full of readers’ letters, which only get bagged up and posted every few weeks. I picked one up at random, a pale blue sheet of paper, covered in careful, spidery handwriting that began, “Dear Mr Coren, Some weeks ago you mentioned a pub in Shropshire...”

And I screamed aloud at the ceiling. And then I opened the others. And they were ALL asking about the pub in Shropshire that I had promised to write about. And if I don’t write about it, I realised, this will never stop. So, my



Julie's
 135 Portland Road,
 London W11
 (020 7229 8331;
 juliesrestaurant.com)
Cooking 8
Service 8
Vibes 8
Score 8
Price £60/head

The Ebrington Arms
 May Lane, Ebrington,
 Gloucestershire
 (01386 593223; the
 ebringtonarms.co.uk)
The Bear Inn
 Drayton Road,
 Hodnet, Shropshire
 (01630 685214; the
 bearinnhodnet.com)

dear, darling readers, let me declare, once and for all, that it was THE BEAR IN HODNET that I went to and promised to review and, in the end, did not. Have you got that? THE BEAR IN HODNET. Okay. Good.

And if you're yammering for perfectly decent food boozers not in London (I know the whole "London" thing is a bit triggering for some of you), then I can also broadly recommend the Ebrington Arms in Ebrington, Gloucestershire, on which the Coren family recently centred an eight-mile walk around the Ilmington and Ebrington circular, in the Chipping Campden part of the Cotswolds.

It's a beautiful village and a beautiful pub, with terrific old features and as good an inglenook as you'll see, with a cast-iron stove, stacked logs, Victorian earthenware jugs parked on a wooden pew, the whole *Cider with Rosie*.

I had a pint of Bard's Best, the whitebait were fresh, salt and pepper squid with sriracha mayo was a neat little snack, the burger was fine, Kitty's steak was juicy, the lamb breast didn't quite come off, the chips were a bit floury, Esther didn't like her halibut. Twenty years ago, it might have been the best meal you'd get in the whole county. But today, with ten of England's best eating pubs within half an hour of here by Land Rover, well, it's definitely worth a stop if you're walking the Ilmington and Ebrington circular.

And so to this week's restaurant review, which is of another place I mentioned

en passant a few weeks ago, Julie's in Notting Hill. It was historically a "sex restaurant", I wrote, quoting my friend Camilla Long, and the only point in reviewing it would be to hammer it.

Except I can't, annoyingly. Because it's great. I mean, I *could*. I could take the mickey out of its long history as the site of extramarital assignations and wanton pissuppery from bloated 1980s advertising execs. I could scoff at the daft privilege and non-dom frilliness of the area, the gorgeous fabrics wrapped around the almost exclusively female, wealthy clientele at the outside tables, or the equally gorgeous fabric wrapped around everything inside. Or the lovely lady in the most gorgeous fabric of all, coming round to tell us that she was the new owner and she hoped we had a good time. But I won't. Because the fact is that Julie's serves unexpectedly good food at staggeringly fair prices. And I am a restaurant critic, and my job is to tell you that. No matter what.

I went with Tracey MacLeod who said, "It definitely was a sex restaurant," as she slid visibly away from me along the banquette, "but I don't think it is any more. These all look like bankers' wives to me. So in that sense Julie's is still representing the locals as accurately as it did in the 1980s and 1990s."

Tracey used to come here a lot and we hummed and hawed over what had changed. Mainly it's the focus on upstairs eating now, where it used to be all about dark sticky corners in the

mazy downstairs, which is a bar now with some cosy booths in which a couple or even a threesome could easily, if they wanted to...

But anyway, the food. There are cocktails at £12-15 and snacks at £5-6. That is value in 2024. There is nice warm sourdough on a silver platter with a whipped flavoured butter that doesn't show on the bill. Again, value. And there are plenty of starters for £14 or less, such as the chalk stream trout pastrami, which is small but excellent: comes on like a gravadlax but a blob of sharp mustard, some freshly pickled cucumber and a squirt of sauerkraut push it in the beefy direction. There's a chilled soup for £8 (eight!) and eggs mollet (the comeback dish of 2024 – see last week at Joséphine Bouchon) or buttered asparagus for £12.

For a bit more, there's the duck liver schnitzel with shallot marmalade and quail's egg (£19), which is every bit as cute and delicious as it sounds, though I had to hit it with a salt bomb, and a tuna tartare (£19) from the "Raw fish counter", which was cubed rather large for a tartare or even a ceviche, but was quite generous.

Now, moules frites for £15 sounds like Belgo 20 years ago. But it's not, it's Julie's, now. Sure, it's not a vast bucket of moules and they are smallish ones, but how many "front-bottoms of the sea" do you really want to eat? The shoestring fries were scattered over the top and it was a great summer lunch main with a big glass of albariño (£13) or a small one of condrieu (£23) – although, for me, the roquefort sauce was too much for the wee shellfish (though grand with the chips) and a straight *marinière* option might be nice.

Best of all, though, was the lobster soufflé (£39), which was more expensive, yes, because it's a lobster bloody soufflé! But this was no twee cylinder, rising out of a dinky ramekin; this was a beautiful eggy cloud, free floating on a black iron skillet of the most compelling fricassée, rich with gruyère, sleek and peppery with leeks, bustling with chunky lobster. Salads and puds were excellent and well priced too, with a good tomato and basil for £8 and spot-on crème caramel for the same. Tracey decided, after a second glass of the condrieu, that Julie's was her "new favourite restaurant", and indeed, to borrow a famous phrase from another legend of restaurant criticism, one who lived just round the corner, it was all utterly historic. ■



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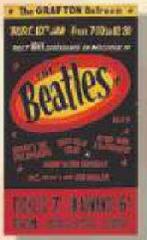
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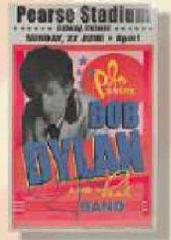
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'My reasons to be cheerful in 2024. Things aren't as bad as they seem'



DAN KENNEDY

I think we all need cheering up, don't we? I know I do. Things have been feeling grim for quite a while now. Not personally – I'm toddling along reasonably well. I mean grim at the more macro level. Politically, economically, meteorologically, culturally, socially... England (and I mean England, not Britain) has sunk into a national depression. Covid, miscarriages of justice, pollution, quiet quitting, biblical quantities of rain, it's getting people down.

So hey, how about this? Every two years, in my office – and maybe in yours too – we all put in a fiver and predict the outcome of every match in the group stages at the Euros or World Cup. Three points for the correct scoreline, one point for the correct result, the winner stands to pocket £75.

Far be it from me to indulge in gender-based generalisations but, broadly speaking, the women tend to casually fill in a random sequence of 2-1s, 1-1s and 1-0s and, on occasion, wildly out there 6-3s, while we blokes pore over form, rankings, selections, memories of previous tournaments etc. I waited, for example, for all the squads to be named before making my forecasts, as if, say, a late injury to the reserve Albanian left-back might influence my judgment.

In short, the women do it for a laugh; we men pretend to know what we're doing.

At the time of writing, the top five positions on the leader board are occupied by women, with the top slot held by somebody's mum, who kindly subbed in for her daughter. I am languishing in mid-table mediocrity. So are the other male footballing "experts" in our ranks, most of whom, back in the day, used to play six-a-side together. No wonder we were crap.

In other news, I've been travelling far and wide recently (East Yorkshire, County Durham, Nottinghamshire, Kent) and I must say, England has seldom looked more green and pleasant, the benefits of a saturated spring, plus "No Mow May", plus council budget cuts, I guess. The trees! The wildflowers! The weeds standing head high on the nation's verges!

Even in the gritty old East End, my bus to work has to fight through overhanging branches, scraping the top deck as if the Bethnal Green Road were a sunken lane in the deepest countryside. Much longer and London will turn into New York in *I Am Legend*, with Will Smith hunting deer on the prairies of Fifth Avenue.

But no zombies in cellars, I hope.

The East Yorkshire trip was for my nephew's marriage – another weekend,

another wedding – so that was nice. It poured down, but nobody minded. Except me, whose pink suit got soaked while fetching my comfy shoes from the car park after the ceremony.

On Father's Day, Sam and Rachel treated me to a packet of shortbread biscuits, plus a card with all their pejorative nicknames for their dad inscribed: Chud Meister General, Dudley Duo Flush, Mediocre Journalist, Lowest Priority Key Worker, all the old faves. Life goes on.

At the wedding, the DJ played (not entirely appropriately if you study the lyrics) *This Old Heart of Mine* and, spontaneously, the family formed a circle and all danced together: my wife and her brothers, their partners, my kids and their cousins, some with partners of their own, Alex with Beth, his bride. It was quite a moment. Reg, my father-in-law, the patriarch at 85, did a turn in the middle of the circle. I found it superbly life-enhancing.

Outside the rain lashed down.

That dancing, incidentally, gets recorded in the "other" column in my exercise stats, which at the midpoint of 2024 are better than last year, which is all you can ask. The "other" category is looking particularly good, which is a healthy sign, because besides dancing, "other" includes random fun stuff, such as climbing or paintballing, that isn't gym or swim. Lots of "other" exercise signals variety, experimentation, risk.

What else? Well, I've made a dozen train journeys over the past month and, fair's fair, only two were seriously delayed.

No, three, actually. And three others were moderately late. Still, not bad. I take what you might call the Isley Brothers approach to trains: yeah, they've broke this old heart of mine a thousand times, "Never knowing if I'm coming or going" and so forth, but each time I keep coming back for more.

My German classes have finished for the summer, so that's a blow, but at least Tuesday evenings are freed up for the next three months. I paid a visit to my aunt Isobel, 87 and in fine form, and she's got another cat, which got me thinking that maybe, five months after the demise of Tiger (2006-2024, RIP), the official mourning period over, it might be time to get some kittens. Lucky, who survives Tiger, would appreciate the company.

Or she might savage the new arrivals to death. It's hard to say. ■

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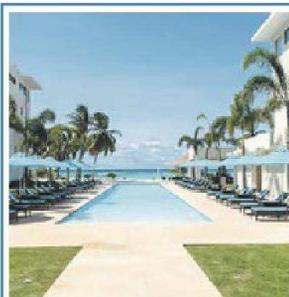
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