

THE  TIMES

# MAGAZINE

06.07.24

**MY DAD BOD  
MAKEOVER**

Can I really get fit at 60?

**THE BEST  
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WOMAN IN PARIS**

**DON'T MESS  
WITH MINNIE**

Sexism, misogyny and Hollywood harassment  
– by the British actress who fought back





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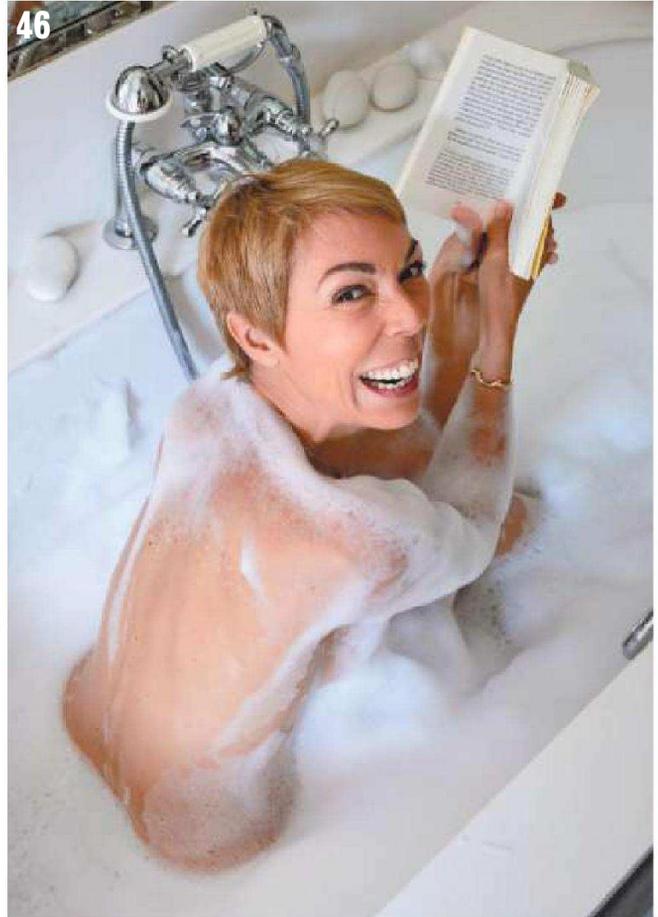
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**FAB FIVE: COOL DECKCHAIRS**



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# BUILT FOR MORE



INEOS GRENADIER

# CAITLIN MORAN

## Why I am never ever getting into a boat again. I loathe them all – apart from pedalos

I only allow myself one angry column a year, because, hey, the world's full of angry columns. Everyone's angry about everything. In the marketplace of "vibes", I like to provide a more whimsical, laid-back product instead.

However, once a year I allow myself to let fly, peeve-wise, on something truly deserving of ire – and this year's allotted vex-slot has now rolled around. So allow me to vent on something we all need to be more openly disparaging about: boats.

It's summer holiday time, and therefore peak Boat Season. People who are, sanely, land-bound for the rest of the year are right now relaxing near the sea – and suddenly finding themselves under immense pressure from Big Boat.

Currently, this is happening to me: I am in Greece and my husband has just said, "Shall we hire a boat for the day? Potter along the coast? Could be fun!"

Allow me to explain why this scenario – and, indeed, all boat scenarios – are never "fun". Indeed, why they are all frankly frightful.

To put it simply, we are land-based mammals. When people say, "Oh, I love the sea!", what they *really* mean, if they rigorously examine it, is, "Oh, I love the sea in the places where it meets the land."

Because what humans really love is beaches. Rock pools. Cliffs. Lovely waterfront tavernas. Because these are the *good* bits! The bits that are predominantly land – with the sea as merely a garnish. Around the edges.

By way of contrast, *the actual sea* is... a bit same-y? Pretty wave-based, really. Not much happening in its millions of boring, empty acres. I don't understand the compulsion to *go right out on it*. "Sun worshippers" don't actually get shot into the heart of the sun. Similarly, "sea lovers" should realise that going *on* the sea is a bit unnecessary. A bit extra. Frankly, horrible.

Because, in addition to the deep boredom of the sea, there is nothing more unpleasant than a boat. They are *dreadful* vehicles. They make the sea *even worse*. Twice now I have hired a day boat in the Med. Twice I have realised, within ten seconds of leaving the sweet, sweet land, that it was a terrible idea. That there were now 12 people in something smaller than a bathtub and louder than war – those engines! – in 45C temperatures and *without a roof*. Reader, we *baked*. We ceased to be human. We turned slowly



**'Twice now I have hired a boat in the Med. Twice I have realised, within ten seconds of leaving land, that it was a terrible idea'**

into sad jerky. I saw people argue over whose turn it was to shelter in the other's shadow. I saw someone try to fashion a sunhat out of a Croc. It was pitiful.

And boats are one of those rare situations where even "throwing money at the problem" doesn't make things better. It's not just the small boats that are hateful. I've been on a fancy yacht twice now, and even though they had roofs, it was still enough to make me realise all Boat People are genuinely mad.

"The captain can marry people. He could officiate your sea-wedding."

What? *Why?* What is the logic of this? Captains are just people who can *drive a thing*. Bus drivers don't issue birth certificates. Bin men don't knock out funerals – which would make more sense: they could just pop the corpse in the recycling. So why do sea cabbies – captains – suddenly get massive admin privileges?

And what's with the Posh Yacht Shoe Phobia? The first thing I heard when I stepped onto a fancy yacht in Cannes was, "No shoes on deck! Shoes off!"

Photographs show even the Queen had to skid around the Britannia in her tights.

**GUYS – START BUILDING BOATS WHERE YOU CAN KEEP YOUR SHOES ON.** This seems like a *massive* design flaw. Why are you making such delicate walking surfaces? Stop being so ridiculous! Just pop a bit of lino down. I know a guy in N22 who could do a whole yacht for under £500 – it's not difficult.

All boating experiences are awful. British sea safaris? Guys, you won't see anything. Britain is a Class One Denuded Landscape. You'll genuinely see more marine life on the fish counter at Waitrose. Barges? A drownable caravan. Kayaks? You're sitting in a giant Croc.

Of course, there will be some who will say, "Everything you have disparaged is a *leisure* boat, Cat. But surely you can't hate *working* boats. A noble fishing boat! That, surely, is glorious?"

To which my reply would be, the *only* thing that could make a boat worse is if it were a fishing boat. You're in an already distressing vehicle – a boat – but now with thousands of fish who are *dying* and *hate* you? That's like getting on a Suffocating Chicken Plane. *No one* would do it.

All boats are ghastly. *All*. Except those pedalos that are shaped like giant swans. Those are psychedelic masterpieces.

But all other boats? Oh darling, they're just *dreadful*. ■

## For those who don't want to be seen wearing the emperor's new clothes



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SCAN ME

# SPINAL COLUMN

## MELANIE REID

# My husband says his life is full of bossy women telling him what to do. He might be right



**M**y husband has become worried about the rise of Amazonian women. You're everywhere, he says. At home, all over the telly. The world is full of fearsome big women with strident voices, most of them telling him what to do.

One of the perils of getting old and slowing up, as he's discovering, is that life accelerates and leaves you behind. Those of us who jolly him along day-to-day are all women – me, my carer, my friends – and in his view we make too much fuss and do everything at time-warp speed.

"Hang on, hang on," he grumbles if we fire too many instructions at him or try to rush him. He gets grumpy when I prompt him to drink (he gets dehydrated), go for his walk, remember to eat. Blessed with west of Scotland man's fierce, instinctive resentment at being told what to do by anyone, let alone his wife, he has perfected the art of silent defiance and selective deafness.

His life, he claims, is full of women giving him jugs of water to drink, which make him go to the bathroom all the time, or nagging him about something trivial.

"You need more man-time," I tell him. "Go to the pub and see your mates. Have one of those non-alcoholic beers you can tolerate." He used to be the ultimate man's man but the fun has gone out of the pub now he doesn't drink alcohol. There are too many noisy people there, he grumps.

Part of his gloom is the fact he's got toothache and is living on paracetamol until the distant day I've managed to get an appointment with his gorgeous, soft-spoken, brown-eyed lady dentist, who works half a day's drive away. No other dentist will do. "She's kind and gentle," he says. "I don't trust anyone else." And then, over lunch in a *douce* restaurant with friends, because he's Dave and inappropriate as ever, he launches into blood-spattered detail about being strapped to a chair and butchered in the Fifties by a member of the Stasi masquerading as a dentist. Interspersed with flirting with the charming Spanish waitress.

Meanwhile the election visited all kinds of new horror on him. Assertive 21st-century women make him uncomfortable. He came away from watching one election debate shell-shocked: Angela Rayner and Penny Mordaunt in full-throated, unbridled attack mode he found terrifying – their aggression, their big outfits, their imposing presences.

I tell him he's an anomaly: there are many men of a certain age for whom a tussle between Rayner and Mordaunt is the stuff of private phwoar and fantasy. He brightens up. "You mean mud wrestling? I wouldn't mind that."

Patiently – for I am mostly doggedly patient until, suddenly, I'm not – I tell him that many women, regardless of how they vote, are fan girls of female politicians like Rayner and Mordaunt because they're brave enough to put themselves out there, act no holds barred and absorb the kind

of vicious personal criticism that men don't have to face. Because hey, I remind him, today women can be as tough and ambitious as men, and they don't have to look like Sixties air hostesses any more. He shudders.

From Janice standing over him to get him to take his pills in the morning, to me reminding him to put his slippers on at night, he thinks there's something in the air. Even Taylor Swift is Amazonian. She's just tall and strong and teaching teenagers to stand up for themselves, I tell him.

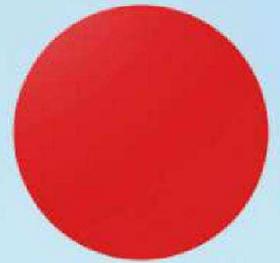
"You married me and I was taller than you. You used to enjoy seeing tall women as a challenge." That, he says, was different. He means I was less bossy when I could do things for myself and left him alone to muddle along in peace.

Poor Dave. Getting old is pitiless, stripping you of your power. I know – mine vanished in seconds, not in slow motion over the decades. Which is worse? Even as I grimace at his outrageous misogyny, I remind myself how hard powerlessness is to accept. I have been riffling through old pictures recently and found one of us, when we were younger and fit and, gosh, possessed a kind of happy vibrancy. I was balancing on one leg to shrink a bit, but I was still taller than him. How little it mattered then. And how poignant life can be now. ■

@Mel\_ReidTimes  
Melanie Reid is tetraplegic after breaking her neck and back in a riding accident in April 2010

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# What I've learnt Rob Brydon

Comedian Rob Brydon, 59, grew up in south Wales and started out as radio presenter. The first two series he co-wrote, *Marion and Geoff* and *Human Remains*, both won British Comedy Awards. He is best known for roles in *Gavin and Stacey* and *The Trip* and for hosting *Would I Lie To You?*. He tours as a stand-up and had a cameo in *Barbie* last year. He has three children from his first marriage and lives in London with his second wife, TV producer Clare Holland, and their two sons.

**Having acne held me back with girls.** It did affect my confidence, but it didn't ruin everything, because I was the boy who did shows and could make people laugh.

**The James Corden I know is not the person I sometimes see being reported on.** He gets a lot of stick. I'm hugely fond of him. I'd never heard of him when we met on a show in 2002, but I vividly remember saying to myself, "Oh, I've got to pull my socks up here. This kid is really good."

**British people have a fascination with toilets.** When I did improv comedy, I'd say, "Right, we need a room to set this scene in," and they would always say, "The toilet."

**I had a fear of rejection at school discos.** Other boys, who'd had a few drinks, were willing to try to go in for a kiss. For me, the thought of rejection was mortifying.

**I didn't have any curiosity about alcohol as a teenager.** I didn't like the taste. For a lot of kids, drinking is also a rule-breaking thing. But I never had a desire to break the rules – and still don't.

**When my wife was having contractions, I was playing golf with Ronnie Corbett.**

It was my fourth child, but my first with Claire and we thought that the first child is often late. When my wife called, Ronnie said, "Oh, we'd better get you home."

My son was due to be born in the kind of fancy birthing centre that idiots like me choose, but we were too late – he ended up being a home birth. It was pretty dramatic.

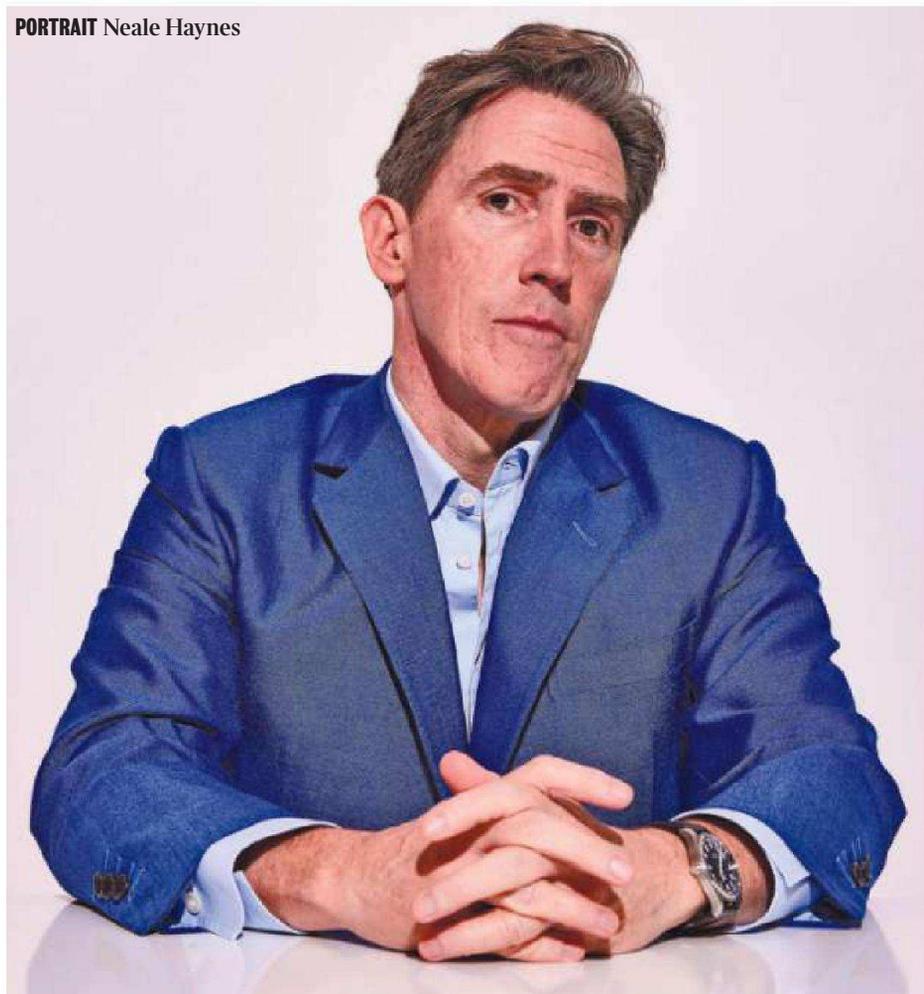
**Margot Robbie is a fan of *Gavin and Stacey*.** Years ago, Margot's friend asked me to record a birthday message for her as Uncle Bryn [his character in *Gavin and Stacey*].

I bumped into Margot when I went for a *Barbie* wardrobe fitting. She said, "You don't remember doing that message, do you?" I said, "No, to be honest, I forgot." *Barbie* is a really important piece of work. But you don't know that when you're making it. Being in it for just a day, I had no idea.

**I don't mind being the butt of any joke in my family.** Be it about my height, my hair, my age or because – for my younger children – I'm an older father.

**Wales is definitely the poor relation out of England, Scotland and Ireland.** *Gavin and Stacey* has really put Wales on the map and I'm very proud to be a part of that. Some people feel it caricatures the Welsh

PORTRAIT Neale Haynes



'Margot Robbie is a *Gavin and Stacey* fan. I once recorded her a birthday message as Uncle Bryn'

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

– I disagree. For me, it's very authentic. Before we did the last special, I was perfectly happy with them making no more. I was of the opinion of, "Look, we ended on a high. Why risk it?"

**My stock in the house shot up when I got a letter from José Mourinho.** It said, "Let me know if you ever want to come to a match or a training session." That went down so well with my boys. Then Mourinho got sacked. I once met [YouTuber] KSI on a talk show – that impressed the boys too. But my career is not the centre of the family's universe. It's our life, then I go off to work.

**I'm not controversial by nature, neither is my comedy.** In terms of "cancelling", it's up to your audience to make that decision. I sense that people are becoming less tolerant of intolerance.

**I remember my shopping channel lessons on how to sell.** We sold Paula Yates hand cream and jewellery. I learnt things I still remember – you sell the benefit, not the product. You tell people how it's going to make them feel.

**The stakes would have been higher if I was a court jester or a minstrel.** Back then, rather than a bad review, I could have been killed.

**Age is catching up with me in my knees.** I can only play what I call "gentlemen's tennis" now. It's me and a friend returning the ball to each other, not being competitive – it's more artistic expression than anything else. But I do saunas and cold plunges. It's as much a mental health thing as a physical thing. It keeps me positive and upbeat. ■

Rob Brydon is starring in *My Lady Jane*. Stream on Prime Video now

# MY DAD BOD MAKEOVER AT 60

THE  
REALISTIC  
FITNESS  
SPECIAL



Michael Odell has spent decades seriously committed to being unfit and has the stats to prove it (more than 16 stone, high blood pressure and the rest). But is it too late to change? With personal trainers and a better diet he's aiming for a target look that combines Zac Efron, the Rock and Obama – in eight weeks

**AFTER**

Michael Odell with trainers Jo and Keely at Personal Space gym in Bristol, photographed by Tom Jackson



first became seriously committed to ill health the summer my sister died. Charlotte was a well-being and fitness nut – yoga, dance, exercise, organic food, moderate drinking. Whenever I visited her in Brighton I'd note her bike, cute window-ledge herb garden and recycling box without alcohol or branded food containers in it.

But she died of breast cancer aged 49 and, yes, stupidly, illogically, seeing her beautiful slim body grotesquely swollen by lymphoedema (the body fills with fluid when the lymphatic system fails) radicalised me. I became a health heretic, a fitness infidel overnight.

There used to be the occasional jog or swim but I came to despise these activities, even my tomato-faced friends in Lycra who stuck with them.

Like those oldsters smoking 30 a day in their high-backed care home chairs, I decided, "If it's your time to go, it's your time to go." It's fate, it's your genes.

But I've just turned 60 and I'm questioning this "game over" mindset, especially when male friends are sending me texts from A&E. "Can't make curry night – in the hozzie." A pal admitted with heart arrhythmia here, another zapped back to life with a defibrillator there.

But is 60 too late to lose weight and get fit? I'm 5ft 11in and weigh 16st 6lb. I got a concerned text from my GP regarding my blood pressure (136/85) and, when I huff to the top of the stairs, I sometimes hear blood pounding in my right ear.

I know my wife is worried because sometimes when we are in bed she gives my belly a funny look. Like it's a pet that has jumped up to snuggle uninvited between us.

"Listen, I want you to be around with me for a long time," she says sometimes and I know this is code for, "You have given up. Do something. Or you will die."

Friends have suggested the weight-loss drug Ozempic to me, though that gaunt look, located somewhere between *Zoolander's* "Blue Steel" pout and *Munch's The Scream*, doesn't appeal.

I don't want to die, but what am I prepared to do to live? I'd heard about this gym in Bristol called Personal Space, where they take an ultra-focused approach to even the most hopeless cases. When I walk in it's a bit depressing. I have drawn diametrically opposite conclusions about human body shape to everyone else here. Where I stick out, they go in. Where I go in, they stick out. (I note big bottoms are on trend, so I'm not a total basket case.)

"Have you ever worked with a personal trainer before?" asks Jo, with a searching up-and-down appraisal.

For me, right there, that's passive-aggressive. I mean, do I look like I've worked with a PT before?

When I mention Ronald McDonald and Colonel Sanders as my go-to influencers, Jo shows me a daunting-looking menu on her laptop. I don't much like the sound of the starters ("glute bridge", "hollow holds", "Romanian deadlift" and "goblet squat") or the foreboding main course ("Amrap" – as many repetitions as possible – and "Emon" – every minute, on the minute).

"Actually I did have a personal trainer but I got sick of her putting her tongue in my ear," I mention.

It's true. My Jack Russell, Billie, is the nearest thing I have to a workout buddy. My girl just loves to run, jump and chase a squirrel as I gamely puff along behind. But if I'm not ready to play at 7am she leaps on to the bed and works me over with that little pink tongue.

"No, a real PT," insists Keely, Jo's colleague. "Someone with a holistic approach to nutrition and fitness."

That's a hard no.

The summer of 1997, just after Tony Blair waved from the steps of No 10 but before Princess Diana got in that car – that's probably the last time I took my top off at the beach. After that I became a dad, with all the leftover fish fingers that implies, and was soon in a state where I would only strip off behind a full-size windbreak.

Where is that beach hunk now? Jo, Keely and I convene a search party.

"How long have you got?" Jo asks.

"Eight weeks," I say.

"Do you have a target look?" Keely asks. The wrestling movie called *The Iron Claw*, featuring a bulked-up Zac Efron, has just come out. Equally pumped actor the Rock is in the news too. I mention those.

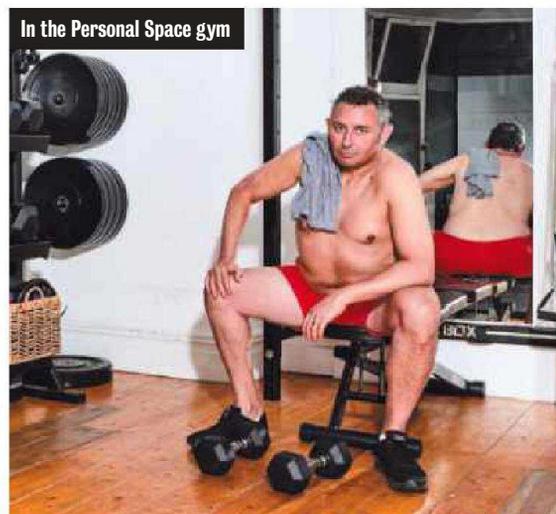
"Maybe throw in some Obama," I add. The ex-Potus still has a flat stomach at 62. However, he might be out of my league. He famously ran the free world while allowing himself seven almonds as a late-night snack. I co-run a Bristol household and don't think I've ever eaten just seven almonds unless they were attached to a gigantic slice of Dundee cake.

To get fit in eight weeks it is decided I need both these extremely fit PTs. Jo will lead the strength and muscle building initiative and Keely will try to jump-start my flagging aerobic system.

"Eight weeks is not really long enough to go 'full send'," Jo says. "So you'll need to get out there and do stuff yourself too."

"Full send" sounds like a premium service the Post Office used to offer before they started slinging my mail into the nearest tree, but here it means "hardcore".

The "dad bod" reclamation plan is as follows: I need increased muscle mass, improved cardiovascular health and also enhanced body flexibility. More muscle will fend off sarcopenia (muscle loss associated with ageing and a component of frailty syndrome, which can signal



## The idea that one can exert control over individual buttocks is completely new to me

sudden catastrophic health decline). Cardio will boost heart and lung efficiency as well as burning calories. Finally, increased flexibility will bolster my marriage because my wife thinks going, "Ooof," whenever I sit on the sofa is deeply unattractive.

My first session is like a police traffic stop. As I tentatively execute my first side squats in front of Keely, she walks around me, frowning. It feels like she is going to say, "Is this your body, sir?" before issuing a ticket citing an unsafe load, maybe even a problem with emissions.

But she doesn't. She says, "Make sure that the left glute is switched on."

The idea that one can exert control over individual buttocks is completely new to me. Mine are like twins, they prefer to do everything together.

These first few sessions are extremely testing. Afterwards I stagger about like someone drunk or in an earthquake. And my world does fall in slightly when my daily weigh-in actually shows me getting heavier. Food and my misapprehension regarding calorific values is at the core of my problems. Jo gets me to sign up to MyFitnessPal, an app for logging and analysing all comestibles. I'm allowed between 2,200 and 2,400 calories a day, but 140g-160g of this should be protein for building muscle. She can follow my progress via live updates and this soon becomes like Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, except with a boot stamping on my Hula Hoops. For ever.

"Are you sure you are recording your calories correctly?" Keely asks me when my weight goes up 2kg. I was hoping this could be explained by a new bicep, but I'm busted. I find logging every pea, every

## MICHAEL'S FITNESS REGIME

### MY DIET

When the 5:2 diet came out, I jokingly renamed it the “Five to” diet because I was always five minutes away from my next snack. I ate around 2,400 calories a day. Not much was processed food, but I didn't really distinguish between carbs and protein. Crucially, wine – being derived from fruit – was one of my five a day.

I now eat 1,900-2,000 calories a day. Nothing before midday, then I attack scrambled eggs and smoked salmon (finally, I understand protein). In the evenings, I make sure I am full by 7pm, usually with fish and vegetables. In extremis I use chewing gum or maybe a boiled sweet to keep my mouth occupied. I find 0.0 per cent Guinness is actually thick, creamy and sustaining enough to help me to avoid alcohol.

### What I ate before

**Breakfast** Almonds or brazil nuts, banana and black coffee. Handfuls of cereal without milk.

**Mid-morning** Peanut butter on toast.

**Lunch** Cheese on toast, tuna or chicken mayo sandwich. Fruit.

**Afternoon snacks** Oatcakes and cheese. Sweets. Leftovers. Cereal.

**Dinner** Olives, bread sticks and wine. Lasagne (likely with seconds).

**Evening snacks** Salted cashews, cereal, toffees or chocolate.

### What I eat now

**Breakfast (if not fasting until lunchtime)**

Almonds or brazil nuts, black coffee. Maybe Greek yoghurt and nutty muesli. **Lunch** Scrambled egg and smoked salmon with half an avocado.

**Afternoon snack** Apple or banana.

**Dinner** Vegan lasagne (using Quorn mince and vegan cheese). Salad. Water. Occasionally steak or chicken.

**Evening snacks** Satsuma, apple, chewing gum.

### MY EXERCISE REGIME

#### What I used to do

**Daily** Approximately 7,000 steps. Walk the dog. Occasional bike ride.

#### What I do now

**Daily** 10,000 steps. Walk the dog with intermittent sprints.

**Twice weekly** Self-led weights/aerobics session lasting 30 minutes: 3 x 10 goblet squats, 2 x 8 Romanian deadlifts, 3 x 8 bicep curls, 2 x 5 inchworms, 3 x 10 glute bridges, 3 x 12 dead bugs. Amrap side-planks (full-length body raised up on one elbow), sit-ups and side-squats (legs apart, hips back, hands clasped in front of chest, now squat extending one leg and then the other).

**Once a week** Cycle sprint (25 mins)

– for fat burning. Rucking (walking wearing a rucksack weighted with 2 x 10kg dumbbells) for 2 miles – to build core strength.

spoonful of hummus, joyless and boring. So sometimes I take a guess.

When it comes to my new diet regime, I'm reasonably restrained in the mornings. A handful of cereal out of the box. Black coffee. Maybe a slice of toast or a banana.

But lunch begins the slide into the sort of prolonged feasting that even the Romans might have balked at. A chicken salad sandwich with mayo to start. Then a bowl of cereal. Then those chocolate buttons left on the side which my wife bought for her nephew. During a particularly stressful afternoon, my remuneration package might also include several exploratory passes at any fridge leftovers.

Sometimes, when I'm joylessly munching through a chicken leg, I wonder if I was breastfed long enough. With me, it's not always about hunger – I just need to be constantly doing something with my mouth. When I message this insight to my wife, I get a return message from her PA.

“I'm covering Susanna's emails while she's with the CEO – is this urgent?”

Foodie friends are another problem. I always seem to be discussing weight loss

while leaning across a countertop watching Penny and Mark or Luke and Caroline flash-frying high-end ingredients for my delectation. They invite me round for amazing meals but – and I can't believe I've never explored this with them properly before – how come they are all still thin?

It turns out it's all to do with cold-water swimming, 10,000 daily steps, intermittent fasting, yoga, low or no alcohol Monday to Friday or five-a-side football. When I find out, it's like that show *The Traitors*: everyone else is cynically running a 5K while I'm face-down in a tub of rum and raisin ice cream.

In the past I've sometimes blamed weight gain on my slowing metabolism. “Your body just burns fuel less efficiently because you are 60,” I tell myself. However, a major 2021 American study debunked this. Basal metabolic rate (or BMR) – the roughly 60 per cent of total daily energy required by the body to execute basic tasks like breathing, digesting and cell production – remains broadly stable between the ages of 20 and 60. After that it declines, but only by less than 1 per cent

a year, so it's not the excuse I hoped for – though by age 90 I should need 26 per cent fewer calories than someone mid-life.

Another factor is what I call narcissism deficit. When I see other clients checking themselves out in the mirror at Personal Space, I think, “Why don't I care more how I look?”

I have never had a close relationship with my body. First, I'm a funny shape – long legs, high waist and a barrel chest. Second, my mother's childhood nickname for me was “ pudding”, which over the years I've come to see as highly adverse food messaging. This explains a certain body/mind disassociation. When I walk into the gym after a couple of sessions, Keely confronts me.

“So what's going on with the body?” she demands.

And for a moment I think, “Did we kill someone last night and I'm supposed to have disposed of them in the woods?”

It takes me a while to fully accept that “the body” means me, this meat glove I inhabit, and which it is my duty to curate and maintain like a bike or a boiler. To be honest I'd kind of hoped the NHS would do that, but I now see that, at scale, this attitude is a huge problem. According to obesity statistics released last year, around 75 per cent of adults in England aged 45-74 are overweight or obese, while obesity levels almost doubled between 1993 and 2019, going from 15 per cent to 28 per cent. What's more, obesity now costs the UK economy £98 billion a year (when you factor in associated medical conditions such as diabetes and cancer).

The cardio sessions quickly become very tough going. Jo makes me do ten glute bridges, where you lie on your back with shoulders pressed to the floor and raise your bottom while clenching your buttocks together.

“Imagine you are holding a winning EuroMillions ticket between your butt cheeks and you don't want to let it go,” she suggests as I pant.

After grunting through five, I can't help thinking surely EuroMillions pays by Bacs.

Hardest of all, though, is the 2km sprint on the rowing machine. After 1km, I start to think about those poor people on the Titanic. Not the lucky ones who slipped under the waves. No, the poor bastards who made it to the lifeboats. Rowing fast is very hard.

The rule of thumb for a proper cardio workout is to calculate your maximum heart rate by subtracting your age from 220. Therefore while rowing I should be at 160bpm. Am I? I think so. Because when Keely asks me how I feel, my tomato-faced reply is, “Nggghh... uh.”

My weights sessions get tougher too. I remind myself I do not want to be one of those old people you see pictured on leaflets in NHS walk-in centres. The

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ones lying on the floor, reaching out for the “fall” alarm. No. I will get up. I will be strong. Also, weight-lifting is anaerobic exercise which means I am burning glucose stores (the body taps glucose stores for quick bursts of energy) rather than aerobic exercise (which uses oxygen for more sustained exercise, eg cardio).

Yet I can't help notice that while I grunt and yowl through my 70kg deadlifts that many female clients at Personal Space can happily chat while working out. Are Jo and Keely working me harder because I'm a man? Sometimes each extra weight added to the bar feels like retribution for millennia of patriarchy. Watching me with hands on hips, I feel that, with every 5kg weight she adds, Jo is saying, “That's for burning all those witches, that's for the suffragettes and *that's* for Russell Brand!”

The columnist William Leith wrote a very funny and insightful book about overeating called *The Hungry Years* and one passage has always stayed with me: “Deep down every fat person is a little bit frightened of crossing the border into the slim world,” he wrote. “What if it's not as good as it looks in the brochures?”

It's a good question. With improved eating and my twice-weekly gym sessions, plus two self-led home workouts – one weights, one cardio – some cycling and 10,000 daily steps, I feel like I'm entering the outskirts of Slimsville. After six weeks my blood pressure is coming down. I've lost 4.5lb and put on muscle. Also I can deadlift 70kg, which is more than my wife weighs (before a business lunch, obviously).

Around week three, I make a silly tactical error. Jo asks me which workout I find harder, hers or Keely's. Pro tip: never tell one PT that a colleague is more of a disciplinarian than the other. It's like telling Keir Starmer that Rishi Sunak is more serious about tackling inflation than he is. Except in this scenario, I am the inflation.

Jo starts to drive me harder and Keely responds with even more squats, more “inchworms” (squatting then crawling forward on hands to hold a plank before crawling back to the squat position to stand) and more rowing.

Nevertheless, all this means that by week six my thighs are 1cm bigger in circumference and my biceps are little vein-marbled mounds, like scoops of blueberry and vanilla ice cream. When the sun comes out I sip a low-cal rosé and idly stroke them like I've seen my daughters' suitors do when they sit and wait on the wall outside the house.

But thighs and biceps, are these really what I came here for?

I've always wondered what it would be like to take Belly Fat Hill. For me, this rubber ring of blubber around my middle represents the most entrenched fitness redoubt, like a Nazi gun emplacement overlooking a D-Day beach. How do I take

## My blood pressure is lower. It feels like I've unblocked a drain

it out? Whatever measures I've taken in the past, the smoke clears (usually from a barbecue) and it's still sitting there, heavily defended, well-supplied by biscuits, booze, any carb I can lay my hands on, really.

But does Belly Fat Hill comprise subcutaneous fat (you can grab it) or visceral fat (packed deep in the abdominal cavity between vital organs)? The latter, I fear. And that's bad because visceral fat is alive, a biologically active substance linked to heightened LDL (or bad cholesterol) and lower HDL (good cholesterol) not to mention heightened insulin resistance and therefore risk of diabetes. Visceral fat also produces cytokines, “signalling proteins” that regulate inflammation as part of the body's autoimmune response. That can obviously be useful, but over-inflammation is a contributor to cardiovascular disease.

I know four guys my age who've had heart issues in the past six months alone. I need to take this hill.

The first assault is like nothing I've experienced. Jo has me doing 5 x 5 reps of 80kg deadlifts, then cranking out countless reps of a “kneeling overhead press”. With Keely I do dozens of inchworms, and “seated rows” (repeated sitting lifts of a 30kg weight on a pulley to enhance deltoids and rhomboids). I do a couple of Atlantic crossings on that bloody rowing machine, then core-crunching lifts on a TRX (a suspension trainer that uses one's body weight). I'm even rubbing chalk on to my hands like one of those grimacing Eastern Europeans at the Olympics.

At the end of each session comes the “finisher”, an intense 15-minute pick'n'mix of torture. Multiple superfast 12-calorie burns on the bike, Romanian deadlifts, squats and dead bugs. Faster and faster, more and more. The principle here is that my body needs so much energy to cope with this orgy of cardio/weight-lifting that it has no option but to throw that rubber ring into the furnace.

It doesn't shift overnight but... am I seeing some unexpected benefits anyway? On a free day during week seven, I'm on the train to London and I see an old lady struggling with a suitcase. I grab it and easily swing it up on to the rack. She is grateful and calls me “a big strong man” with a glint in her eyes. I feel seen again. OK, she's 80-odd, so that could easily have been a cataract, but still, the arousal needle twitched. And for the first time since I began working out, friends aren't saying, “I heard you had a personal trainer – does she need counselling?” They say, “You look well.” Some of them, I sense, find

it hard to accept the new me. If we're in Starbucks they buy me a pain aux raisins, even though I've said I don't want one.

“I think friends or family can either be supportive or a bit threatened when someone gets fit,” Jo counsels. “Especially if one person in a relationship does and their partner doesn't. It can cause tension.”

My wife is very supportive, but then she already runs and cold-water swims. She acknowledges my moos are now hard as hubcaps and pats my nutcracker ass cheeks encouragingly whenever I bend towards the salad drawer.

“Not bad for an old codger,” she says.

I have lost 6.5lb yet gained muscle: my biceps are up 2cm and my thighs are swelling nicely at more than 1cm. Also I can row 2km in eight minutes – it was over eleven at the start – and my blood pressure is at a respectable 121/78.

I am particularly pleased about my lower blood pressure. It means my heart is more efficient and there is less strain on my arteries. Now, when I walk the dog, I don't come home panting at the same rate she does. And I don't have to wear baggy T-shirts to hide my belly any more because it's much smaller. I wear reasonably fitted ones.

“I think you can be really proud of the progress you've made in just eight weeks,” Jo says. That is one of the nicest things anyone has said to me. At uni I once won a Mars bar eating competition and there were lots of cheers and back-slaps, but congratulations for self-abuse feels different. They are tinged with contempt, maybe malice. This feels better than that.

After eight weeks, my kids joke I have a “revenge body”. But revenge against who? Ronald McDonald? Pudding? “Pudding”?

It doesn't matter. Important arbiters of fate have noticed. Instead of being targeted with ads for mobility scooters or elasticated slacks, Google has started showing me ads for Tough Mudder weekends and granola bars.

Most importantly of all, my attitude has changed. When I started, I didn't care when Jo or Keely gave me a dirty look that meant, “You've let me down, you've let yourself down, but most of all you've let the dumbbells down.”

I want to maintain my gains. I will not cede the hill and the best way to ensure I can't go back is to buy some new clothes.

I overhear my wife discussing my new wardrobe with a nosy, thin friend. “No question he looks better, but he's bought these tight red shorts,” I hear her whisper.

She hasn't noticed I'm in the doorway busting out a few more goblet squats. It's a hot mike moment. Actually, no: it's a hot Mike moment.

Maybe I'll do a calendar. ■

Michael Odell trained at Personal Space in Bristol ([personalspacetraining.co.uk](http://personalspacetraining.co.uk))

**THE  
REALISTIC  
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SPECIAL**

# *CAN I REALLY*

**AFTER**

Elaine Kingett photographed by  
Katie Wilson at Do Not Disturb at  
Vintry & Mercer hotel in London

What happened when Elaine Kingett decided to join a gym for the first time in her seventies? Would she be the oldest one there? And what would she wear?



*GET FIT AT 74?*

have always dieted. Always equated thin with fit, thin with attractive, thin with sexy. When I was in my twenties and working in the fashion business, fags, tequila and cocaine were more important than proper dinner, but my first pregnancy at 29 put an end to all that nonsense.

For many years after that I was either pregnant, breastfeeding or juggling work with childcare. Looking after three children kept me fit. Stress kills my appetite as well. I was seven and a quarter stone when my husband died in 2000 and I looked a wreck but, my goodness, my jeans were loose.

Over the past 24 years I've moved around a lot. Commuting to London from Brighton, living in London, then moving to Spain to run writing retreats. Always busy, never eating enough, often drinking too much. Recently, moving into a new little house in Brighton, I realised I wasn't as strong as I thought I was. I suddenly found it terrifying to navigate stairs from the top deck of a moving bus with two bags of shopping, even though my pride refused to allow me to sit downstairs with the "old" people. Painting my toenails was becoming awkward and too often I was grabbing the furniture to stand.

In my head I was still in my fifties, with the same fierce will to take on new challenges that I developed after my husband died. But my kids' attitude towards me had started to change. "Can you do that, Mum? Ask someone to help," they chorused when I mentioned that I was contemplating bump-bump-bumping three suitcases down six flights of stairs when vacating my flat in Spain. Me, ask for help? No way.

Of course, I've heard of age-related sarcopenia, the loss of muscle mass and strength that inactive people suffer as they age. I know that one in three adults over 65 will have at least one fall a year. Falls are the most common cause of injury-related deaths for the over-75s, according to Age UK. I know that women of 70 have a heightened risk of osteoporosis. That the Stroke Association is predicting a more than 50 per cent increase among the ageing population of people experiencing a stroke by 2035 due to lack of exercise, poor diet, too much booze and bad health. But surely this wasn't me? I love frozen spinach, walk hills without wheezing, my blood pressure is fine and I can squeeze into size 8 clothes. But at 74, I couldn't ignore the fact that "scrawny old bird" was probably not a good look any more. That I needed stronger bones and muscles. I needed to be more flexible, rediscover my core, improve my balance. I needed to join a gym.

I needed experts to help me. But gyms were for fanatics, weren't they? Full of big, noisy-breathing men sweating

testosterone and too-taut women in Lycra. A young friend recommended Natural Fit in Hove, near my new home. I booked a look and, on the day in question, nervously dragged out my ageing hiking leggings and a charity-shop sports vest that I never wore in public because of, well, "bingo wings". I hoped I wouldn't look too sad or amateurish.

First relief: Ben, who showed me round, didn't seem at all fazed. Apparently their oldest member is 89, so that was reassuring. No one stared at me. And the vibe of the place was all rather inviting: there were velvet loungers, mags and books, people on their work laptops in the café area in sports gear drinking green juice. I'd give it a go.

But first, like all newbies, I had to take a movement screening assessment to test my mobility, stability and motor control, which was basically an opportunity to prove how crap I was at balancing, even on a 3cm-thick narrow plank of wood on the floor, with my legs apart, holding up a pole with both hands while my assessor, Stefan, no doubt entered "1/10" on his laptop. Three once-broken toes on my right foot and osteoarthritis in my left knee and hip, plus my general fear of falling, produced the perfect storm of wobble and pain. But Stefan didn't laugh.

"What do you want to achieve by joining a gym?" he asked.

"Survival?"

It was decided better balance, stronger arms, increased energy levels and more flexibility were my goals. Not losing weight, more redistributing it. I'd like more on my face and bum and less on my waist, please. And yes, more of that stuff called muscle.

Did I want to look younger, he asked. No, just more alive.

Next was a diagnostic metabolic screening, where I had to breathe into a mask for five minutes to see from where in my diet I received my energy. It came up mostly with fats, carbs and booze, which sounded like my life in Seville. Indeed, 72 per cent of my energy was coming from carbs when apparently it should be only 15-20 per cent. And 13 per cent came from fat when it should be 65-70 per cent. Plus, I was dehydrated. Put simply, my "snack all day on a cracker or a carrot" diet wasn't up to scratch and this proved it. If I wanted to get stronger, I needed to eat more chicken or beans, consume more good fats like olive oil

**I certainly wasn't joining a gym to pick anyone up, which I know can be the objective these days**

**BEFORE**



and drink more water, which I have always had a tendency to restrict in case I need a wee in the night or when I am out.

They suggested I track my food intake on an app, but what a pain. I wanted to get away from screens. I saw people on machines making calls on their phones, even a guy on the rower with a laptop. Not for me, thank you.

The last test was performance screening, to see how long I could do on a bike before I collapsed. Again, with the mask on and a heart-rate monitor strapped around my chest. The conclusion was that constant moving would be the best approach for me rather than just high-intensity exercise a few times a week. My cardio training could be the bike or the treadmill, plus strengthening sessions on the machines to buff me up and get my metabolism working.

"Am I good, better or worse than I should be at my age?"

"Average," Stefan replied. Damned with faint praise.

My biggest preoccupation was what to wear. Hair scraped back, exposing every wrinkle? Make-up or not? I didn't want to look like a reject from RuPaul but I didn't want to look half-dead either. T-shirt to cover my tum, with sleeves to conceal those upper arms? No way. I was glad I'd finally plucked up courage to do this, so forget covering up. But black was out. In Spain, if you wear black at my age they think you've had a recent bereavement.

## ELAINE'S FITNESS REGIME

### MY DIET

Before I started training, my diet was mostly grazing, picking, snacks and nibbles. Toast, a satsuma or an apple, a handful of small tomatoes, a square of cheese, carrots and hummus, precious little protein and rather too much booze. I've never counted calories, just kept an eye on the bathroom scales to make sure I wasn't putting on weight.

Now I still don't count calories, but I do take time to cook proper meals combining protein, carbs, fats and fruit and veg. I make sure I drink enough water during the day and only have one glass of red wine in the evening.

### What I ate before

**Breakfast** One slice of toast, Marmite and tahini. Two cups of tea with milk.

**Mid-morning** Satsuma, coffee with milk, handful of raisins.

**Lunch** Sardines on toast. Chocolate.

**Mid-afternoon** Toast and honey, cup of tea with milk. Digestive biscuit. Another satsuma.

**Dinner** Raw carrots and hummus with sriracha and a G&T.

**Evening snacks** Rice cakes and peanut butter and another G&T, or chips and beer in the pub.

### What I eat now

**On waking** Two mugs of boiled water.

**Breakfast** Oats with nuts, seeds, raisins, grated apple, mixed spice and full-fat milk, or spinach and mushroom omelette and toast with peanut butter. Coffee with milk. Eight glasses of warm water before lunch.

**Lunch** Something fishy, non-farmed, or organic chicken, green salad or broccoli, tomatoes and brown rice. Kefir with maple syrup.

**Afternoon snack** Protein cakes with tahini and Marmite. A banana.

**Dinner** Either fish or chicken depending on what I had for lunch, beans, cheese, maybe quinoa with green veg, tomatoes, sweet potatoes. Full-fat yoghurt and maple syrup.

**Evening snacks** A glass of red wine and some unsalted mixed nuts.

### MY EXERCISE REGIME

#### What I used to do

**Daily** Walk to the bus stop, walk around town, walk up and down stairs; 3,000-4,000 steps if I was lucky. Yoga stretches at home perhaps once a week.

#### What I do now

**Daily** Thirty minutes of gentle yoga-like mobility and stability exercises on the mat, including a warm-up of crocodile diaphragmatic breathing; baby rock on hands; lateral shift on hands; rib grab.

**Three times a week at the gym** Warm-up and mobility exercises on the mat, 20 x baby rocks; 20 x lateral shifts; 20 x lower abdominal exercises involving lying down and lifting one leg then the other. Followed by 2 x 20 squats; 2 x 20 left lunges; 2 x 20 right lunges. Then resistance machines: 3 x 15 leg press at 29kg; 3 x 15 abductor at 18kg; 3 x 15 leg extension at 13kg; 3 x 15 close grip row at 13kg; 3 x 15 lat pulldown at 13kg; as many as possible chin-ups at 34kg.

But I certainly wasn't joining a gym to try to pick anyone up, as I know can be the objective these days. So sod it – hair back, no make-up, a sports bra that kept my bits in place, vest and leggings, socks and trainers and away we go.

I tried classes but often I felt I was only there to show everyone else how good they were. I know they're not meant to be competitive, but I am and I hate it when I can't do something well immediately. I tried a Natural Fit Pilates class, which incorporated reformer machines, and got my comeuppance big time thanks to years of ignoring my core. Gosh, it hurt, and why are two sides of my body so different?

"You look terrified," said PT Isaura.

"Got my gym face on; terrified of everything. I've got no core muscles."

"Yes, I can see that."

One movement was to spread our legs and insert a rather large rubber ring

between our thighs and squeeze. Mine hadn't been that wide for years. I tried Seasonal Yoga to improve my mobility – lots of talk about spring – but it was hard to follow because of my hearing impairment. I tried Movement & Core, which I did enjoy because Ben the teacher was wonderfully patient and I could go at my own pace. But I really found my home working independently in the weights and strength area.

Rhiannon and Isaura, the two endlessly good-humoured PTs with whom I worked most regularly, sorted me a programme on the machines that I could follow on my own. This meant only the machine was judging my performance. Like the abductor one for instance, which I discovered wasn't counting my reps because, yes, I wasn't spreading my legs wide enough...

My one-hour workout, to be completed three times a week, was to start with

warm-up mobility exercises, which I love because they're down on the mat, then horrible squats and lunges, which I will hate to the end of my days and really test the lack of mobility in my arthritic knee and hip. But I'll persevere because I now accept that body-weight exercises are brilliant at strengthening bone and muscle. I noticed an improvement in my agility (and less groaning) sooner than I expected. Then it's upstairs to the resistance machines, which I like most because I am sitting or kneeling down. I've already increased my weights on the lat pulldowns.

True, I often feel unenthusiastic about going to the gym, but I always feel better afterwards. Even a bit smug.

Since I began this training I have said an uncomfortable hello to muscles I hadn't spoken to for years and were reluctant to wake up. Getting stronger is hard work. You have to puff and pant, strain and complain, but the thing to remind yourself is that, especially if you eat more protein and drink more boring water, it will get easier and you will feel so damn clever. Even at 74.

It took a couple of weeks of regular gym attendance before I got into the flow and, of course, life, work and builders have messed up some weeks. But even when I skipped sessions I made sure I had oats, seeds, nuts, fruit and full-fat milk for breakfast. I had oily fish for lunch but will never cook fresh sardines indoors again.

I began this training dreading the idea of any form of exercise that wasn't walking, feeling creaky, saggy, baggy, lacking in energy and fearful. It took the experts to show me just how much my body has stiffened up over the years, how much I had neglected it, thinking thin was fine. And they showed me how to fix it. Perhaps most positive and surprising of all is that I have never felt too old to be at Natural Fit. The opposite in fact. I realised that I too can belong in a gym.

I no longer have a pain in my left knee when I straighten it in bed at night; no longer carry a tube of Voltarol in my bag "just in case". And now when I race down the steps in front of my house I am a lot less worried about tripping. Last week I chased a bus down the hill, and when I caught it I raced up the stairs without using the handrail. I am simply more confident on my own two feet. Stronger and more flexible in the most useful, practical ways. The truth is that, as a woman in her seventies, strength and resistance training – along with taking the time to sit down and eat a proper meal three times a day – simply has to be a regular part of my life now. If I want to live it to the fullest. ■

*Elaine Kingett trained at Natural Fit health club in Hove ([naturalfit.co.uk](http://naturalfit.co.uk))*

**Noor Siddiqui, 29, does not have children yet, but she knows a lot about her future family. She will have two boys and two girls and, like any parent, she wants them to be healthy. Unlike most parents, however, she is almost guaranteed to get what she wants**

## **WHAT PRICE A SUPERBABY?**





Noor Siddiqui photographed by  
Rachael Wright in San Francisco

The woman behind  
a controversial startup  
calls it the future; critics  
call it social engineering.  
So would you pay to have  
your embryos screened for  
hundreds of conditions from  
diabetes to Alzheimer's?  
Interview by Helena de Bertodano

**A**lthough Noor Siddiqui and her husband have no fertility problems, she has undergone IVF so that she can freeze her embryos. Then, using the technology of her own startup company, Orchid, she is pre-screening each embryo for any potential health problems.

Siddiqui, 29, does not have children yet, nor is she even pregnant, but she knows a lot about her future family. She will have two sons and two daughters and, like any parent, she wants them all to be healthy. Unlike most parents, however, she is almost guaranteed to get what she wants.

We are not talking about simply screening for major birth defects or conditions such as Down's syndrome – we are talking a full-scale analysis of each embryo's predisposition towards all the 1,200-plus diseases and conditions about which we currently have genetic information, including a wide range of cancers, diabetes, coronary artery disease and even Alzheimer's. Based on the results, prospective parents can decide which embryos to implant. Testing costs \$2,500 (£2,000) per embryo – on top of the cost of IVF – leading to concerns that the wealthy will breed “superbabies” (although Orchid is also planning a select philanthropy programme).

The difference between the Orchid testing – which is already available in dozens of clinics across the States – and what Siddiqui refers to as “the old testing” is off the charts. She suggests you think of it “like a book”. “The old testing is only looking at the table of contents, [whereas Orchid] is spellchecking the entire book. So if your genome is 3 billion letters, Orchid is looking at all of them.

“Look,” Siddiqui says, pointing to a graph she has pulled up on her iPhone that shows the analysis of one of her embryos. “All these genes that cause horrible diseases are all negative. Same for hereditary cancer.” She flicks to another one and I see a solid red line. What's that? “This embryo was in the 99th percentile for breast cancer. So it has a 37 per cent lifetime risk versus this embryo, which has an 18 per cent lifetime risk.”

She splits the screen so she can compare embryo three – the one with the heightened risk – with embryo five, which shows no heightened risk factor for any disease. So, I say, you would clearly choose embryo five over three. “You can choose whatever embryo you want,” says Siddiqui, who is hypersensitive to any suggestion that Orchid's services have any similarity to eugenics. But embryo three would be an unusual choice, wouldn't it? “Sure,” she concedes. “But embryo three knows at age zero to screen early for cancer.”

We are chatting in the San Francisco

apartment of Masha Bucher, a Russian friend of Siddiqui's and an investor in Orchid who plans to use the service herself. Aged 34, Bucher is married but says she is not ready for a child right now. Dynamic and bossy, Bucher explains why she supports Siddiqui. “We have access to data on so many less important things. I've been calculating my calories since I was ten years old; I track how much time I sleep; I have financial apps. Why wouldn't I use something that helps with such a major decision over the health and future of [my child]?”

In their friend circle, freezing eggs or embryos is completely the norm. “Many of my friends who are younger than me are already doing egg freezing or embryo banking with their partners,” Siddiqui says. “They get engaged and they make embryos and they plan to have kids in ten years, whatever.”

So far, Siddiqui has frozen 16 embryos. “Unfortunately, almost all are girls.” Just two are boys – and one of the boys is at a heightened risk for prostate cancer. Not that that in itself is a deal breaker. “But if you want to have two boys, then you should probably have more than two embryos. Basically, each embryo has a 70 per chance of becoming a baby.”

So she is going to freeze more eggs in September. Yes, she says, of course IVF is uncomfortable. “But it's really not an ordeal. I dispute that strongly. Think about it: women do waxing, Botox, laser hair removal – and it's completely frivolous. Who cares whether you have hair or not? I care way more if my baby is going to get cancer. I care way more if my child will go blind in college. People do way more invasive and expensive things for cosmetic reasons. So why wouldn't I spend an extra two weeks and a couple of thousand dollars to make sure my child doesn't suffer? That should not be stigmatised.”

Very pretty and slight, Siddiqui is full of infectious enthusiasm. She seems to be one of those intellectually brilliant people who, on a practical level, is a complete disaster. I rarely feel like the grown-up in any situation that involves organisation, but after a chaotic day with Siddiqui, I almost feel like a babysitter. The location and time of the interview change so often I lose track; patients and doctors whom she has lined up to speak to me suddenly evaporate. She doesn't know what number apartment Bucher lives in – so we end up knocking on multiple random doors while she tries to contact someone 5,000 miles away who might have the address. Except her phone's battery dies and she doesn't have a charger. At one particularly low point in the day, I find myself stuck in a fire escape stairwell with her, unable to re-enter the main building because the door has locked behind us.

## ‘Why wouldn't I spend a couple of thousand dollars to make sure my child doesn't suffer?’



With her husband, Feros Aboukhadijeh

The day starts smoothly enough, albeit well behind schedule. Siddiqui kindly offers to collect me from my hotel to take me to the interview location – which has just changed again. A white Jaguar pulls up and I get into the back seat next to her. We begin chatting and as the car navigates into busy traffic, I suddenly realise there is no driver. The car is driving itself. “I hate driving,” Siddiqui says. “It's so annoying.” So, being a young cutting-edge San Franciscan, naturally she uses Waymo, the self-driving car app that is rapidly supplanting Uber. “It feels superfuturistic when you first jump in, but then you forget about it because it is clearly so confident.”

It is pouring with rain and I ask her if – with all her technological knowhow – there might be a way to stop it. Actually, she says, there might be. She knows someone who has a company called Rainmaker. “I don't know if they can stop the rain, but they can start it.”

The daughter of Pakistani immigrants, both engineers, Siddiqui grew up in Virginia, where discussions around the dinner table were highly intellectual.

“My family loves to debate. My [older] sister and my dad would spar about any topic: political, technical, nuclear power... I would try to insert myself and then, when I went to school,



I'd sound so smart because I would just repeat the conversation."

The one cloud on the family horizon was her mother's worsening vision. She had been diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, and Siddiqui says that watching her mother struggle with the disease triggered her fascination with genetics. "Just think about it – someone you love, their independence is getting ripped away from them. It just struck me as incredibly unfair."

As a teenager, she applied – without her parents' knowledge – to the Thiel Fellowship, a programme that funds 20 gifted young people a year to work on their ideas, deferring college. She won a place and founded a startup called Remedy, using Google's augmented reality glasses to help healthcare providers care for patients. Later she attended Stanford, graduating with a master's degree in computer science. By then she had met her future husband, Feross Aboukhadijeh, a fellow student. No slouch himself in the field of innovation, he is the founder and CEO of Socket, a security platform, and seen as one of the most brilliant brains in Silicon Valley.

After eight years of dating, they married in a "giant, crazy" three-day wedding in Hawaii in 2022. "It took me way too long to decide to marry." She was determined to be the one to propose

first. "I told him I wasn't going to accept any inbound [proposal]; I had to ask first." So, not one to do anything by halves, she organised a flashmob proposal (it's a thing these days, especially in California), flying in friends and family from around the country and contracting artists to perform his favourite music. He said yes, of course, and then organised his own return proposal with a scavenger hunt. They now live in the Mission neighbourhood of San Francisco and plan to start a family in the next couple of years.

Using her own relationship as an example, Siddiqui robustly contests the argument that the IVF/freezing embryos route lacks romance. "Think of how much love and energy it takes to say we're going to plan ahead to make sure this child is healthy. This is the biggest gift I could give my child."

And, she maintains, it is still a magical process. "Of the millions of eggs that existed in me when I was a baby, I capture 20 of them. Think about how miraculous that is. My husband has billions of sperm and it's these specific magical combinations of literally trillions [of options] that get to be our kids... And we haven't gotten pregnant yet. The first embryo might not take. So there's still a lot of mystery."

Of course, for couples who take the Orchid route to have a baby, sex in itself

is actually unnecessary. "Sex is for fun," is one of the lines that Orchid uses. "Embryo screening is for babies."

"It's a little tongue in cheek," Siddiqui says. "But that's what I personally think. You're taking more risks [having a baby through sex]."

As for finding out about potential problems post-conception, the emotional toll is high. "The current process is much worse: once the pregnancy is already in progress, you can get a very small amount of genetic information and find out about a very small list of those thousands of diseases. And then you have a very tough choice to make: you can either terminate or continue that pregnancy. I would way rather have the information before I'm pregnant."

I tell her that when I was pregnant with my second son in the States, I had an ultrasound that showed he might have Trisomy 18, also known as Edwards' syndrome, a chromosomal condition that affects the heart and lungs and is so severe that most children do not live beyond the first two weeks of life and fewer than 10 per cent beyond the first year. I was called in for a meeting at my local hospital with a doctor who asked me if, given the risks, I wanted to continue with the pregnancy. They offered me counselling and made it sound almost a certainty that he would be born with the condition (even though there was a much higher chance that he would be born without it).

Twenty-one years have passed since then. Obviously, if I had terminated the pregnancy, I wouldn't have my healthy, kind, beautiful 6ft 7in son Joe. Or if I'd had the choice of several embryos, I would be unlikely to choose one with an elevated risk of such a condition.

"But you'd have a different son," Siddiqui says cheerfully, "whom you'd also love."

She has the same answer to the suggestion that her mother might not have been born if her grandmother had been given a choice of embryos and could see that her mother had a heightened risk of blindness. "I'd have a different mother." Clearly, Siddiqui herself would not exist either, but she thinks I am far too stuck on people who wouldn't have been born. "People are always thinking about [one] person who wouldn't exist. You immediately say, 'I wouldn't have my son.' But what about all these future people who wouldn't exist if you don't use this technology?"

Perhaps doubting the efficacy of her positivity, she continues, "Think about this: my grandma had my mum when she was 16. Now women go to college and choose when they get married. You killed all the babies that you [could have] had at 16 and 17. And 18 and 19. ➤

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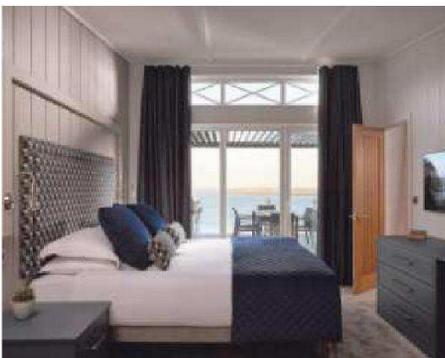
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All those eggs... There are trillions of children and children's children who didn't happen because we as a society have said we value women having autonomy over who and when they marry, when they have kids... I don't think anyone in society would say that women should all be forced to have kids at 16."

Well, no, but that's slightly different from selecting embryos when there is no apparent medical need to do so. There is something about the randomness of birth that is seen as almost sacred. Siddiqui is ready for this. "I think because it's sacred, it is incumbent upon us to use the best science [we have] to give this person we're bringing into the world the best chance at a healthy life. If a child needs more resources, then we should be summoning those resources earlier, not leaving it to the last minute, once it's too late to intervene. There are so many of these situations where if you intervene earlier, you can either totally avoid the illness or significantly alter the trajectory of that child's life."

She talks at immense speed for hours, the words tumbling out of her. Even my voice recorder can't keep up with her and at times I have to ask her to slow down. "Sorry, sorry," she says breathlessly, slowing down a fraction before galloping on again. "When children are born without a skull, they might suffer and die within a week [or be] a stillborn. So it strikes me as very cruel to say to a family who's going through IVF that you shouldn't have this information – especially if you've already buried a child... Three per cent of babies are born with birth defects. Six per cent of babies are born with a neurodevelopmental disorder. We don't have treatments. We have vaccines for smallpox and polio. And that's about it. So unfortunately, the most humble thing to do is actually to screen embryos and identify the risks early. Because medicine is still in the Stone Age. We can't cure most chronic diseases. A lot of people that we serve weren't going to have kids because they were so worried about the child suffering... So the idea that you should stigmatise access to information about the health of your embryo is offensive to me."

So what you're doing is editing out the risk? "Not editing," she quickly corrects me. "Editing would mean you'd be manipulating embryos that already exist. This technology is just expanding the menu of choice."

Although a lot of what she says makes good sense, I find that anyone I talk to about Orchid almost physically recoils when I try to explain what it is doing. Is she surprised that the subject causes some upset? "It honestly doesn't make sense to me. People are already choosing embryos based on sex, which is a lot less important.



## 'Genetics is really messy. So many things can go wrong. Why don't we try to make it more fair?'

They obsess over the most silly things: playing classical music or rock music during pregnancy; whether to have an organic or non-organic apple. Yes, those are important decisions but for me personally, embryo testing is the most important parenting decision I'm going to make."

Late last year, the first Orchid baby was born to a San Francisco couple. Siddiqui recently posted a film of herself meeting the baby, named Japhy. His mother, Leah, was 38 when she married. "We both have family history of type 1 and 2 diabetes and my husband has a history of bipolar in his family, so we wanted to see if there was anything we could do to mitigate some of those issues," Leah says. "It's a huge relief to have the information to make informed decisions."

Siddiqui is thrilled to meet Japhy. "This baby represents the future of how all babies will be created, hopefully."

Dr Michael Feinman, an IVF doctor, says that Orchid provides a valuable tool in preventing severe diseases. "While there are ethical considerations and societal implications, the primary focus should always be on the wellbeing of the future child and reducing the burden of disease on families and society."

Orchid is also working on a way to predict if a future child may be predisposed towards addiction. "There is

a genetic component to substance abuse," Siddiqui says. There are even, she adds, "certain aspects of personality that have a genetic basis". Maybe, I speculate, one could stop a future serial killer being born. Or someone like Vladimir Putin. Siddiqui looks doubtful. "I think you still have free will. You're predisposed to things but I wouldn't go so far as to say you could predict character."

She dismisses as "sensational and silly" a recent headline about her that ran, "This woman will decide which babies are born". "It's the exact opposite of that. It's the parents who decide; I don't decide anything."

Yet given the strong feelings the technology engenders, I ask if she sees any downside to what her company is doing. "I don't think so. I think this is something that society has been waiting for. For generations. So much had to develop in the history of humans for us to be able to get here. It's up to us to decide the morality and how it's used. It's just data on embryos at the earliest possible stage."

She acknowledges that for some people, it is just too much information. "For people who want to take the risk and do it traditionally at home, more power to them." But, she cautions, "Genetics is really messy, and there are so many things that can go wrong. Your genetics is a lottery. Why don't we try to make it a little more fair?"

Society will eventually embrace such technology, she firmly believes. "Previous generations would consider IVF as taboo and stigmatised. And now it's the opposite." We are back in the car and she makes an analogy. "Self-driving cars were considered really scary and crazy, but look at the data: how many car accidents are there with human drivers? Thousands. Waymo had to pass one million miles without an incident. In the future, our grandkids are going to think it was so unsafe on the road before self-driving cars."

She feels that Orchid is her "life's work". "It is the most meaningful work I've ever done. We want to bring it internationally around the world." She herself plans to decide which embryos to implant after her second round of IVF. "I wanted the whole company because I built to do that."

A few minutes after we part ways, she sends me links to two YouTube videos set to music: one showing her marriage proposal to her partner, the other his proposal to her. The videos are sweet, if corny, and clearly prove the romance in their relationship. As she runs into his arms on top of a picturesque cliff, I note that Justin Bieber's *Anyone* is playing and the accompanying lyric is, "You can't predict the future." Except now, of course, you actually can. ■

# MISOGYNY, SEXISM AND METOO

## The actress who fought back

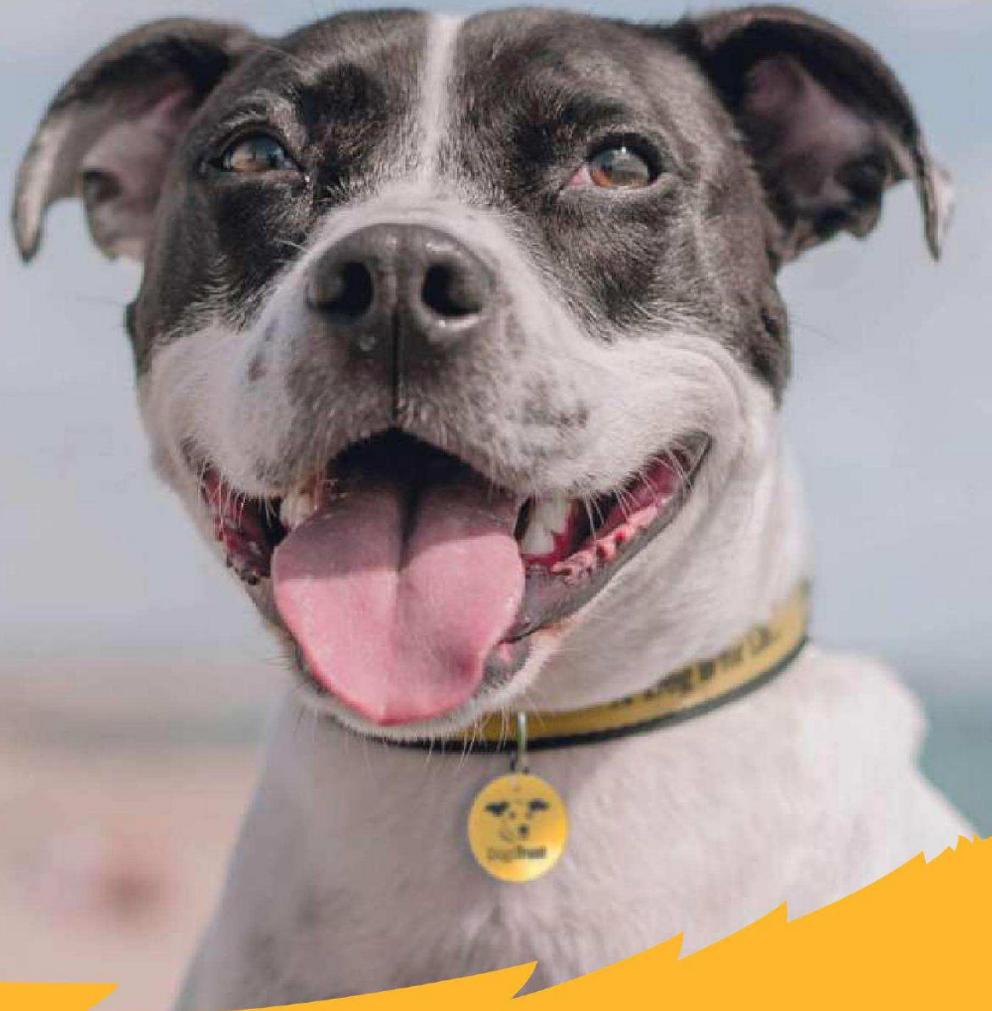


Minnie Driver as Elizabeth I in *The Serpent Queen*. Opposite: photographed by Tom Jackson at the BoTree hotel in London. Styling: Hannah Rogers

Story continues on page 34



'I was punished for being ambitious' – is Minnie Driver the most outspoken female star in Hollywood? About to return to our television screens as Elizabeth I, the 54-year-old British actress tells it like it is, as Jane Mulherrins finds out



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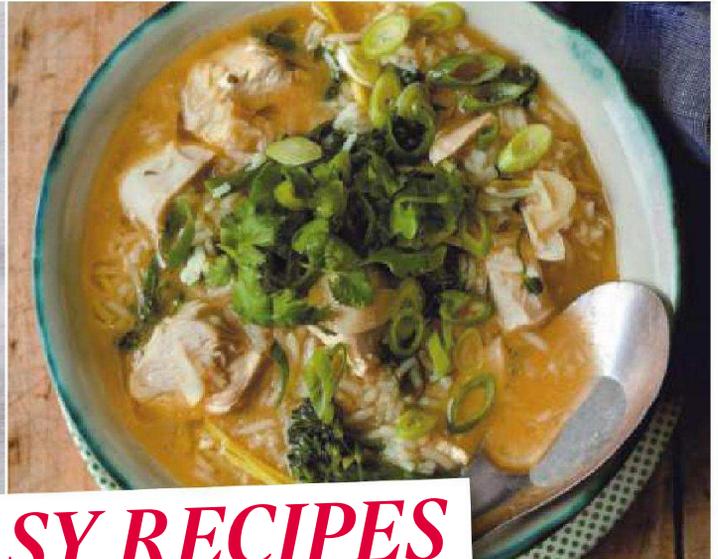
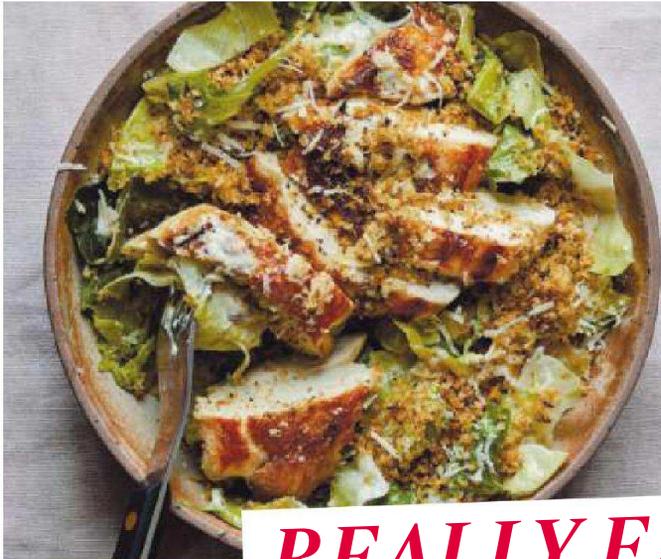
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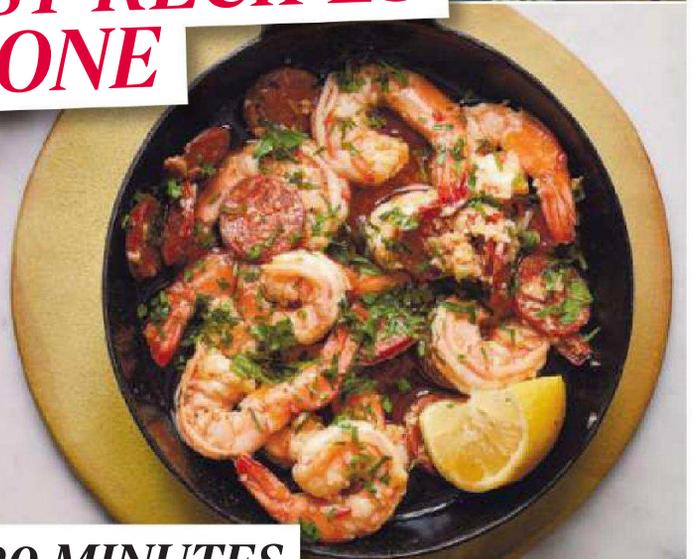
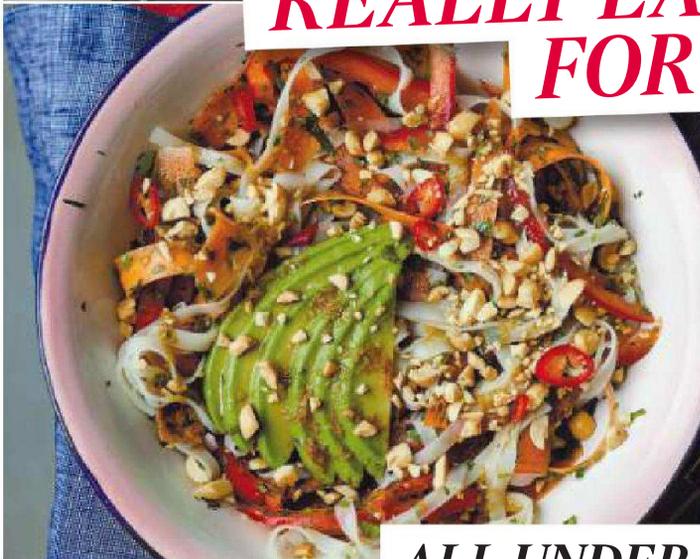
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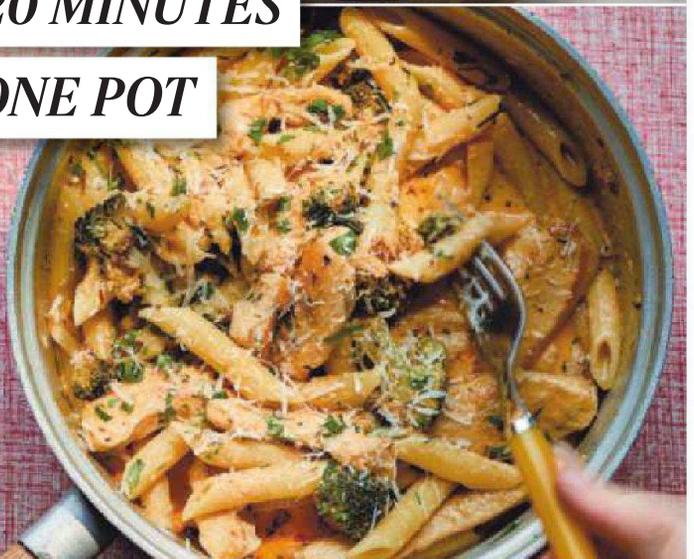
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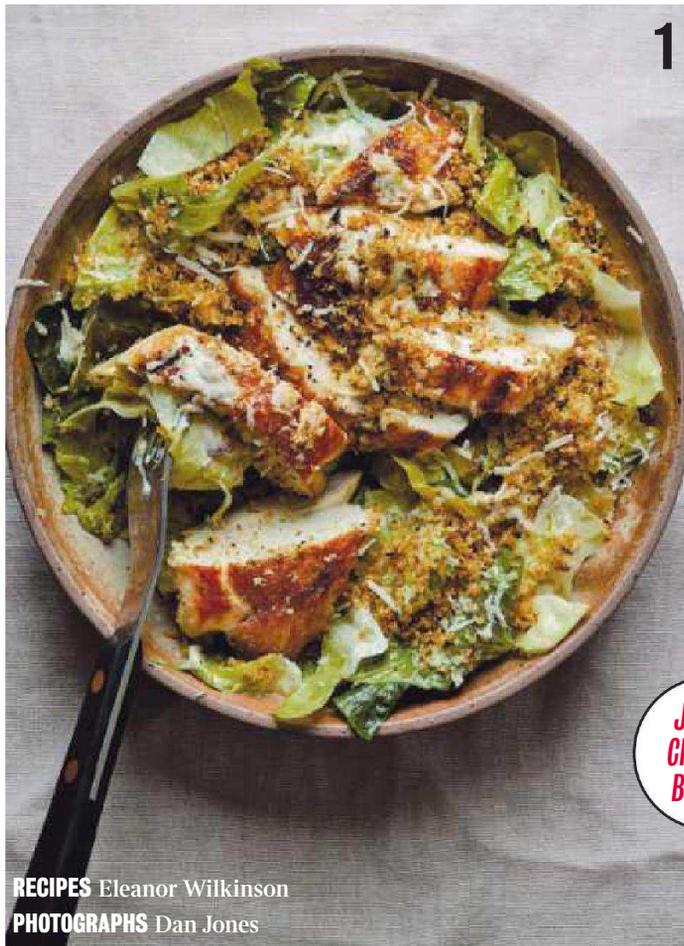
**REALLY EASY RECIPES  
FOR ONE**



**ALL UNDER 20 MINUTES**

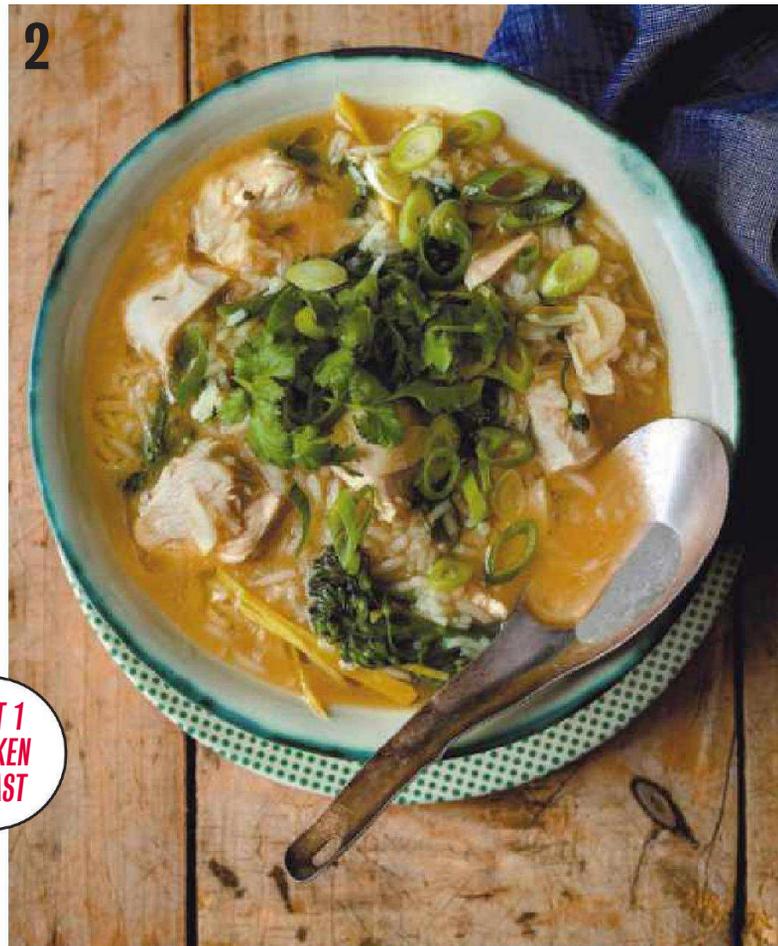


**ALL IN ONE POT**



1

RECIPES Eleanor Wilkinson  
PHOTOGRAPHS Dan Jones



2

JUST 1 CHICKEN BREAST

In a culinary world that caters so well for families, couples or large gatherings, why does the solo cook get such a raw deal? That's the question 28-year-old Eleanor Wilkinson asked herself when, newly single and freshly graduated from the prestigious Ballymaloe Cookery School in Ireland, she embarked on a recipe-writing career. Yes, you can divide recipes by four or stash the leftovers in the fridge or freezer but, as she says, "It's hard to find joy in the monotony of eating from the same Pyrex dish every night." Plus, of course, there's the fact you will be the only one on washing-up duty.

So her idea for *One Pot, One Portion* was born and she instantly struck a chord, building up a following of nearly 1 million people across TikTok and Instagram. "The response was overwhelming, and showed me just how many people out there are in the same predicament, but still want to eat well." **Tony Turnbull**



Eleanor Wilkinson

ALL RECIPES SERVE ONE

1. CHICKEN CAESAR SALAD WITH CHICKEN-FAT PANKO CRUMBS

Prep: 5 minutes  
Cook: 20 minutes

A punchy dressing packed with lemon, mustard, anchovies and garlic. Golden chicken perched atop crisp lettuce with lashings of parmesan. And most importantly, chicken-fat panko – where croutons would usually sit, I've swapped in panko breadcrumbs, which distribute the crunch evenly through every bite.

- 1 chicken breast or thigh, skin on
- Salt and black pepper
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 75-100g Baby Gem lettuce, cut into strips
- 20g grated parmesan
- 2 tbsp panko breadcrumbs

For the dressing

- 1 tbsp mayonnaise
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- ¼ tsp Dijon mustard
- 2 anchovies
- 1 small garlic clove, grated
- 10g grated parmesan

1. Season the chicken with salt and pepper, then heat the oil in a frying pan over a medium heat. Place the chicken in the pan skin-side down and fry for 12-15 minutes until cooked, turning halfway through.

2. While the chicken is cooking, prepare the dressing. Add the mayonnaise, lemon juice and mustard to a serving bowl. Finely chop the anchovies, then use the flat side of your knife to crush them into a paste. Add these to the bowl along with the garlic and 10g parmesan. Mix everything together.

3. Add the lettuce to the bowl. Toss together with the dressing and sprinkle over 20g parmesan.

4. Once the chicken is cooked, take it out of the pan, slice it and place it on top of the salad. Keep the pan on a low heat. There should be some fat left over in the pan; if there isn't much, add another small drizzle of olive oil. Add the panko breadcrumbs and toast for 2-3 minutes until golden. Sprinkle over the salad before serving.

2. GINGER CHICKEN RICE BOWL

Prep: 10 minutes  
Cook: 20 minutes

This dish takes minimal time to make so is useful to have on hand for busy days.

- 1 tbsp sesame oil, plus extra to serve
- 2 garlic cloves, finely sliced



**JUST 1 CHICKEN BREAST**

- 10g fresh ginger, cut into matchsticks
- Half a chicken stock pot
- 1 tsp soy sauce
- 1 tsp rice wine vinegar
- Salt (optional)
- 55g basmati rice
- 1 chicken breast, cut into 2cm-thick slices
- 55g broccoli, chopped into small pieces
- 5g fresh coriander, finely chopped
- 1 spring onion, sliced diagonally into chunks

1. In a pan, heat the sesame oil over a medium heat. Fry the garlic and ginger until they have softened slightly and smell fragrant but haven't coloured too much.  
 2. Add 300ml water, the chicken stock, soy sauce and rice wine vinegar. Bring to a simmer and taste – if needed, add a little salt.  
 3. Bring the pan to the boil, then add the basmati rice and cook for 5 minutes. Reduce the heat to a gentle simmer and add the chicken and broccoli (Tenderstem will take slightly less time, so add this when you have only 4-5 minutes left). Put a lid on and cook for 8 minutes. You want it to stay at a gentle simmer so the chicken poaches but doesn't toughen.  
 4. Place the coriander and spring onion in your serving bowl. Once the chicken and rice are cooked, spoon into the bowl and mix everything together. Finish with a final drizzle of sesame oil to serve.

**3. HERBY CHICKEN AND RICE SALAD**

Prep: 10 minutes  
 Cook: 20 minutes

This is a meal I make again and again. It has everything I could possibly want from a salad. You can eat this as soon as it's ready, while it's still warm (I prefer it like this – the flavours really sing), or let it cool and keep it in the fridge. Poaching the chicken gives a tender, juicy result but be careful not to have the heat too high, as boiling can toughen the meat.

- 1 chicken stock cube
- 1 large chicken breast
- 75g basmati rice, rinsed
- Quarter of a small red onion (about 20g), finely sliced
- 2 tsp white wine vinegar
- 5g fresh coriander, finely chopped
- 5g fresh mint, finely chopped
- 3 tbsp pomegranate seeds
- 2 tbsp cashews or pine nuts, roughly chopped
- Juice of half a lemon
- 1 tsp olive oil
- Salt
- 2 tbsp coconut yoghurt

1. Fill a pan with 1 litre water and add the stock cube. Bring to the boil then reduce the heat to low until the water is barely simmering. Place the chicken breast in the water and gently poach for 5 minutes.

2. Add the rice and continue to simmer for another 10 minutes.  
 3. Meanwhile, add the onion to your serving bowl along with the white wine vinegar. This will lightly pickle the onion.  
 4. Once the chicken and rice are done, take out the chicken and place on a chopping board. Drain the rice and add it to your serving bowl along with the herbs, pomegranate seeds, nuts, lemon juice and olive oil. Shred the chicken using a fork or your hands, then add this to the bowl too. Mix, season well with salt and serve with dollops of coconut yoghurt.

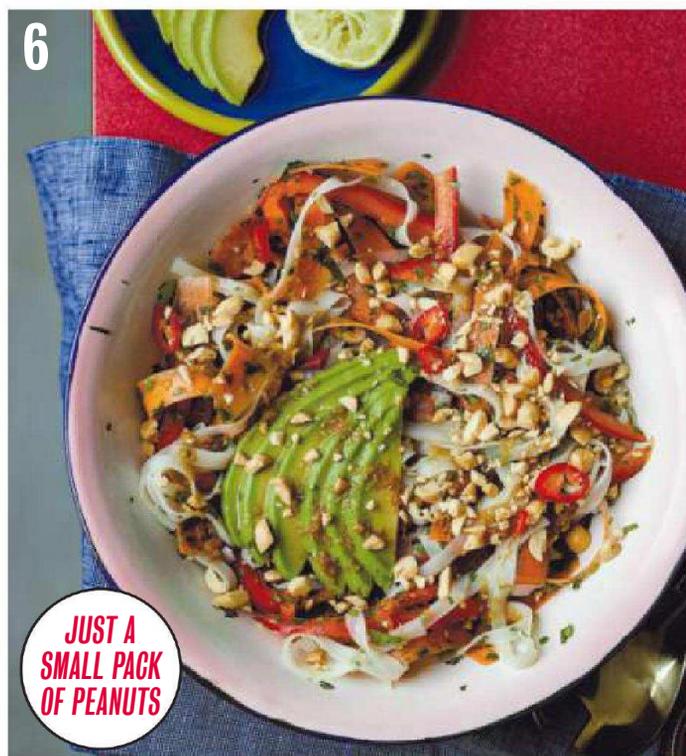
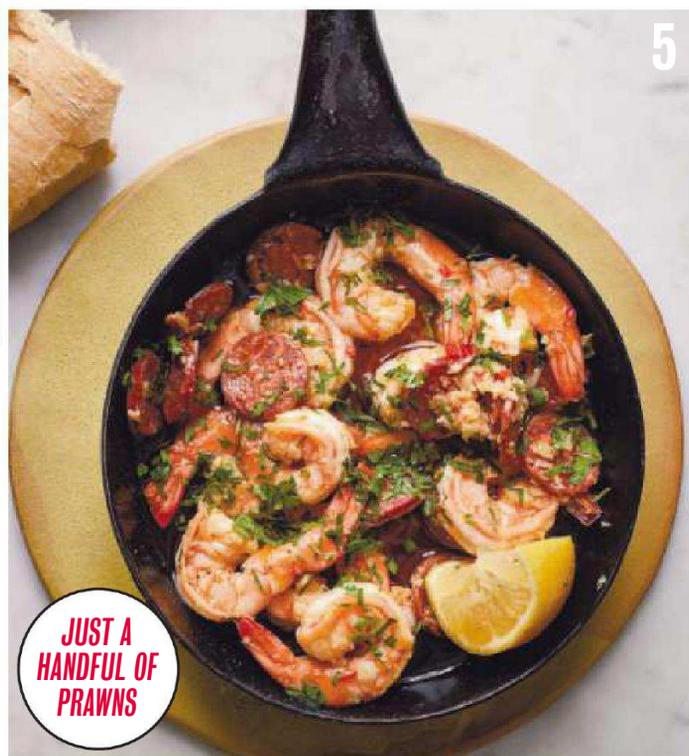
**4. CHICKEN AND BROCCOLI ALFREDO**

Prep: 5 minutes  
 Cook: 10 minutes

There aren't many things more comforting than a creamy pasta dish, but what I love about this alfredo is that it has a lightness to it – in essence, that means you can eat loads of it. And who doesn't want that?

Using fresh pasta is handy when making one-pot pasta dishes because it's quicker to cook and doesn't require as much liquid. Once you've tried this you'll be making it on repeat.

- 1 tsp olive oil
- 1 chicken breast, cut into thin strips
- 70g broccoli, cut into small florets
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- ½ tsp paprika



- ½ tsp dried mixed herbs
- Salt and black pepper
- 90g fresh penne or other short pasta
- Half a chicken stock pot
- 3 tbsp double cream
- 25g grated parmesan
- Small handful of finely chopped parsley
- Bread, to mop up the sauce

1. Heat the oil in a saucepan over a medium heat. Once hot, add the chicken, broccoli, garlic, paprika and mixed herbs and season with pepper. Sauté for 4-5 minutes until the chicken has some colour but isn't cooked all the way through.  
 2. Add the pasta, 125ml water, stock, cream and parmesan. Give it a good stir and let it simmer for 4-5 minutes until the pasta and the chicken are cooked and the sauce has thickened slightly.  
 3. Add the fresh parsley and stir through before serving. Mop up any extra sauce with a piece of bread.

### 5. PRAWN AND CHORIZO PIL PIL

Prep: 10 minutes  
 Cook: 10 minutes

We're playing with a classic tapas dish here, gambas pil pil, a simple pot of fresh prawns and spiced herbs bathed in plenty of good quality olive oil. "Pil pil" refers to a Spanish/Basque sauce made from olive oil, garlic and chilli, which is the foundation of this dish. Chorizo adds the smoky flavours of paprika, which you normally find in a pil pil, and the hit of fresh lemon and parsley at the end brings it all to life.

- 60g chorizo, thinly sliced
- 3-4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

- 100-165g raw prawns
- 3-4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 red chilli, finely chopped
- Salt and black pepper
- Juice of half a lemon
- 5g fresh parsley, finely chopped

1. Add the chorizo to a cold cast-iron frying pan and place over a medium-high heat. Let that cook for 2-3 minutes until it has started to crisp up and release its oils.  
 2. Add the olive oil to the pan and let that heat up with the chorizo. When hot, add the prawns, garlic and chilli and season with salt and pepper. Let that sizzle away for another 2-3 minutes until the prawns are fully cooked.  
 3. Take the pan off the heat, squeeze over the lemon juice and sprinkle over the fresh parsley. Serve with crusty bread to mop up the oil.

### 6. PEANUT NOODLE SALAD

Prep: 15 minutes  
 Cook: 5 minutes

I'm determined to change the rhetoric, to which I subscribed for many years, that salads are bland and boring. The key to unlocking maximum flavour is in the dressing and this one hits every flavour profile, utilising sour lime, salty soy and fish sauce, sweet honey and savoury sesame. Add the crunch of roasted peanuts and raw vegetables and the result is a taste and texture sensation.

- 1 nest of rice noodles
- Half a carrot, finely sliced or peeled into ribbons
- Half a red pepper, finely sliced
- 1 red chilli, finely sliced

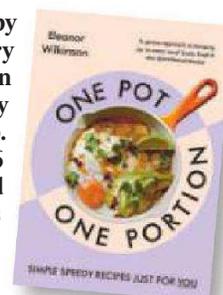
- 5g fresh coriander, finely chopped
- 5g fresh mint, finely chopped
- 30g roasted salted peanuts, finely chopped
- Half an avocado, sliced

#### For the dressing

- 2 tsp sesame oil
- 3 tsp soy sauce
- 1 tsp rice wine vinegar
- Splash of fish sauce
- 1½ tsp honey
- Juice of half a lime
- 5g fresh ginger, grated

1. Put the rice noodles in a heatproof bowl and cover with boiling water. Leave for 3-5 minutes until soft, then drain in a sieve. Rinse the noodles with cold water to stop them sticking together, then leave them in the sieve while you make the dressing.  
 2. Add all the ingredients for the dressing to the bowl and whisk together, then return the rice noodles to the bowl.  
 3. Add the carrot, red pepper, chilli, herbs and peanuts to the bowl and toss together. Serve with sliced avocado. ■

**One Pot, One Portion** by Eleanor Wilkinson (Ebury Press, £22) is published on Thursday. To order a copy go to times bookshop. co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Discount for Times+ members



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# Love Story

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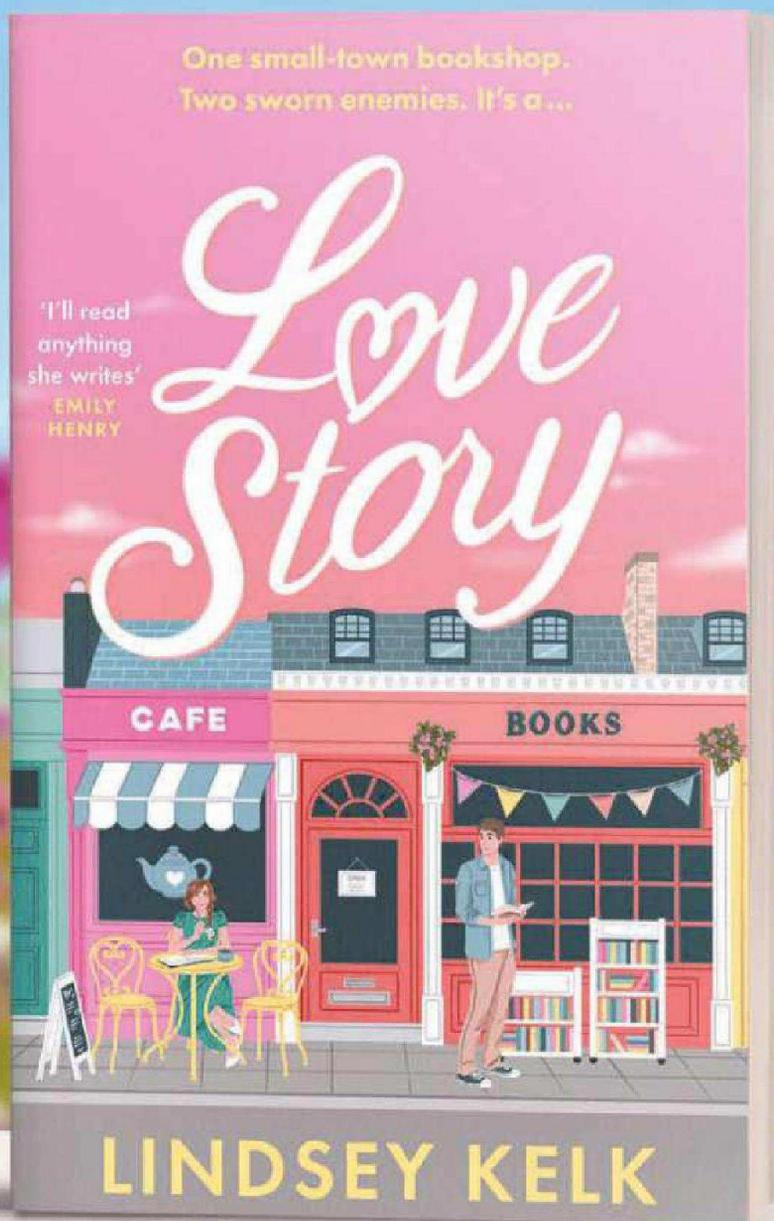
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'I'll read anything  
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and extremely hot'

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**M**innie Driver has had a very late night. After the celeb-studded Dior show at Drummond Castle in Perthshire, Scotland, the previous evening, Driver got to bed at an impressive 3.30am – before, even more impressively, forcing herself up again at 6am for her flight. She is, she declares, having arrived straight from the airport (large sunglasses, small suitcase), “F\*\*\*ing knackered.”

She goes on, “I hate that I can’t bounce back quickly these days. Everyone [on the flight back] was talking about Lumity and Arrae and all these different supplements and I was like, ‘Does that shit work? Does it give you back your *joie de youth*?’”

She may not be feeling the *joie* right now, on two and a half hours’ sleep, but, as she relates in her memoir, *Managing Expectations*, her looks were hardly a source of *joie* to her in her actual youth either.

Her late mother, Gaynor – a former model – and elder sister, Kate, were both willowy blondes, while Driver’s corkscrew mane earned her the teenage nicknames Slash (from Guns N’ Roses), Animal (from the Muppets) and T. Rex (Marc Bolan). Or, as she puts it, “My hair was part of my identity that had shown up too soon for the rest of me to accommodate.” Her angular features, meanwhile, gave rise to the school tag “50p face”.

It was during a US press tour 30 years ago for *Circle of Friends* – her breakthrough film in which she starred alongside Colin Firth and Chris O’Donnell – that she had what she calls her “Cinderella moment”. She’d put on weight for the role because, “Benny [her character] was meant to be soft and bigger and smart and funny and lovely,” and Driver was happy to do so. “I just wanted ten grand to pay off my debts and get new wheels on my Ford Fiesta.”

Landing in the US having lost the weight again, she was treated to the full Hollywood glam-over. “They came at my hair and blow-dried it straight,” she says. “And they got me a good bra and the right size jeans. And suddenly I was sleek. Suddenly, I was revealed to myself as being a girl who was pretty, and it was so exciting.”

At 54, the aesthetic doubts are now different. “I’d like to write a strongly worded letter to somebody saying, ‘It [high-definition television] should have just been for Animal Planet, for David Attenborough’s programmes and for sport,” she says firmly. “Nobody wants to see my pores and my wrinkles. Or now, the strange outline of dermal filler. You can’t win.”

Her solution? “You don’t look at it. If you’re me, you go and you shoot it and

## ‘ALL THE WORK THAT I DID ON SCRIPTS – ABSOLUTELY UNCREDITED’

you don’t ever watch it. When you’ve grown up on film it is hard to go and look at your dramatically changed countenance and not be judgmental. And frankly, I don’t want to judge myself. So I’d rather just do the work and not watch it.

“I’d much rather have my face when I was 25,” she admits freely. “But I certainly wouldn’t want to have to go through all that shit again, of all the other attendant stuff that was coming down the pipe.”

Handily, given Driver’s lack of sleep, we’re meeting in a hotel suite off Bond Street in central London, and she only takes a little persuading to make full use of the facilities, removing her trainers and climbing gratefully onto the vast bed.

Home these days is mainly here, back in London after 27 years in Los Angeles.

“I will always be between both places, but my son’s at school here, so if I’m not working, I’m wherever he is.”

Her son, Henry, 15, attends her old school, the progressive Hampshire boarder Bedales, to which her mother sent Minnie and Kate following her separation from their father and rapid remarriage to their stepfather.

Driver’s California place, meanwhile, is a mobile home in the same Malibu “trailer park” where Pamela Anderson lives. A keen surfer and outdoor swimmer, Driver seems to possess a strong free-spirited streak. She is also prolifically swears but requests that I report her swears “judiciously”, as she worries cursing doesn’t land quite the same when it’s written down.

Having grown up in Barbados until the age of six, Driver’s life thereafter changed dramatically. Her mother left her father and the family court decreed that for her to retain custody of her daughters she had to be married, have bought a house and have them in school by the time of the relocation – all within seven weeks.

So Gaynor sold most of what she owned, “bought a dilapidated cottage in the middle of Hampshire... then cheerfully told the man with whom she had begun a relationship that they were getting married. She marched into the school where she herself had gone and said they had to take her children.”

Gaynor, who died from liver cancer three years ago, sounds like a genuine force of nature. “That’s what was brilliant about her. She would decide and she would do something,” Driver says. “She was not all roses. She was a very difficult, complicated person because of her history. But she was really funny and really wise as well.”

At 12, Driver discovered the reason for her parents’ split: her father, Ronnie, had another family. Her parents had never been married during their 16-year relationship as Ronnie still had a wife.

“I had such an aversion to my stepfather, and I think she told me [that] in quite a selfish way, to try to make me feel better about her choices,” Driver says.

“As opposed to explaining to her kid what was going on, she told me in a fight, in a moment of rage, which was not good, but I understand it. Maybe that’s about getting older – all the faulted stuff about your parents you just go, ‘Oh yes, I know why they did that, because I did something similar last week.’”

I wonder what she thinks the discovery of her father’s infidelities did to her own ideas about relationships – particularly at such a formative age. “If I look at my history, what it did was make me want to be married so much and then choose men who were so not the right men to be married to,” she says.

“So I would carry on longing to be married and to have that conservative version [of a relationship], find men who had no interest in that, and then if one did, run a mile.

“The one time I was engaged [to fellow actor Josh Brolin in 2001] it would have been, I think, the biggest mistake of my life,” she says.

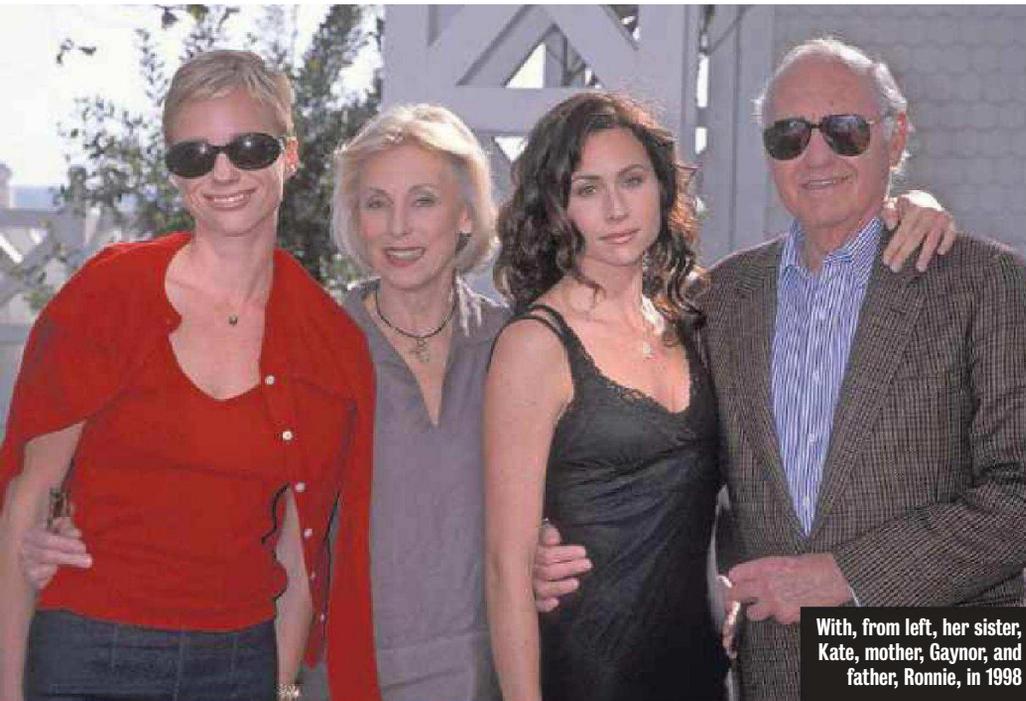
“But now I’m with someone [the American writer and director Addison O’Dea] who doesn’t want to get married but who is the most devoted, loving, extraordinary... Everything I could have wanted in my childhood idea of a husband, he actually is.”

She and O’Dea first met at a party in LA, after which she referred to him as “the spy” because he had worked a lot in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. When California wild fires blocked her route to her mobile home by road, the spy helped her reach it by boat.

She has talked of growing up “being unused to certainty”. When she became pregnant with Henry, the result of a short-term relationship with the Hollywood writer Timothy J Lea, she was determined to give her son the opposite.

“It’s why I stopped making movies, really consciously,” she says. “I called my agent and went, ‘OK, I’m having a baby and I would really like you to go and look for a show that’s called *Shoots in Los Angeles* and will pay me a regular wage,” she says.

“I couldn’t be travelling. I couldn’t be taking a tiny baby to Romania – and



With, from left, her sister, Kate, mother, Gaynor, and father, Ronnie, in 1998



With her *Good Will Hunting* co-stars Matt Damon, left, and Ben Affleck, 1997



In *Circle of Friends* with Chris O'Donnell



With Samantha Morton in *The Serpent Queen*



With her partner, Addison O'Dea, and son, Henry, 2020

I didn't want to. As a single mum, I didn't want him to have that uncertainty. I wanted him to have school and football and mates and tea and his own bed and our house," she says. She took parts in television sitcoms such as *About a Boy* and *Will & Grace*, which meant she could also be home each night. "And it was so lovely because with what you consciously give your children, you can perhaps at the same time be giving yourself the thing that you did not have."

Her latest small-screen project is *The Serpent Queen*, a historical drama about the life of Catherine de Medici, showing here on Prime Video. Driver plays Elizabeth I. Her Elizabeth is glorious: quirky, charismatic, funny.

"There was incredible licence to start exploring who this woman was," she says.

"And the two most powerful women in the world at that time were Catherine de Medici and Elizabeth I, and both of them husbandless." Which is not to say, Driver adds, that they were nuns.

"There's this brilliant, spitting speech that I have to Sam Morton [Catherine de Medici], who is basically calling Elizabeth a phoney for being the Virgin Queen, and she says – essentially; I'm paraphrasing – 'It's a brand, you idiot.'

"She was so aware that if you had a man, he would take your power. If you had children, other people would probably kill them, which made you vulnerable. So her being this brand, the Virgin Queen, was how she lived."

In reality, Driver says, "she was a woman of appetites. And I was interested in who that woman was once she took off her corset, when she was sexual, when she was free."

For Driver, freedom came when, following the success of *Circle of Friends*, she began getting cast in Hollywood in films such as *Grosse Pointe Blank* and *Good Will Hunting*, for which she was nominated for an Oscar.

"In America there was just this idea of, 'Whatever you want to do, try it. Do it. Throw everything you have at it and see what happens.' There is this idea that you're allowed to renew and to change course; you're allowed to pivot. I can be a writer, I can be a musician, I can be a mother, I can be an actor – you don't have to be just one thing."

This was new for Driver. "In England, I felt I was punished for wanting more. I was punished for being ambitious. The British press," she says, "think it's greedy for me to want to be more."

While not as well known for her music as her acting, Driver has recorded three albums, toured and performed at festivals. She names a British music journalist who, years ago, wrote that he "wanted to hate" one of her records "but couldn't".



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“The idea that the default position was, ‘We need to hate this because this is somebody stepping outside and wanting to express themselves in another way...’” She sighs.

The success of *Good Will Hunting* sent her profile soaring, in part thanks to her relationship with her co-star, Matt Damon. That she’d been offered the role was a triumph in itself, since Harvey Weinstein had objected to it, telling the casting director that, “Nobody would want to f\*\*\* her,” just one of the litany of horrors and incidents of harassment Driver details in her memoir.

She was once asked to fake an orgasm in front of 17 executives in an audition for a chocolate bar ad.

“Fake an orgasm?” she clarified. Yes, she was told, “Unless you fancy having a real one.” Driver walked out. Her agent was given the feedback that she had been “difficult”.

Given her upbringing, it is probably not surprising that Driver was more defiant than most in the face of such misogyny.

“You try to find a mechanism that could help you, that you could tell someone, ‘This thing is happening, please help me make it stop, but also help make it stop for that person over there and that woman over there.’”

But instead, she says, she was “crucified” for speaking up, “completely and utterly vilified for being some sort of ‘whistleblower’. This idea of ‘causing trouble on the set’ – ‘She called her lawyer.’”

It would be 30 years before the rest of Hollywood would rise up and add their voices with the #MeToo movement. Does Driver believe things have really changed?

“Yes, I do. But not because of some kind of systemic epiphany that men had. Rather, because they know that there’s accountability now,” she says. “There are actually mechanisms in place [which mean] that kind of behaviour can’t be hidden. And I think #MeToo put a dent in it, but I just don’t know whether that power dynamic is ever really going to be redressed.”

I wonder if she’s bitter that it took so long. “Revolutions are bloody. People want to maintain the status quo for as long as they possibly can until they absolutely can’t and then, kicking and screaming, people will change.

“It annoys me no end that there wasn’t recourse and there was actually punitive stuff that happened [to me] as a result,” she says. “But here we are talking about this new project that I couldn’t love more, and I’m 54 and it’s been 30 years...”

One important shift she sees is in younger actresses taking ownership of their productions. “I watched *Challengers* the other night and what I loved most was seeing that Zendaya was a producer. Not

## WHEN SHE REFUSED TO FAKE AN ORGASM, SHE WAS CALLED ‘DIFFICULT’

an executive producer – a producer.” She namechecks Margot Robbie, the creative force behind *Barbie*. “They’re like, ‘I’m part of this creation, I am making this happen.’ And I think maybe that is how it changes.

“We all should have been doing that back in the Nineties,” she continues. “When I think about the work that I did on scripts, the fixing things, the making stuff better, absolutely uncredited.

“I made so many of the roles that I was in through improv, through rewriting, through ideas that were all then completely uncredited. So what’s great is that these girls are now getting credit for it.”

Driver has said that, while she is British, “I identify as a Californian.” Days before we meet, Donald Trump is found guilty of 34 felony counts in the historic hush money trial in New York, for paying Stormy Daniels \$130,000 (£92,000) in the run-up to the 2016 election. But Driver is more anxious than jubilant. “He’s going to say that the whole thing is like the election, that it’s corrupt.

“Of course he deserves to be in prison – of course he does,” she says. “But just looking at how much money he raised in that two days, \$53 million in a 48-hour period, and the idea that because the founding fathers – if there had been some mothers involved perhaps it would be different – left no room in the constitution for the idea that the American people could be so stupid as to vote for a felon, there is nothing reflected in the judiciary about what would happen if he wins. It’s a pickle when you’ve got the Secret Service already scoping out prisons, going, ‘What would this look like?’”

Were Trump to be re-elected, could she live there again?

“If I lived in a red [Republican] state, no, I couldn’t,” she says. “But living in California, you are somewhat insulated. But do you want to go and live in a bubble? Do you run away from the fire or do you go back and help?”

It’s not just Trump himself, she says, but “the revelation of the 70 million people who really quite like a bit of a racist attitude and non-existent immigration policies and dismantling the environmental agencies. And they were always there; they weren’t created by him. He’s just a symptom, and now they’ve got a mascot,” she says.

Is the UK in a much better state politically? “At least the memes are funnier,” she says with a laugh. “And I am more hopeful. For all the division in the UK, there just seems to be a more robust connection between us. We have this

discourse. We talk about it and we laugh about it. We don’t pull out guns and shoot each other about it.”

Following the success of her memoir, Driver is now writing a novel. “But is it really fiction? No, it’s not,” she says, laughing. Her mother’s death meant she found herself unable to write for three months and ran out of time to put more stories into her memoir. “But I didn’t want to write another memoir. And there is no reason this character can’t have that experience that I had in Morocco in 1988.”

She’s also cribbing – openly – from others. “When you’re standing in line at the supermarket, people do pontificate and philosophise about the world and say hilarious stuff. I’m a bit of a magpie.”

Certainly, she’s a keen student of human nature. Her podcast, *Minnie Questions*, in which she asks public figures seven existential questions based on the so-called Proust Questionnaire – a set of questions often used by modern interviewers – has been running for three years now, with guests including Chelsea Clinton, Tony Blair, Alan Cumming, Cindy Crawford, Graydon Carter and Courteney Cox. Her favourite guests include the actress and presenter Jameela Jamil, “Because when I asked her, ‘What question would you most like answered?’ she said, ‘Does anybody actually enjoy reverse cowgirl?’” She throws her face into her mound of pillows in mirth.

What question would Driver herself most like answered? “I want to know if there will ever be equality for women. Will there ever be parity – in the way in which we’re treated and financially? I’d love to know that so we could stop feeling angry and sad about it.”

The seven questions also include asking guests, “What in your life has grown out of a personal disaster?” For her, Driver says, it’s “the repeated humiliation of being rejected by people you respect for jobs that you really wanted and then having to meet them socially.

“You can’t possibly not take it personally. It’s so personal,” she says.

“But what grows out of that is: sink or swim. You have to find a way not to attach your self-worth to the opinions of others. I work on it every single day. It’s not like I’ve managed to do it. But it has grown, because it’s enormously powerful to feel that you are the one picking yourself up and going, ‘Don’t worry. It’s Netflix who are the idiots. It’s not you.’” ■

The *Serpent Queen* season two is available on Prime Video channel MGM+ from July 12

# 'I DID SOMETHING I'LL REGRET FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE'

Lindsay Nicholson, the former editor of Good Housekeeping magazine, lost her husband and young daughter within six years of each other. Work kept her going, but after breast cancer, a car crash, the breakdown of her second marriage, an arrest and redundancy, she finally unravelled. She tells Louise France how she survived

**PORTRAIT** Mark Harrison **STYLING** Hannah Rogers





Lindsay Nicholson, 67

**L**indsay Nicholson – award-winning glossy magazine editor with friends in high places (including Downing Street), frequent guest on primetime news shows, who, in her own words “dressed like I was at a cocktail party: Donna Karan suit, Jimmy Choo shoes, Chanel handbag” – found herself sitting in a police cell in Hatfield, Hertfordshire.

Five months earlier her second husband, Mark, had made a speech, telling more than 100 guests at her 60th birthday that “I love and adore her”. Now, she suspected him of having an affair. Following a disagreement during which his mobile phone had been smashed, he’d called 999 and accused her of criminal damage and common assault.

How had it come to this? The answer is one that she is only now able to unravel, seven years on, and she does it with both acuity and remarkable honesty. The crisis (and it wasn’t over yet, not by a long way) goes back 32 years, to 1992 and the devastating death of her first husband, the journalist John Merritt, at 35, and then the death of their eldest daughter, Ellie, who was only nine, six years later.

But in the cell in Hatfield, having been escorted from her *Grand Designs*-style barn conversion by three policemen, fingerprinted, DNA swabs taken and body-searched, she could think of only one way out. It looked like all her efforts to get her life back on track had been for nothing. Her marriage, which up until a few days before she had assumed was happy and solid, was clearly over and, even though she believed she was innocent, she had been arrested. Nicholson scanned the bare walls for a way to hang herself with her cashmere jumper.

She was held overnight. The following morning she was questioned. After more than 16 hours, the duty solicitor informed her that the charges had been dropped. “But don’t go home,” he told her. “He may make more accusations. You could be arrested again.”

We meet in the aforementioned barn and sit in the kitchen, complete with boiling tap and moulded resin floors. There is confusion over the date and she isn’t expecting me but, perhaps in a throwback to her old editing days – when she went to work doggedly, even going

Lindsay Nicholson with her first husband, John Merritt, and their daughter, Ellie, 1988



As editor-in-chief of Good Housekeeping, 2006



With Kirstie Allsopp, 2014

back within weeks after the funerals of John and Ellie – she doesn’t want to let me down and welcomes me inside. She is, she says, “in a state of limbo” before the publication of her compelling memoir, *Perfect Bound*, about her breakdown.

Her account, based on her diaries, was never meant for publication. Not least because only a handful of people knew about her arrest. Publishing the book would mean telling her elderly mother,

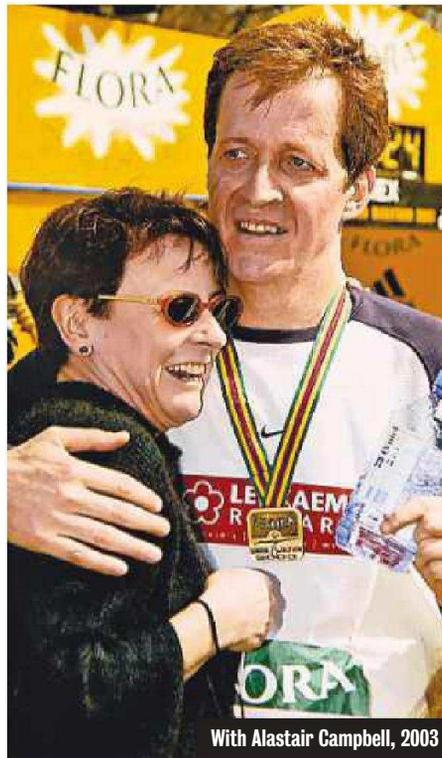
to whom she is very close, that she had spent the night in a cell.

“But then I discovered that although the vast majority of perpetrators of domestic violence are men – 92 per cent – it is women who are more likely to be arrested if police are called,” she says. “Yet hardly any of these women are ever charged and fewer still found guilty in court. I was so, so shocked. But the more I looked into it, the more I understood

COURTESY OF LINDSAY NICHOLSON, ALAMY, MARTIN GODWIN/GUARDIAN/EVYINE



John and Ellie on holiday in France, 1991



With Alastair Campbell, 2003



With Ellie, aged five, and Hope, one, 1994

why it happens. Why it's so secret for women. And I began to think a lot of women out there would have had the same experience, for whom it was the most shameful thing."

The book is also, perhaps, a bid to have the last word. Twenty years ago she brought out her first memoir about losing John and Ellie and bringing up her youngest daughter, Hope – she had been pregnant when John died – on her own.

It had ended happily ever after when she met Mark, a tall, handsome estate agent, and got married. Good Housekeeping, the magazine she edited, which had 1.5 million readers, would regularly run "triumph over tragedy" stories and she had imagined she was the living embodiment of one, especially when her new husband helped her through breast cancer. "One day, Mark and I will be separated by death. Until then I choose love and

## 'Going to work meant I didn't have to think about what had happened in my life'

life," she had written. But her life had imploded for the second time.

She is now 67. "I thought I'd nailed it. But it's one thing to pick yourself up when you're in your thirties," she says – as indeed she had done, a doubly bereaved single mother. "It's quite another in your sixties, when you aren't bursting with energy any more and you are no longer beautiful and full of life."

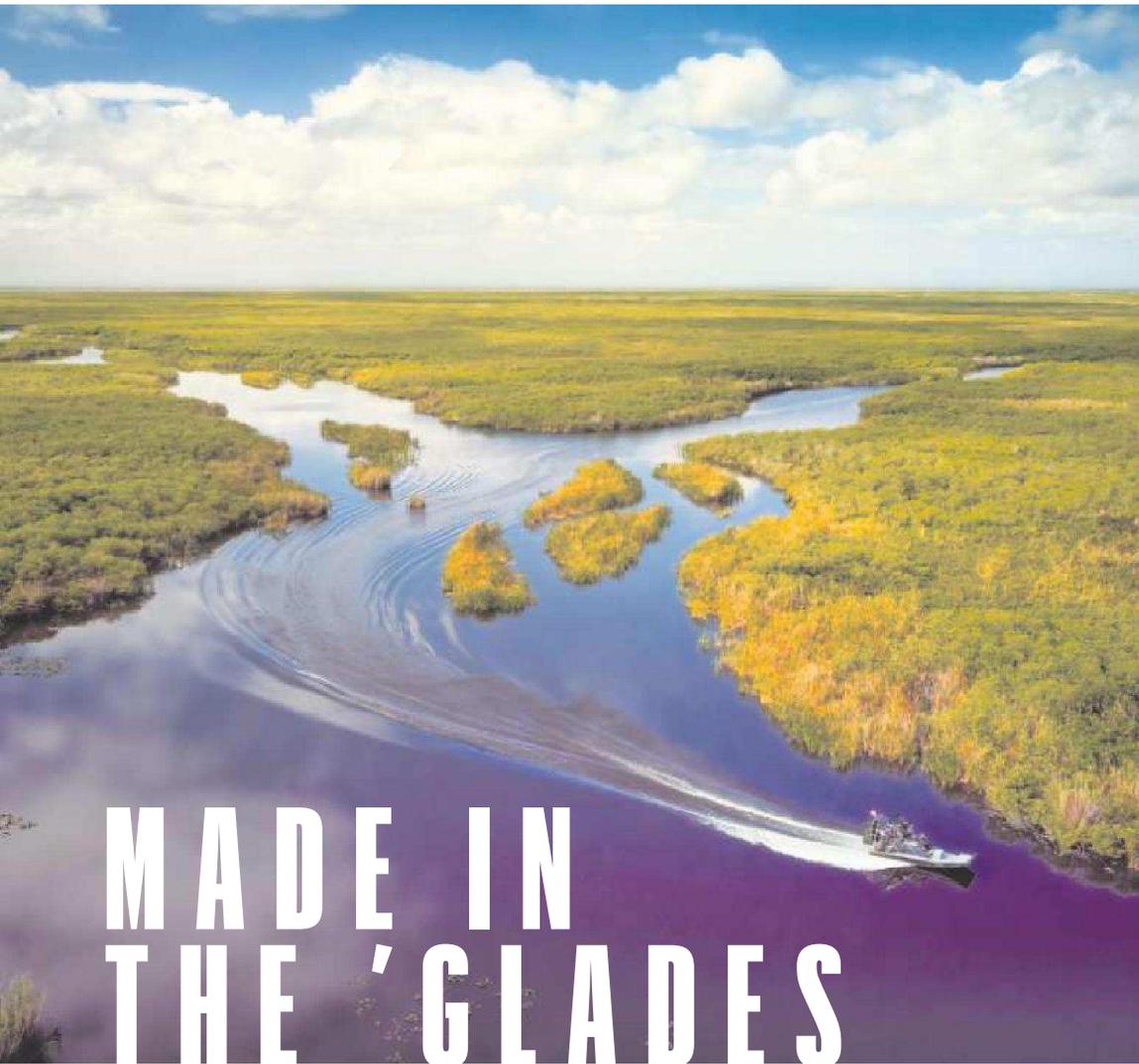
Nicholson believes the catalyst for her breakdown came six weeks before the arrest, when she'd narrowly missed being killed driving home on the motorway after visiting her mother in Essex. A man had thrown himself onto the tarmac in a suicide attempt and the lorry in front had ended up parallel in front of her. "I was hurtling at 70 miles an hour. I thought it was the end. Cars were spinning around behind me like a scene from *Fantasia*. Afterwards, I sat on the roadside and assumed I was dead. It was as though I was looking down upon myself."

No one had died, including the suicidal stranger. But something about the trauma took her back to her own grief decades before. She'd survived a literal car crash; now her life was going to turn into one.

She'd often had flashbacks to John dying from leukaemia and then her daughter dying from the same rare form of the disease. In the decades that followed, she had become accustomed to insomnia (sleeping risked dreams of hospital wards and death beds and funerals) and would tell taxi drivers to avoid any route that included Great Ormond Street, where she had sat by Ellie's bedside. She also used work as a distraction. "Busy, busy, busy. For me going to work meant that, one, I earned enough money to keep a roof over my head and, two, gave me ten hours a day when I didn't have to think about what had happened in my life."

Now she thinks she was "cracked open in the car crash. Although I was physically unhurt, I was utterly cracked open."

Looking back on the morning of her arrest she was already in crisis, but maybe she wouldn't have dealt with the suspected infidelity in the same way if she hadn't been "utterly cracked open" on the motorway. She already feared her husband was having an affair, but he refused to discuss it. "And I went to work on the Monday, as you do. And I went to work on the Tuesday, as you do," she says, ➔



# MADE IN THE 'GLADES

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By Stephanie, TUI rep

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Ellie at her first communion, 1996



## ‘Maybe I’m the bad seed. Maybe I’m the reason everything keeps going wrong’

And, you know, having had quite a bit to drink the night before, I’d have a glass of sauvignon blanc to take the edge off breakfast. It was freaking out my friends and family. It was scary for them.”

There are some blackly comic moments. The award-winning former editor makes up fake coverlines in her head – a parody of the phrases she always used to make a point of writing herself: “Dress like nobody can see you”; “101 reasons not to exercise – you only need one”; “How to carry on when you think you’re going to kill yourself”. A few months down the line, she imagined she was well enough to book a flight to America, but discovered at check-in that she hadn’t filled in her visa paperwork correctly. Unpacking her wheelie bag on the airport floor, scattering her belongings everywhere, who should walk past but Anna Wintour, the editor of *US Vogue*.

She laughs. “It’s not like I’d only ever seen her on television. I’d had lunch with her.” It seemed to sum up just how far her life had come undone.

Since growing up in Essex, the high-achieving daughter of cash-strapped parents, Nicholson had always been “the good girl”. When awful things happened to her – and we can all agree that she has had her fill of what experts call traumatic events – she thought she just needed to try harder. Now she thinks that for many years she had been suffering from undiagnosed PTSD. Perfectionism is one of the less reported symptoms, along with the years of flashbacks. “In the end you have to admit that, however perfect you are, through no one’s fault, your life can fall apart, just because that’s the way the world is. Then you’re just, you know, on

a rock spinning somewhere in the solar system on the outer arm of the galaxy and that’s a really scary place to be.”

Was she a workaholic? “Yeah, but I didn’t realise it at the time. My experience of being a workaholic is that you don’t think you’re a workaholic because you always think there’s more work that you could squeeze in if you weren’t so lazy.” Now she says she gets tired in a way she never used to when she was full of adrenaline and cortisol. “I was never tired, never hungry, never cold,” she says. “The thing is, the world rewards you very well if you override all your natural feelings. The world rewarded me very well for my level of commitment. I was well paid, I had a lot of perks, I had a lot of access and treats. People were very admiring.”

Incrementally, she is putting her life back together for the third time. Her divorce came through. She worked with Meghan Markle on her *Grenfell Tower* cookbook and is invited to sit on boards. She must earn a lot less? “Well, I’ve got less money coming in, but less money going out. I used to spend a lot on clothes. I used to spend a lot on getting my hair done. I used to go to spas. I only ever slept at spas,” she laughs. Hope, a teacher, has been a huge support. So have friends, including the Labour spin doctor and podcaster Alastair Campbell and his wife, Fiona, who have been part of her life since she was married to John.

She has rediscovered her love of horses and bought a five-year-old bay, Pablo. She is a qualified instructor for Riding for the Disabled. On her kitchen table she has a big board full of Post-it Notes, organising the following day’s timetable. And the most healing thing of all, ten months ago she became a grandmother for the first time. Hope’s daughter, Cora Eleanor, is named after the little girl who, had she survived, would have been her aunt.

There is a sense of Nicholson being a work in progress – not the woman she was, but on the mend. Flawed like all of us. “The man who went in front of that lorry? If I saw him I’d give him a hug. I’m glad my marriage no longer exists. I am very sad about the way he did it.

“If you’re a dissociating perfectionist, trapped in PTSD and determined life has to be a certain way, you miss out on so much. Now? I can just sit and smell my baby granddaughter’s head for an hour, no trouble at all.” Life is OK and that’s good enough. ■

*Perfect Bound: A Memoir of Trauma, Heartbreak and the Words That Saved Me* by Lindsay Nicholson (*Mudlark*, £20) is published on July 18. To order a copy go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](http://timesbookshop.co.uk) or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members.

knowing how absurd this might look, but it was in her DNA to keep going. The following day she made her way to a celebrity photoshoot, one of the favourite parts of her job, knowing her marriage was in serious jeopardy.

As she stood on the platform at Swiss Cottage Tube, she thought about stepping onto the tracks. “I had been so lonely after John died and I didn’t want to go back there. I didn’t know what I was facing at home. I did know that he wasn’t willing to talk to me. And I thought one step onto the tracks would be all it took not to feel this way any more. There was self-loathing – maybe I’m the bad seed, maybe I’m the reason everything keeps going wrong. If I’m out of the picture, everyone else can get on with their lives.”

At the shoot, she crept into a toilet cubicle and rang her doctor. “I think I want to kill myself,” she whispered. Somehow, she got home to Berkhamsted – and things were about to get even worse. “I do something I will regret for the rest of my life,” she writes in the book.

I wonder what she thinks was going through her husband’s mind when he called 999. She chooses her words carefully. “All I can say is that I thought I was in a happy marriage but it turns out I had no idea what he was thinking.” (It is a full 35 minutes into our interview before she refers to him by name.)

“I thought it was a genuine relationship, but at some point it changed and I don’t know when that was.”

Had the police followed procedure, she says, and done a risk assessment for suicidal ideation when they arrested her – the three police officers were male – she might not have been locked up in a cell for the night. She thinks she went into an almost comatose state when they took her away, a shutting-down response to trauma that is often not picked up. When she asked for footage from the arresting officer’s body-worn camera, she discovered it had been deleted. What perplexes her most is the fact that, while female-to-male domestic violence is much rarer than male-on-female domestic violence, she was taken into custody.

Two bereavements, breast cancer, a car crash, an arrest, a break-up, being made homeless and then came another blow – she was made redundant from the magazine she’d worked on for 18 years. The woman who used to go to the same gym as Prince Harry couldn’t airbrush her life any longer. Living in a rented house, which she nicknames “the Divorce House”, depression descended like a fog, putting an end to the ceaseless activity that had ruled her life for so long. She stopped showering. She put on weight.

“I was on Valium and antidepressants. I wouldn’t get dressed. I’d walk the dogs in my nightie and Wellington boots.



# DRIVING CHANGE

## How Ferrero supports the livelihoods of cocoa farmers and their families

Imagine being in Fatoumata Kouradogo's shoes. Despite working long hours on the cocoa farms at Konankro in Ivory Coast, she could only afford to send two of her six children to school. That left the others with no education – and education, as everyone knows, is the key to giving children a better life.

Many families working in cocoa farming face similar dilemmas – but Fatoumata's story has a happy ending. Thanks to a five-year project in partnership between global sweet packaged foods company Ferrero and Save the Children, which was launched to protect children in the region's cocoa-growing communities, she took out a zero-interest loan to buy and cultivate two fields of maize and beans that would provide her with an income. "She was able to repay the loan, put aside some money for the schooling of her children, and provide food and clothes," says

Camilla Stecca, senior programme manager with Save the Children.

It's undoubtedly a good news story. However, the challenges facing the cocoa industry are ongoing and complex. There's also a need for multi-stakeholder organisations such as the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI) to unite companies and civil society organisations, to work together to find collective solutions.

Together with its members and partners, ICI is dedicated to tackling child labour and forced labour in the cocoa sector. "We believe finding solutions is a shared responsibility," says ICI's executive director, Matthias Lange, "one that requires collective action. Missions like this don't change things overnight, but they do change things for the better in the long term.

"ICI works with cocoa communities, farming co-operatives, companies and governments to



**QUALITY IS MORE THAN JUST TASTE – IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT WE'RE ABLE TO TRACE OUR COCOA TO ITS SOURCE**

develop and test ways to tackle child labour, and help all actors to implement the strategies we know work, for example, improving access to quality education, supporting farmer livelihoods and promoting gender equality.”

To drive such wide-scale and lasting change, organisations, governments and industry partners must work together. Save the Children is one such organisation. It helps people to create positive change in their communities. One of its key focuses is “soft work”, which includes helping to build up a community’s infrastructure by giving children birth certificates and implementing bridging classes for children to go into formal education.

Like Save the Children, Ferrero believes in the need for a mix of initiatives to support cocoa communities – and this approach underpins their partnership, which started in 2020. “The objective of our partnership with Ferrero is to ensure a harmonised approach on child protection in Ivory Coast and Ghana by all suppliers in Ferrero’s cocoa supply chain,” explains Stecca.

A vital part of this work is identifying the most vulnerable households in the community and supporting them with interventions which aim to promote community development, provide children with access to quality education and empower them to realise their future potential.

The positive impact of Save the Children’s work comes to life in Fatoumata’s case: she became a “champion of education” among women and the secretary of a school committee that aims to raise awareness of programmes in the community and improve the learning conditions of children. “The project has opened our eyes and shown us how things can change for the better,” she says. “Now it is up to us to keep the torch burning.”

Stecca adds: “We firmly believe that only by intervening in an integrated manner – through a multi-stakeholder approach where each player takes responsibility – will it be possible to create significant and lasting change in the cocoa sector, and improve the lives of thousands more children and families in West Africa.”

At Ferrero, sustainability is key, and collaborative initiatives and long-term strategic partnerships help the company deliver on its robust commitments. “We want the cocoa we source to be aligned to what we’re promising to our consumers, which is quality products,” says Olivier Zwolsman, responsible sourcing manager of cocoa at Ferrero. “For Ferrero, quality is more than just taste – it is essential that we’re able to trace our cocoa to its source. Traceability is at the heart of sustainability.”

Today, Ferrero’s cocoa is 100 per cent sourced through independently managed standards such as the Rainforest Alliance, Fairtrade Foundation, Cocoa Horizons and others, and its supply chain is traceable to farm level. “We aim to build long-term relationships,” says Zwolsman, “working with farmer groups to deliver projects that secure sustainable livelihoods, improve the wellbeing of women and children, and help to protect the environment. We achieve this through interventions aimed at increasing productivity, supporting farmers to diversify their income and empowering women in the local communities.”

Ferrero has co-signed a letter of intent to



support the governments of Ivory Coast and Ghana in evolving the Living Income Differential and putting in place the right mechanism to support farmers’ income and guarantee the sustainability of the sector.

One challenge is that cocoa does not provide farmers with a year-round income. To mitigate this, Ferrero supports all those in its supply chain with programmes to diversify income, increase food security and become more resilient to climate change. “We also pay all farmers a cash premium on top of the commercial price for the purchased cocoa,” says Zwolsman. “And we’re committed to paying the Living Income Differential.”

This support extends to the wider communities too. With Ferrero’s help, more than 1,721 Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLA) – with almost 47,000 members, of which 62 per cent are women – have been established in cocoa-growing communities. Through the VSLAs, women can access small loans to set up businesses that help to bring social change. Evidence shows that women members’ increasing financial independence contributes to their empowerment and the wellbeing of their children. Ferrero is also part of a large public private partnership, the Child Learning and Education Facility, which aims to provide high-quality education to four million children in Ivory Coast.

“We believe the right partnerships enable us to drive forward long-lasting change,” says Zwolsman. “Not only are we passionate about creating products that have quality at heart, we’re also committed to producing them in a responsible way.”

For more information visit  
[ferrero.co.uk](https://www.ferrero.co.uk)



#### Seeds of hope

From top: children in cocoa-growing communities are feeling the benefit; Camilla Stecca, senior programme manager with Save the Children; a cocoa pod

Mathilde Favier and Inès de la Fressange, 1989



At the Opéra Comique gala, 2024



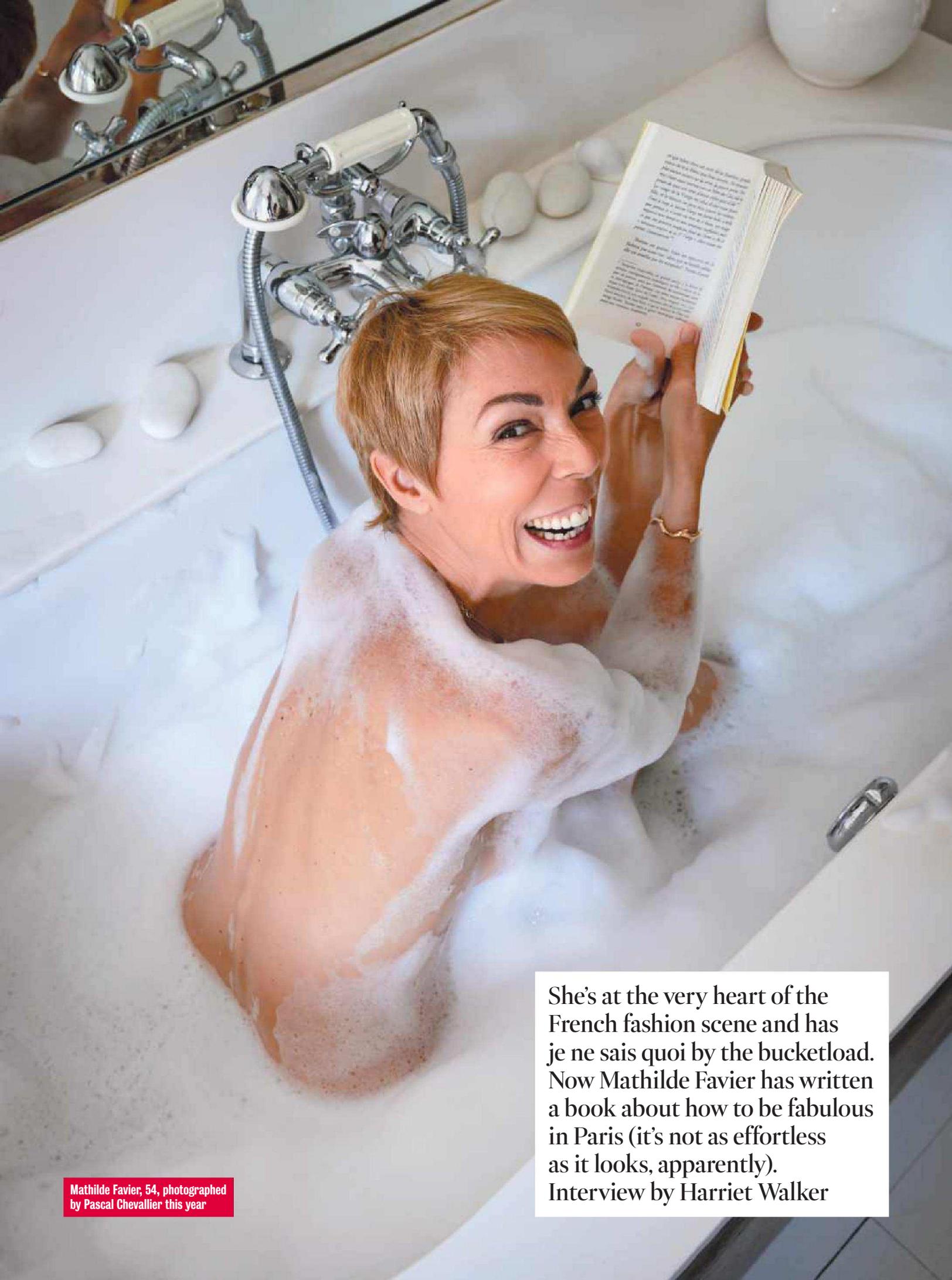
# MEET THE MOST CONNECTED WOMAN IN PARIS



In Paris with Natalia Vodianova last year



With her daughter, Héloïse



She's at the very heart of the French fashion scene and has je ne sais quoi by the bucketload. Now Mathilde Favier has written a book about how to be fabulous in Paris (it's not as effortless as it looks, apparently). Interview by Harriet Walker

Mathilde Favier, 54, photographed by Pascal Chevallier this year

f the mythical “true” Cockney is born within earshot of Bow bells, Mathilde Favier surely ticks off whatever metric constitutes authentic *Parisienne* – an infancy spent beneath the horse chestnut trees of the *seizième*, perhaps.

The 54-year-old is such a lifelong denizen of the City of Light’s most chichi arrondissement, her childhood

hot chocolates were sipped at the Trocadero and she knows Carla Bruni from taking the same bus route as kids. Favier went to school with the former editor of French Vogue, the superstylist Emmanuelle Alt; her half-sister, Victoire de Castellane, is the acclaimed jewellery designer at Christian Dior; and her younger sister, Pauline, became famous as a TV presenter. Their uncle, Gilles Dufour, was Karl Lagerfeld’s right-hand man at Chanel.

With this pedigree, it is perhaps unsurprising that Chanel offered a young Favier her first internship, where she met and became friends with Sofia Coppola. Now head of PR at Dior Couture – the august label’s most rarefied and expensive echelon – Favier is so much a *Parisienne* that chic runs through her core, like a word in a stick of rock.

Yet she has none of the stereotypical *froideur* that once came with this sort of territory. Favier’s perma-expression is a big grin and her outlook is relentlessly positive.

“It’s so French to complain,” she says with a laugh. “I’m a very smiley person. I’m sometimes melancholic though; I get nostalgic for the Paris I grew up in. When I was young, I was lucky enough to [know] a world that no longer exists.”

That is why she has attempted to catalogue her own for a new book. *Living Beautifully in Paris* is a who’s who of the city’s most quietly fabulous and their homes, among them the jeweller Aurélie Bidermann; Elisabetta Beccari, wife of the Louis Vuitton CEO Pietro; and the hip artist Eva Jospin, who has created catwalks for Dior and is the daughter of Lionel, the former prime minister.

Yet it is also part guidebook to Paris’s finest food (and patisseries), part manifesto on the ancient French art of *je ne sais quoi*, as practised by its most refined inhabitants – of which Favier is certainly one. Cuttings from glossy magazines show her as an It girl in her youth and an extra in Coppola’s 2006 film *Marie Antoinette*, balancing Versailles pompadour and Vogue menthols behind the scenes.

French society might have changed since then but, according to Favier, its complicated rules of etiquette have not.

“I would never put a plastic bottle on the table,” she tells me over Zoom while I pretend I wouldn’t either. “When I’m at home by myself, I still dress the table. I don’t eat off my knee. Even if it’s just to eat something really simple, I still do it

## ‘Refinement isn’t about money. I’d never put a plastic bottle on the table’

nicely. I take time to go to the market to buy the right salad.

“My mother always took the butter out of its wrapper and the price off everything. My grandfather’s motto was, ‘I’m not rich enough to skimp.’ Everyone asks me where this obsession with refinement came from. It’s in my DNA.”

Favier’s is the sort of gene sequence that, for a time in France, meant losing an important part of one’s body. These days she is safe to describe her younger self as a “debutante”. Through her mother’s friends she knew the interior designer Madeleine Castaing, who sat for Modigliani and Soutine in her time, and Countess Jacqueline de Ribes, then fashionable queen of Paris’s beau monde. Aged 16, Favier created paper tablecloths for a Rothschild wedding and went for Sunday suppers at the artists Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne’s rural estate in Ury.

It was Jackie Kennedy’s sister Lee Radziwill who introduced Favier to Robert Agostinelli, who would become her first husband. They married at the palazzo of the Formula 1 manager Giovanni Volpi on the Giudecca in Venice. Their daughter, Héloïse, is a model and *Made in Chelsea* star, and their son, Carlo, until recently dated the tennis player Emma Raducanu.

“Refinement has nothing to do with money,” Favier insists. “Just a sort of freshness and some taste.”

I now feel more certain than ever that, like an uncle who works at Chanel or the sort of face that suits a pixie crop, *je ne sais quoi* is either something you are born with or must struggle through life without. Nevertheless, Favier has 200,000 followers on Instagram keen to learn her craft. Just don’t call her an influencer. “I’m against that term,” she says, understandably when you consider what happened to the country’s last one-percenter to advise people on eating cake. “We should speak about inspiring, not influencing.”

Certainly there is plenty of inspiration in her book. Aspiration too: beautiful interiors, gorgeous florists, phenomenal homeware. But doesn’t it run counter to the insouciance trope to put quite so much effort into being fabulous?

“This is a big lie,” Favier says, breaking Frenchwoman omerta. “It’s never effortless. Some people are so charming, they make it look effortless. But if somebody very thin is saying to you, ‘Oh, it’s funny, actually I eat a lot,’ it’s never true. They are always very careful; they eat the right things. Life is an effort. When you make some, life is more beautiful and special.”



Lee Radziwill and Mathilde Favier, Paris 2013



With her son, Carlo, who was dating Emma Raducanu

With, from left, Kaia Gerber and her mother Cindy Crawford, daughter Héloïse and Carine Roitfeld



With third husband Nicolas Altmyer, Cannes, 2023



At the vegan Maisie Café in Paris with its founder, Isabella Capecce, stylist Mélanie Huynh, Luiz Broetto, a yoga teacher, and the designer Alexandra Golovanoff

She references Radziwill always matching her nail varnish to her knitwear. “That seems like *My Fair Lady* now, but the other day I recognised Brigitte Bardot walking down the street from behind because she has that beautiful dancer’s walk, even at 89. I have always been disciplined about my body. It makes me feel good to do yoga, eat well. I like eating badly, but it doesn’t make me feel good so I don’t do it.” When pressed, she admits to enjoying aeroplane snacking cheese out of the wrapper.

All this counts as radical honesty in an overcrowded genre of Frenchspiration literature that normally makes out that its glamorous protagonists, to borrow Beyoncé’s phrase, woke up like this – literally in the case of one several years ago, who claimed her signature smoky eye came from sleeping in her make-up. Surely Frenchwomen are not really that *laissez faire*?

“People don’t pretend they don’t do [tweakments] any more,” Favier concedes. “But *Parisiennes* always want it to look real, to keep the best of what they have. Ask men and they’ll tell you: cosmetic surgery makes you look older.” Does she have anything done? “Of course I do. But I don’t smoke any more and I don’t drink.”

The book features one photo of Favier on the balcony of her apartment, dressed in an almost entirely sheer Dior gown split to the thigh. The caption references the designer Azzedine Alaïa saying that, “After 40, you shouldn’t show your legs or your arms.” How does she feel about men deciding how women should age?

“It’s so unfashionable to speak that way now. We show our legs and arms if we feel comfortable, though it’s true they’re not the most beautiful to show after...” A pause. “I think we’ve gained a good 20 years.”

She leans in as if telling me a secret. “Besides, it’s not the legs; it’s the knees.”

I ask about her fabulous day job at Dior in charge of dressing – and facilitating – some of its starriest and wealthiest VIPs. Has her chirpiness ever foundered in the throes of a diva tantrum tempest?

“I’m built to make things happen,” she says, laughing. “I hate hearing the word ‘no’. The craziest requests are always the last-minute ones. We once had to fit and sew a dress onto Julianne Moore half an hour before the red carpet at Cannes. That was really stressful.”

It was at that city’s film festival that Favier met her current husband (her second was Antoine Meyer), the film producer Nicolas Altmyer. “It’s very *Emily in Paris*,” she says, cringing. “But we didn’t conclude our story in Cannes. We waited, because that would have been a little clichéd. I feel lucky to have met my best friend and lover in this part of my life.

“I’m in the happiest moment because I have nothing to prove any more. You will see – [growing older] is extremely peaceful. And now I’m in love and all set

in my private life, I notice all the secret rendezvous happening all over Paris.”

How did she find rejoining the dating scene between relationships? Were apps involved? “In fact, I decided to be on my own for two years,” she says, “and it was wonderful. But I was also not well.”

I had wondered at which point in her life Favier shifted from the fringed Jane Birkin hair of her twenties to the gamine crop of her Instagram era. Chemo was the catalyst. At the age of 46 she was diagnosed with breast cancer, from which she has now recovered and is donating royalties from the book to a treatment centre.

“I cut my hair because I was scared to lose it. But now it’s like an identity. I never really spoke about being treated, but I would have loved someone to tell me, ‘Yes, the word is scary but you’re going to be OK.’”

Of that time, Favier has kept one habit: solitude. Like Napoleon, she doesn’t need much sleep: 6 hours, then 90 minutes alone to scroll messages and eat breakfast every day before revving up into PR mode. She is “addicted” to yoga and enjoys walking solo on the beach in Normandy, where she has a weekend bolt hole.

“I have something on most nights of the week,” she tells me, citing Le Voltaire on the Left Bank and La Poule au Pot near la Bourse as two of her favourite traditional Paris restaurants. “I want us to keep the right places open. I don’t see the point of going to a restaurant if the food is not better than at home.”

I wonder how she views the ongoing luxification of Paris, where many hotels, shops and bars are undergoing a distinctly un-Gallic reglossing for the benefit of the international super-rich. In the book, she describes the five-star Hotel Raphael – near her childhood home – as “the only hotel not yet ruined by bad taste”.

“You see people with a lot of money and think, ‘If I were that rich, I wouldn’t spend that way.’ For me, luxury is about rarity and quality, not money. I’d rather have one beautiful thing than ten.

“I have the sense you can live well in Paris with the minimum; Britain is very expensive, and we all know why.” Favier is far too refined to mention Brexit directly – one more leaf I should probably take from her book.

What, then, is her golden rule to achieve Parisian refinement for those of us born well out of sight of the Eiffel Tower?

“Context is key,” she says. “When you’re in context, you’re always chic.”

That, and always serving milk from a jug rather than the bottle. ■

Living Beautifully in Paris by Mathilde Favier and Frédérique Dedet (Flammarion, £55). To order, go to [timesbookshop.co.uk](https://timesbookshop.co.uk) or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount for Times+ members



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By Nadine Baggott



## 1 THE SUPER SHOWER GEL

**Fragrance Society Black Pepper, Vetiver & Coriander Bath & Shower Gel** (£7.50; [marksandspencer.com](http://marksandspencer.com))

Such a chic range from M&S. This scent is woody, spicy and perfect for anyone who avoids florals and foodie scents. There are other products with the same fragrance to layer, including a hand wash, hand and body lotion, and a hand and nail cream. In fact, the whole range smells much more expensive than it actually is.



## 2 THE MATTE HAIR HELP

**Hanz de Fuko Claymation**

(£18; [mankind.co.uk](http://mankind.co.uk))

A modern hair putty should be a few things: supersoft, non-sticky and – most importantly – matte. This works well on all short hairstyles for teens, men and women and is unscented, so will not clash with your chosen fragrance.

## 3 FOR PITS AND BITS

**Secret Whole Body Deodorant Unscented**

(£12.97; [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) will ship to the UK)

Whole-body deodorants are taking the US by storm this summer and are set to be here by next year. In the meantime, Amazon will ship this range to the UK and it is perfect for anywhere you might sweat, from feet to hands and backs to bits, as it is formulated for sensitive skin. Unscented, it's also great for sport.



## 4 THE GENTLE EXFOLIANT

**Humanrace Rice Powder Cleanser** (£33; [Selfridges.com](http://Selfridges.com) and [cultbeauty.co.uk](http://cultbeauty.co.uk))

This is a well thought through capsule skincare collection from the musician Pharrell Williams, with bars for body and simple skincare products, all of which are refillable. Try the gentle rice powder exfoliating cleanser before shaving to gently lift out ingrown hairs and get rid of dead skin cells.

## 5 THE PERFECT MOISTURISER

**Paula's Choice Water-Infusing Electrolyte Moisturizer** (£36; [cultbeauty.co.uk](http://cultbeauty.co.uk))

Skin is skin, so skincare does not need to be gendered. But I get



The Bear's Jeremy Allen White

that a lot of men do not like occlusive creams, which create a barrier on top of skin, helping to seal in moisture. This superlight gel cream blend is ideal in all weathers and just because it is lightweight does not mean that it doesn't pack a heavyweight moisturising punch.

## 6 THE BRILLIANT BAR

**Dove Sensitive Skin Hypoallergenic Beauty Bar**

(£1.75 for two; [sainsburys.co.uk](http://sainsburys.co.uk))

Contrary to popular belief, this is not simply a soap – it's a superfatted solid cleansing bar. What's more, it is unscented, suitable for even the driest and most sensitive skin, it lasts for ages and it is better for the environment than endless plastic bottles of shower gel. This should be a shower and bath staple for every family member.



## 7 SPRAY-ON SUN PROTECTION

**Eucerin Oil Control Dry Touch Sun Spray**

(£22; [boots.com](http://boots.com))

This was recommended to me by a male dermatologist with oily skin because it doesn't



aggravate breakouts, is non-greasy and dries matte. This spray version is idiot-proof to apply – great for anyone who hates sunscreen. Just remember to apply three sprays to each area to get the optimum protection.

## 8 NOSE NO BOUNDS

**Paul Anthony Salon Pro Nose Clipper & Trimmer**

(£12.99; [superdrug.com](http://superdrug.com))

You can buy this, pretend it's for your hipster beard, then use it exclusively to whisk away errant nose hairs. The blade is protected by a metal cylinder, so it tackles hairs without nicking sensitive nasal skin. Good for ear hairs, too, as it has an LED light to pick up unwanted growth in dark crevices.



## 9 THE FOOT PEEL

**Barber Pro Foot Peel**

(£5.30; [boots.com](http://boots.com))

A pair of supersized acid-impregnated socks for guys who are about to brave the Birkenstocks. Simply unwrap, put your feet into the socks and secure the ankle ties, leave for 90 minutes, then remove and shower off the gel. The glycolic and salicylic acids penetrate the dead skin to encourage cell renewal. But be warned



– over the coming week your feet will visibly peel and shed before emerging like butterflies from their craggy cocoons, just in time for the warmer weather that late summer is sure to serve us.

## 10 THE ANTI-SHINE POWDER

**War Paint Anti-Shine Powder**

(£20; [warpaintformen.com](http://warpaintformen.com))

Now, I'll be honest: I see no reason why men need a separate make-up range from women. (Hello, MAC anyone?) However, this is a great translucent powder to knock back a shiny T-zone or bald head.



It genuinely works on all skin tones and does not cake or clog pores. Just the thing for offsetting sweatier days. ■

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

# Eating out

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## Giles Coren

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TOM JACKSON, DAVID LOFTUS

# ‘There are no bad tables at the Park. It is truly Heaven’s refectory. Everyone will love everything’

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## The Park

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**J**eremy King turned 70 last month, just in time for his second regeneration as London’s most important restaurateur. I say “regeneration”, lazily citing *Doctor Who*, but, of course, Jeremy keeps coming back as himself (and what an excellent Doctor he would make: as elegant as Hartnell, sprightly as Davison, avuncular as Pertwee and, let’s be honest, as bonkers as Tom Baker).

I was lucky enough to be present at his birthday party, on June 21, at the restaurant whose name is at the top of this column and to which I will eventually get, and briefly appraise with all the distance and objectivity I can muster, and leave for you to do with as you will. But things were not always so cosy between us and the fact of my being there was as great a testament as you could ask for to Jeremy’s forgiving nature, generosity of spirit and general not giving a damn for the opinion of restaurant critics.

For I wrote a review of the Wolseley when it first opened in 2003 (flagship restaurant of his second incarnation, after the Ivy/Caprice period) that will, well, to say it will live in infamy would be to ascribe bogus longevity to something as transitory and daft as restaurant criticism, but Jeremy certainly mentions it every time I see him. And I see him a lot.

I was new to the job, maybe 18 months in, still desperate to be taken seriously (or at any rate noticed) by my peers, and the Wolseley had been open a few weeks. Already it was full of everybody who was anybody, adored in the reviews, and had become the second home of the late AA Gill (who would himself have been 70 on June 28), who was in there for breakfast, lunch and dinner most days, holding court among Lucian Freud and the rest of them in the “bear pit” in the middle of the room. He was Jeremy’s great mate, the biographer of the Ivy and Caprice, and even had a dish named after him.

I was furious about the whole thing, and began my review as follows: “The Wolseley is run by the two guys who gave us the Ivy and Le Caprice. Or, rather, gave it to you. I didn’t get any. I can never get in. And I don’t care. The Ivy is the sort of place that makes me look for a milk bottle to fill with petrol and a lighted rag so I can hurl it through the smug little mullioned windows...”

I complained about the stubby wine glasses for a bit and then wrote: “Wine glasses aside, the food was terrible. The dish of the day, a cassoulet, was, by a country mile, the worst cassoulet I have ever eaten. And I have eaten cassoulet in Florida. It was made with the wrong kind of beans, which were as tough as toenails... And instead of confit of duck, the Wolseley had managed to source the actual boot worn by Stan Laurel in the scene in *Way Out West* when he tries to mend the hole in it with a piece of steak... If I were a



**The Park**  
 Queensway, London  
 W2 ([theparkrestaurant.com](http://theparkrestaurant.com))  
**Design** 10  
**Service** 10  
**Area** 7  
**Score** 9  
**Price** You could spend £120/head; you could get out for £40.

Frenchman of the deep southwest, I would have gone into the kitchen and found the chef and shot him. Or at least poked him in the eye with my pitchfork.”

On the back of this passionate excoriation, the Wolseley went from strength to strength, becoming, in time, the most famous restaurant in Europe. And yet I couldn't go in, ever, for fear of bumping into Jeremy. The years went by, and then one day I was invited to a friend's birthday lunch there, and was about to decline on grounds of location when I thought, “F\*\*\* it, what can he actually do?”

The answer was to approach our table very discreetly towards the end of the meal, lean down and say quietly in my ear, “I hesitated to come over and say hello, Giles, but I spoke to Sean on the door and he assured me you'd checked in your pitchfork at the desk.”

From there on, there was no stopping me. I was at the Wolseley as often as I could possibly be. Always booking a table for the interval whenever I had to go to the West End theatre, on the basis that if the play was great, I could go back in for the second half; and if not, I had somewhere to spend the rest of the evening. Not once in all those years did I go back into a play. Because nothing has been published in English since 1623 with a second half as compelling as a wiener schnitzel and a glass of riesling at the Wolseley.

But that was then. It has all gone now. I mean, technically, the Wolseley is still there at 160 Piccadilly. But I think we all

know whether or not the Wolseley is still *there*, don't we?

Same goes for the Delaunay, where I used to get the tarte flambée and a dozen natives and then wrap an oyster in each flap of Austrian pizza and scoff them like that (would it have killed them to call the combination “Tarte Giley”?); and Soutine by Regent's Park, where I went for coffee and a bacon sarnie every Saturday while Sam played football, and the kids loved the fish goujons and chips... All blasted, all wasted, when things went tits up with the majority shareholder.

But now he's back, back again. And it's all about the Park. Sure, there was his Le Caprice reboot, the Arlington, a few months ago, but that was just a smash and grab while getting the long-awaited Park sorted.

The promotional blurb is calling the Park “A New World Grand Café”, so that's essentially an American Wolseley if I'm reading it right, and the vibe is mid-century California drawing room chic worked onto a New York diner. That Hopper *Nighthawks* painting place, but dressed by the set designer of *Mad Men*. Indeed, the deep tan upholstery on the chairs and capacious banquettes could have been peeled directly from Don Draper's face.

The parquet is awesome, the polished wood grid ceiling divine. The horizontal cylinder lamps are mellow and warm, the amber-spotted, creamy carpet runners soft and welcoming, the loos like a subterranean kingdom of comfy widdling.

And its huge. Mahusive. Jeremy has built all this in an empty concrete box the

size of Slovenia. And yet it feels, as his restaurants always do, like it has always been here. Or, at least, always been somewhere. Not necessarily on the ground floor of a new build in what I am going to call a “not very promising corner of town”, between the arse-end of Oxford Street and the main road through Notting Hill Gate. Embassies and brothels mainly. But I gather that the penthouse apartment where pre-dinner birthday drinks took place is on the market for £65 million, which is roughly what Minor International forked out when they wheedled Jeremy's business out from under him in 2022. So a lot.

The night I went, the restaurant was teeming with quality: Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, Charles Dance, Brian Cox, Jonathan Pryce, Zoë Wanamaker, Clive Owen, Damian Lewis, Nigella Lawson, Ruthie Rogers, Claudia Winkleman, Trevor Eve... But to be fair, that was for the birthday party. I went back the next day for the all-important, independent, paying-my-own-way visit, and it was a more regular crowd. But Jamie Theakston was in. So there's that.

From the cool air-con and cigar-box snugness of one of the street-facing booths they gave us, Hyde Park looked unusually green and lovely after a very wet spring and early summer, but there are literally no bad tables. It's a miracle: everything is a corner or a den or a snug. The light is beatific. Favourite faces from previous restaurants float welcomingly along the aisles. It is truly Heaven's refectory.

It was Sunday at just after noon, so brunch. Great eggs benedict (£9.75/£19) on rather firm muffins that Jeremy is still working on (“We wanted to do better than the bog standard muffin, but it might need a rethink”), grilled onget, rare and juicy, nice little char on it, with a fried orange duck egg and sensational latkes (£22.50), the best Chicago style hotdogs (£15.50) and second best chips (£5.75) my children had ever had, pancakes with maple syrup and bacon (£12.50), fresh grapefruit juice and excellent coffee.

The all-day menu mixes King classics with New World surprises. Chicken Milanese (£22.75), grilled veal chop (£42), and a chopped cobb salad (£12.50) that you may remember from the Colony Grill sit alongside a grilled “four cheese” sandwich (£14.75) and a lobster roll (£19.75). And kids will love the build-your-own Park sundae (another classic of Kingly intuition).

In fact, everyone will love everything. Betcha. ■

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Feeling tired and don't know why? You're not alone. According to a recent study, less than half of us consume our recommended daily amount of magnesium, a mineral that helps turn the food we eat into energy.

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Deficiency can cause mood swings, migraines, eye twitches and muscle cramps.

If you have low magnesium levels, you are also less likely to get a good night's sleep.

Magnesium is present in foods such as black beans, bananas and pumpkin seeds, but to get the benefits we need to absorb it into our bodies.

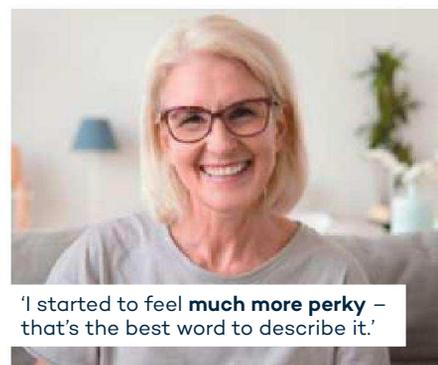
One way to ensure we consume a consistent level of magnesium is by taking a daily supplement – but not all supplements are equal.

Your body's ability to absorb the magnesium depends on the way that the supplement is made.

'Most supplements use magnesium oxide – it is the most common form, as it has a high concentration of magnesium but it's not easily released into the body,' explains Dr Miriam Ferrer PhD, head

of product development at FutureYou Cambridge.

'Taking more magnesium to try and make up for the problem isn't the best approach, as too much can cause an upset stomach so we created Magnesium+ using magnesium lactate which is twice as absorbable as a standard magnesium oxide supplement. This means you need much less per capsule to deliver the same amount, making it a much



'I started to feel **much more perky** – that's the best word to describe it.'

more efficient way to take this essential mineral.'

Reviews gathered on independent website Trustpilot speak of its effectiveness. Nicole, 57, says: 'I genuinely started to feel different within a couple of weeks. I started to feel much more perky – that's the best word to describe it.'

'I feel like I've got more energy and more desire to do stuff. I've taken them religiously ever since.'

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a flurry of positive reviews for its best-selling energy product on Trustpilot, the independent online review platform.

Mark, 46 says, 'I first heard about taking magnesium through friends at my running club. I used to suffer with sore muscles after long



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**'Within two weeks I was a different woman, with energy to spare'**

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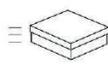
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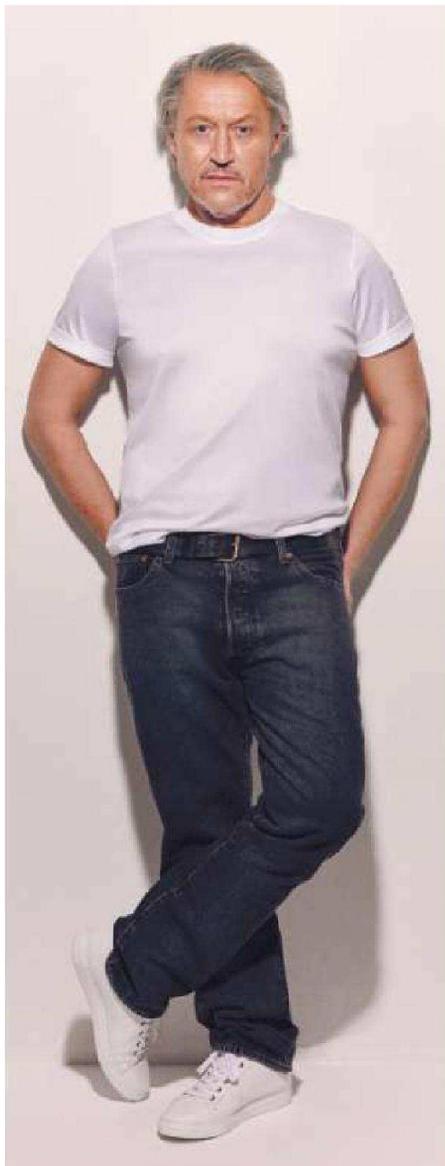
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# Beta male

## Robert Crampton

‘Finally, I’m about to achieve the perfect suntan. Just when even Donald Trump is toning down the orange’



DAN KENNEDY

**This summer, I had hopes I might, finally, after half a century of trying** (I can’t claim to have deliberately and with vanity aforethought sunbathed before the age of ten) achieve the perfect suntan. Perfection being rich, deep, even, no tan lines and brown, obviously. Very brown. Not mahogany, like you see some shrivelled guys in smugglers on the beach, all stringy and stained, like a freshly creosoted fence. And not walnut either, but maybe one shade lighter than walnut, and without the crinkly, wrinkly, scrunched-up connotations. Teak, maybe? Yeah, teak sounds good. Heroes in old-school thrillers are sometimes described as “teak-tough”. I’ll take teak.

I’d put down the “base tan”, as we pros call it, early doors, with that February week in Barbados. That alone made 2024 a potentially fruitful year for a serious tilt at the Perfect Tan title. Usually, I wouldn’t even be thinking of base-tanning before France in April at the earliest, and maybe not then, if the weather let me down. But Barbados gave me a massive head start.

I don’t cheat. Unless you count a couple of spray tans prior to photo shoots in December. I used to go in for a cheeky pre-trip sunbed, £6 for six minutes at Tinkerbells in Bethnal Green, but my wife persuaded me orange was not a good look. These days, I put the hours in, au naturel.

I would in a normal English spring have got in a couple of “continuation tan” sessions on warm days, either by the sea in Kent or on the roof in London. Kent is fresher and more scenic, but the roof in London is not overlooked, except by police helicopters and spy satellites, and I’m too old to worry about them, so I can strip off entirely. But not this year, because the sun didn’t bother to put in a sustained appearance until late May.

Never mind, because by then I was in Corfu, and topping up splendidly at 27C. Back home, mid-June saw me falling asleep on the shingle at Kingsdown, Kent, a stiff breeze alleviating what was actually considerable heat. I woke up radiant (as opposed to lobster) red, saved from sunburn by the hard yards I’d put in early in the year, like a footballer who gets through a congested fixture schedule at Christmas thanks to his punishing work pre-season. Luckily, I’d dozed off at the right angle, slightly anticipating the sun’s westward swing.

Well, I say “luckily”, but luck had nothing to do with it. Rather, I’d brought

all my experience to bear. Few things upset me more than sunbathers not sunbathing in correct alignment with the sun.

Thus, with summer now finally arrived, and a week in France, plus another Greek wedding in September still to come, everything was set fair for perfection. The day after the Kent snooze, I got taken for a Spaniard for the first time this year. This – or Greek, or Italian, or, once, Maltese – happens fairly often. I used to claim Mediterranean blood, but then I did a DNA test for work and it said I was 80 per cent Low Countries in origin. Not very glamorous, is it? Not exactly Roman or Viking or Cheyenne. “You look a bit exotic mate, where are your folks from?” “Er, Luxembourg, most probably.”

Everything was nicely on track. And yet, into each life some rain must fall, and that being true, at the very moment when conditions are tailor-made to achieve a 50-year-long personal goal, I find my resolve faltering. For the first time ever, I have no desire to be any browner than I already am. The backlash against suntans, gathering pace for decades, ever since the glorious Eighties when they were all the rage, George Michael in Club Tropicana, Arnie all oiled up and grinning, topless beaches the norm, has finally engulfed me.

Sooner or later, as Meryl Streep so memorably explains in her “cerulean” monologue to Anne Hathaway in *The Devil Wears Prada*, even the least trend-conscious among us become subject to the dictates of fashion, whether we know it or not. In this case, leaving aside the melanoma issue, the fashion for pale skin. Or if not pale, at least not radioactive.

I’d noticed the signs. I’d clocked my wife, once such an enthusiast, slipping further into the shade with a floppy hat on. I’ve heard female friends being a little, well, a little judgy about other women with overly tanned skin, as they might be about tramp stamps or trout pouts. And, of course, I’ve noticed the cruel “perma-tan” taunts directed at fine men like Tom Jones, David Dickinson and, in my youth, George Hamilton. And Robert Kilroy-Silk.

But what tipped the balance was the US presidential debate last week, in which poor Joe’s difficulties rather overshadowed the fact of his opponent’s markedly less tangerine face. Crikey, I thought, if even Donald is reining in his rays, maybe I better had too. ■

[robert.crampton@thetimes.co.uk](mailto:robert.crampton@thetimes.co.uk)

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