

THE SUNDAY TIMES *magazine*

July 21 2024

THE GOOD *W* LIFE

Down on the farm with America's queen of the trad wives (and mother of eight)

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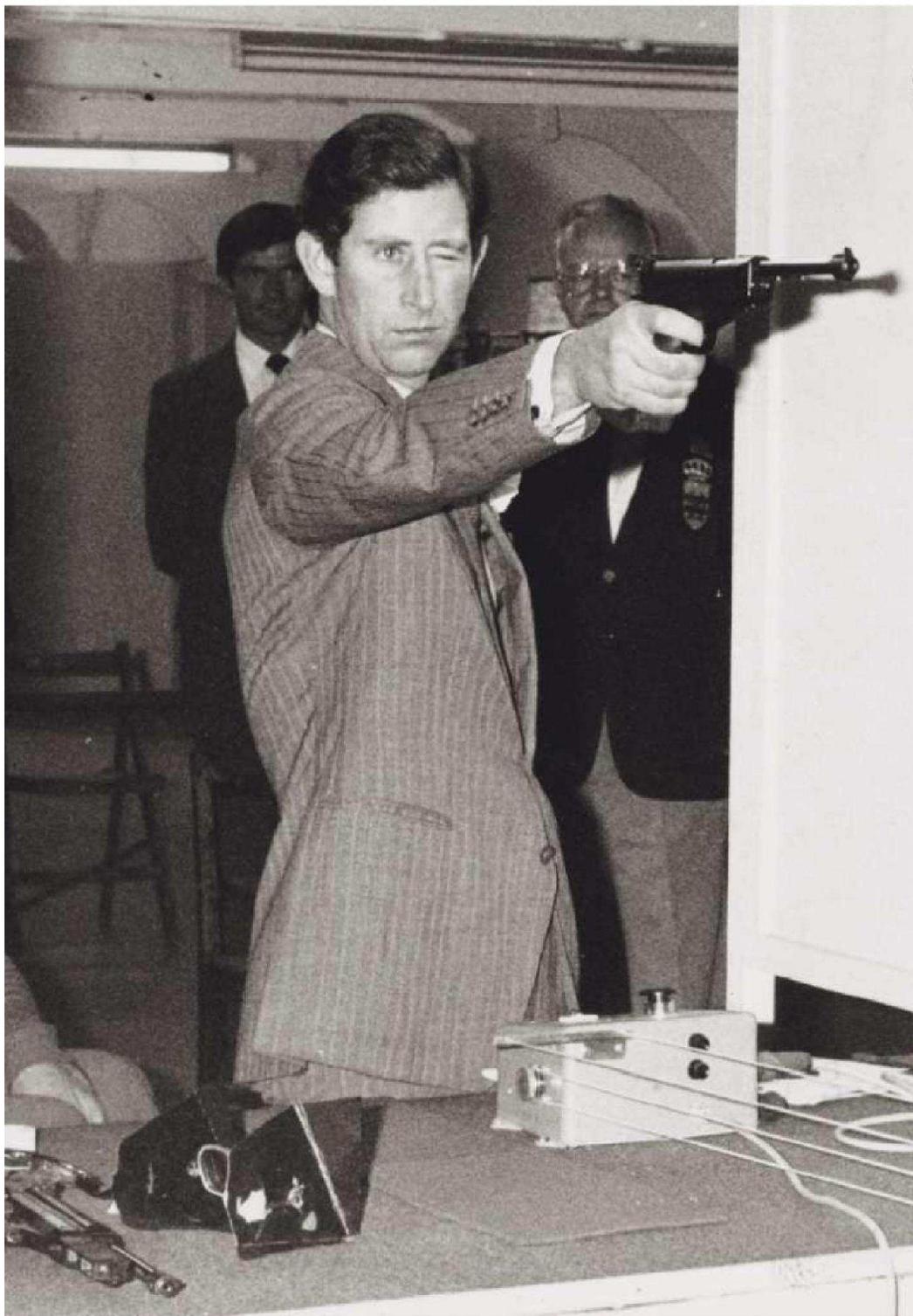
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THIS WEEK IN 1982

Prince Charles takes aim at the shooting range of the Ludwig Guttmann Sports Centre for the Disabled in Stoke Mandeville on July 25. The prince was opening the Stoke Mandeville Games, a precursor of the Paralympic Games. The event was first organised in 1948 by Guttmann, a neurologist who worked at the village's hospital.



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My Amazon order history: a digital record of married life



One dead laptop too many. One back-up too few. Whatever it was (don't tell Harriet), I appear to have lost all our digital photographs from 2003 to 2015. They are probably still somewhere — on a cloud perhaps, or on a drive in a drawer in a spare room — but wherever they are or aren't, it's better this way. A weight has been lifted.

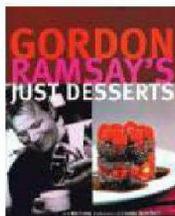
One day, I always said to myself, I'll go through this archive of every minute of our lives and I'll edit it into something more manageable. Instead of 9,000 photographs of Child A's first birthday or Child B's first day at school or Child C's first cricket match, I'll chop them to a couple, which is enough. How many pictures of us looking miserable in a tent do we really need?

Of course, the things I always say to myself are also things that never happen. Digital mess is more easily ignored than actual mess, so the archive just grew into the world's longest episode of *This Is Your Life* and now it has gone. From the year before our marriage to the year my last MacBook died unexpectedly, the record of our existence is now all but aboriginal. Our grandchildren will never get to see 24,000 pictures of us doing mundane things in mundane places.

This is OK, I will tell Harriet if she ever finds out, because there are other records. Our emails. Our texts. And the big one — our past orders. The first item I purchased on Amazon, for example, was a collection of early 20th-century poems. It was delivered to our old flat in June 2003, one week before I proposed. I have a horrible feeling I might have read some of it out loud under an oak tree.

According to my shopping history, our newly wedded life together was a blissful cornucopia of quite pretentious books, quite basic DVD comedies and a cassette adapter so we could play iPod music in the car. Then, in late 2005, everything changed with the purchase of *Naming of Names: A Baby-Naming Book*.

A week after Child A was born I ordered a goose-down duvet and a camcorder, which was sensible. A week after that I ordered *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* and *Gordon Ramsay's Just Desserts*, which was not sensible at all. Had I not realised the time for



reading was over? Did I not understand that nobody would be making desserts ever again?

Slowly, through order pages 24 to 30, I can see the idealism of a new parent dismantled by the realities of actual parenting. In 2007 it was all wooden toys, *Each Peach Pear Plum* and *Diaper Free: The Gentle Wisdom of Natural Infant Hygiene* (that was a fun three months). By 2009, a year after Child B's arrival, I was panic-buying as many loud, flashing plastic toys as possible. Gordon Ramsay's puddings had made way for *The 30-Minute Cook*, then *15-Minute Meals*, then *Microwave Magic: The Art of 21st Century Cooking*.

Each stage of each child's life is documented in the cold, hard history of transactions. Clearly we made some effort with Child A — lots of Blyton, then Dahl, then Sherlock Holmes, plus piano books and drum books and rugby boots and boxing gloves. Less so with Child B. Nothing but bribery with Child C — an iPad, a keyboard, so many useless drones, a telescope.

Then of course there's my own creeping midlife crisis. It began, according to Amazon, in 2009 with a copy of *White Peak Mountain Biking: The Pure Trails* and a Philips nose-hair trimmer. Then, in the same presumably difficult week in 2010, I bought *Play Trumpet Today: A Complete Guide to the Basics (Level 2)*, a Dunlop Max Comp squash racket and another Philips nose-hair trimmer. On the eve of my 40th birthday, peak crisis, I went on a spree — an orbital sander, a pair of lawn-aerating sandals and a last will and testament home kit. And, weirdly, yet another nose-hair trimmer. At the same time Harriet was focusing mainly on mindfulness and sore nipples.

It's all there in Amazon's ether and it's instructional in the way a million photos never can be. Over the years I've ordered so much stuff — DVD players, Bluetooth speakers, sat-navs, blenders, hard drives, breadmakers, ice-cream makers, iPods, iPads, iEverything — and all that remains is this very long record of waste. Apart from the Henry vacuum cleaner, it was all junk and we didn't need it. That's what I'll remember from this trip down memory lane the next time I'm considering a one-click purchase. That and the fact that someone keeps stealing my nose-hair trimmer ■



GOOD NEWS!

The sugar tax introduced by the Conservative government in 2018 has significantly reduced the amount of sugar consumed by children in

the UK. The levy was for manufacturers of soft drinks with more than 5g of sugar per 100ml. In the year after it was imposed, children consumed

4.8g less sugar a day, of which 3g was attributed to the reduced sugar content of soft drinks. Adults consumed 10.9g less sugar a day overall.

RELATIVE VALUES

Tom Dean and Jacquie Hughes

The 200m Olympic freestyle champion and his mother on early starts and going viral

Jacquie

When Tom was born he weighed 10lb, looked like a little Buddha and was incredibly strong. His size meant that an obstetric gynaecologist at Chelsea and Westminster Hospital needed to dislocate his shoulder to get him out, then relocate it afterwards. But that bulk stood him in good stead later in life.

Tom felt like a three-month-old baby in my arms when I first held him. He started feeding like he had been hungry for nine months and he just didn't stop.

I swam every day during my pregnancy and first put Tom in the water when he was six weeks old. Apart from that, I've never interfered with his training. I am not a coach, I leave that to the experts. I've seen too many parents who misinterpret their role with talented children standing by the pool screaming like banshees. I've even seen some wear medals won by their kids.

Tom is the second of five children. Connie was born first, when I was 35, then Tom, Nancy, Alfie and finally William, all in six years. I worked as a managing editor at the BBC then and we lived in Queen's Park, in northwest London. In 2008, with five super-active kids crammed into a small house, we decided to move to a bigger place in Maidenhead, Berkshire, on the banks of the Thames.

It felt like somebody had put a bomb under our lives when my marriage suddenly ended a few years later. Tom was 13 and he just cycled off when I told him. We had no idea where he went that day. The break-up could have been so destructive to the family, but we have too much positive energy in our household.

Swimming was part of our weekly routine by then. Connie and Tom were promising. Six days a week at 5.20am, and five evenings, we all swam. Each morning I'd go bedroom to bedroom shouting, "This is your first call," then make five cups of warm milk and heat some pastries. In the winter we'd have to scrape ice off our crappy old van and wait for the heater to kick in.

I would swim too, then we would eat breakfast while driving back. I'd drop them at school, catch a train to London and cycle on to my office. Then I'd ferry them back to the pool in the evening. I don't know what we would have done if one of them had dropped out.

When Tom was 13 he briefly questioned his commitment. He couldn't do the things other teens did if he wanted to be a top swimmer, but he committed. He won gold at two European Junior Championships, and again at the 2018 European Championships, as part of the British 4x200m freestyle team.

The training was nonstop, but in the build-up to the Olympics in 2021 Tom caught Covid twice. He was forced to spend seven weeks out and became so ill he

couldn't climb the stairs. All the pools were closed, so we swam in the river. Slowly he got stronger, but it was touch and go whether he would make it to Tokyo.

Our house was full during lockdown and the food bill went through the roof. That included 24 eggs a day, which, like loo paper, were hard to find at the time. Covid meant the family couldn't travel to Japan to watch Tom swim in the 200m freestyle final, so we held a party for 70 people in the back garden at 3am, with a projector screen, and I served tea and toast.

I didn't realise a journalist friend had videoed my embarrassing celebrations when Tom won. That clip went viral — it had a huge response on social media. I was so wired that I jumped up and down like a lunatic. Afterwards, to relax, I swam in the Thames at 5am. Tom then won gold again in the 4x200m freestyle relay the next day and became the first British swimmer to win two golds at a single Olympics for 113 years.

Tom will swim in the 200m medley and two relays at the Paris Olympics in the next couple of weeks. I'm very proud — he has a lust for life and will always do his best. Even as family it's hard to get Olympics tickets, so I expect we will watch him swim on TV again. This time I'll just watch out for anybody recording my celebrations.

When Tom won I jumped up and down like a lunatic — I hadn't realised a friend had videoed it



Main: Tom, 24, and Jacquie, 61, with their dogs Lucy, left, and Yogi at the family home near Maidenhead. Right: in October 2000, when Tom was five months old



Tom

I grew up in a crazy household with two brothers and two sisters. Swimming was already a regular activity before we moved away from London when I was eight. My favourite day was Sunday. After a couple of hours in the pool, we would visit my nan for a proper roast lunch. I was always hungry after burning off energy in the water.

Mum was at the centre of everything and she's still a force of nature. Of course, as a teenager, I didn't like being dragged out of bed so early in the morning. I didn't appreciate what my mum did for us all until much later. It wasn't just driving to the pool and the school runs, she had a serious, grown-up job in London and ran everything like a well-oiled machine.

I am very close to my older sister, Connie, who is a brilliant swimmer. We were really competitive growing up. She trained much harder than me and won a medal at the national championships. She had a swimming scholarship to go to university in America and is now studying medicine at Oxford.

My swimming career took off when I was 17 — I won gold in the 200m individual medley at the European Junior Championships in Netanya, Israel. Mum flew in to watch but she arrived at the last moment, as I stepped on the starting block. She forgot it was the Sabbath and

STRANGE HABITS

Tom on Jacquie
She will strike up a conversation with anyone. On the Tube, on a plane — anywhere

Jacquie on Tom
He will argue the toss for fun. All five of my children are very opinionated

the whole city had shut down. I gave her the thumbs up in the stands — something I do before every race.

I didn't think I would get to Tokyo because of Covid. It knocked me for six but my coach, Mum and I worked out how I could get my fitness back. We installed a swimmer's treadmill in the back garden — a tank with a constant flow of water to swim against. But I was too fast, even with a bungee cord holding me back, so we just turned up the temperature and used it as a hot tub.

I had no idea she had organised a garden party at home to watch my first final at the Olympics. I thought they might just watch the highlights. I'm so grateful somebody filmed it so it is forever immortalised.

I now live in Bath, near the British Swimming Performance Centre. The build-up to Paris has been busy, so I haven't had a lot of time to see my family. I stand a good chance of winning a medal but swimming is down to microseconds and one error can throw a race.

I was so envious when Connie won her first medal as a teenager because all I wanted was one of my own. Now I have so many they are packed away in boxes — I never in a million years thought I would reach these heights. I owe Mum for each and every one ■

Interviews by Jeremy Taylor. Tom's podcast, Tom Dean Medal Machine, is available now



DANIEL
35

HANNAH
34

FLORA
6 months

MABEL
2

LOIS
5

MARTHA
3

PHOTOGRAPHY BY COREY ARNOLD

BEAUTY QUEEN, MO

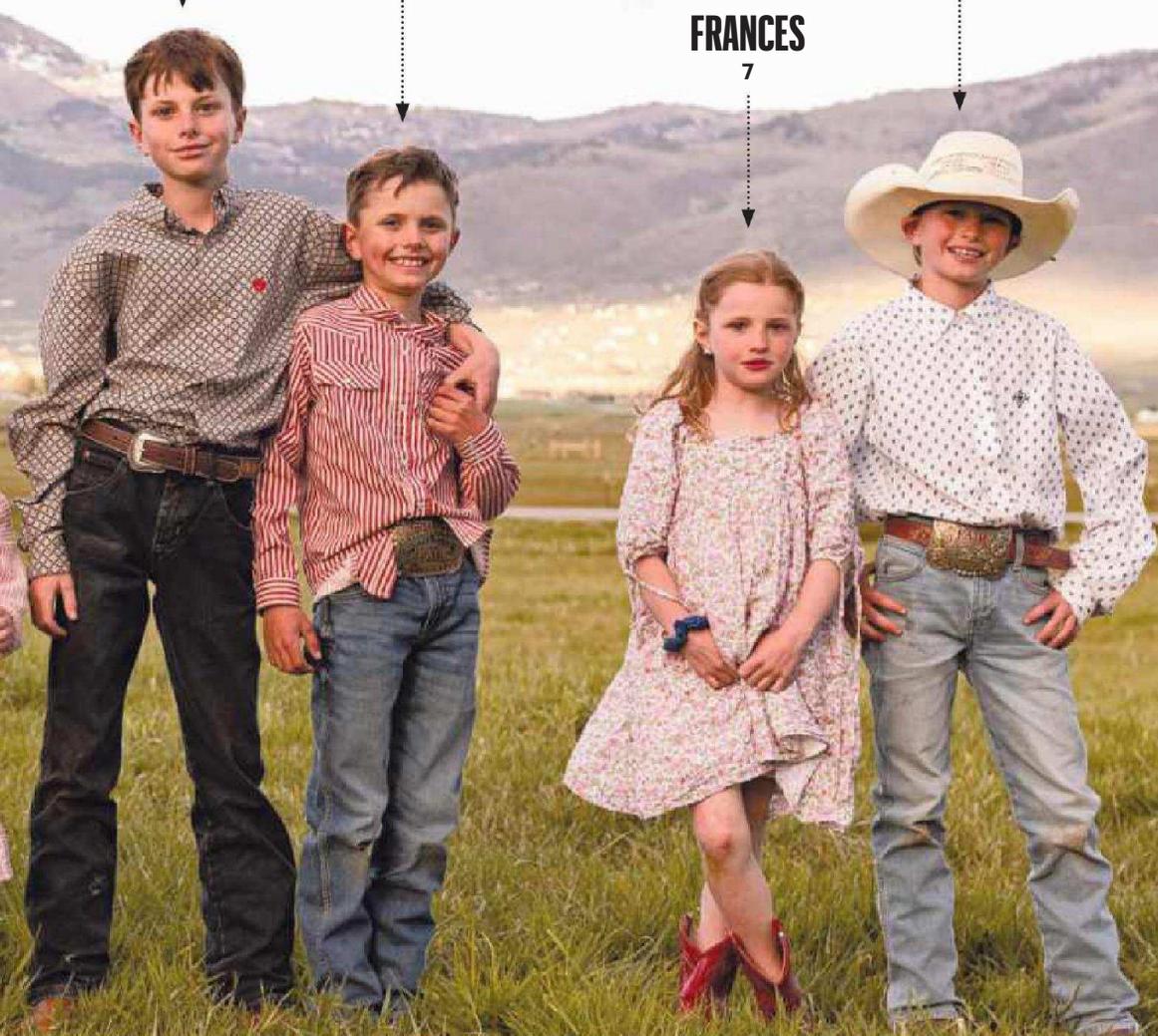
Hannah Neeleman, known to her nine million followers as Ballerina Farm, milks cows, gives birth without pain relief and breastfeeds at beauty pageants. Is this an empowering new model of womanhood — or a hammer blow for feminism?

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INTERVIEW BY MEGAN AGNEW

ORMON, SUPERMOM

Hannah Neeleman was pregnant with her eighth child and she had two due dates. The first was for a baby, obviously. The second, just under two weeks later, was for a beauty pageant.

Neeleman had been crowned Mrs American in August 2023 at a Las Vegas mega-casino and resort, so she was invited back to the city to compete in Mrs World, parading around the stage in a swimsuit and 5in heels, shoulders back and hip popped, spray-tanned, glistening — and 12 days postpartum. Obviously.

“I had known it was coming,” says Neeleman, 34, sitting in her kitchen in rural Utah, two of her children literally swinging off her long golden hair. “So I had prepared.” During the pregnancy it took brute strength, guts and bravery to make sure she could eventually look so perfectly pretty. She kept fit, weightlifting before her children woke up. She had ice baths, lowering herself into the irrigation ditches on the farm. And she took iron supplements to speed up the healing.

On January 2 this year Flora was born in the upstairs bedroom, without pain relief. “A one-push baby,” Neeleman said on Instagram. In the first days she “laid low”, not leaving the house. On the fifth day, she says, “I looked at Daniel” — her husband — “and I said, ‘I don’t know if I’m going to be able to go. This is a lot.’ I was bleeding and swollen, and milk was coming in.”

On the seventh day she rose from bed, doing her barre exercises in the bathroom (a former ballerina, she trained at the Juilliard School in New York). By day nine she was trying on outfits, zipping herself into a pair of leather trousers and skin-tight white ballgown. Day ten: spray tan. Day eleven: a two-hour flight with a newborn to Las Vegas, her husband and seven children following behind, along with other members of her family. And by day twelve she was on stage. Luckily, she says, she had stopped bleeding.

She made it through to the second round of the competition, her social media following exploded (as @ballerinafarm she has nine million followers on Instagram, 7.4 million on TikTok and 1.5 million on YouTube) — and people went berserk. Was this the ultimate act of empowerment, Neeleman doing what she wanted, or the ultimate demonstration of oppression, her tender body encased in spiky sequins? Neeleman, whether she liked it or not, was declared leader of a new and controversial group of the internet: the “trad wives”.

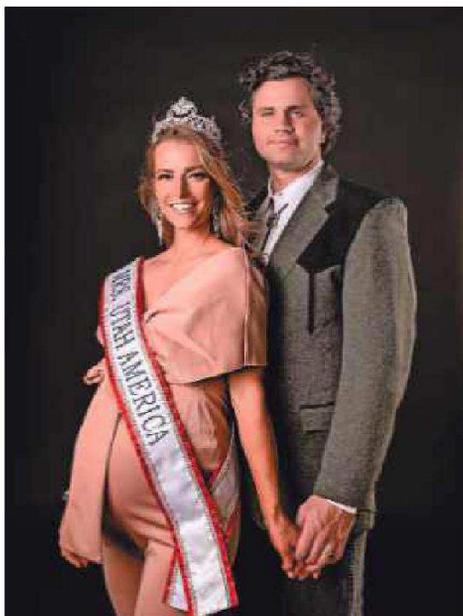
Throughout the maelstrom she has remained — publicly at least — steadfast. She never explained, she never complained, a silence I had interpreted as defiance. But is it? Well, I have flown across the breadth of America and driven through the mountains of rural Utah to ask her. If, that is, I can get her alone.

The Neelemans and their children — Henry, 12, Charles, 10, George, 9, Frances, 7, Lois, 5, Martha, 3, Mabel, 2, and baby Flora — live on a 328-acre farm just outside the small town of Kamas, a pioneering existence beneath a big sky and up against the brutal elements. “Welcome in,” says Daniel, 35, opening the door, baby in his arms. He is part of the family brand (@hogfathering — 490,000 Instagram followers), an all-American steak of a husband, square-jawed and denim-clad.

“Hannah will be out in a minute,” he continues, walking into the kitchen. It is photogenic chaos. The antique wooden counters are stacked with Le Creuset pans and mismatched pottery. There is an Aga, installed by the only man in the west who knows how. I count 28 pairs of shoes by the door. “It’s so good to meet you,” Neeleman says, walking in, a tiny blonde beauty queen, her hair wet and cheeks flushed, impossibly pretty. She takes the baby from her husband. She will not leave Neeleman’s chest for the four hours we’re together.

Even before pageantgate, Neeleman was one of the most popular influencers in America, famous online for depicting her family’s wild, earthy existence. Her followers have included the actresses Jennifer Garner and Hilary Duff. A devout Mormon who was raised in a Mormon family, she bakes perfectly scored sourdough loaves, milks cows straight into her coffee cup and gives birth by candlelight with no pain relief.

A pregnant Hannah Neeleman, winner of Mrs Utah America in 2021, with her husband, Daniel; nursing her newborn daughter Flora at Mrs World in Las Vegas in January





Living out here, it must be hard to envision all the millions of eyes watching them. “I feel like we’re doing what God wants,” Neeleman says. “We’re on His errand a little bit,” Daniel adds. “We’re on His errand a little bit,” she repeats.

How does she respond to the social media storms? There was one after she said at another pageant that she feels most empowered after she has a baby. There were others when she encouraged the use of natural remedies over traditional medicine, and another when she said Daniel had drop-kicked a cockerel across the yard after it attacked one of their children.

“Daniel is so good about that,” she says, looking to her husband. “He says you can’t lean into what people are saying or the titles people are putting on you. You just have to live your life and shut that out, because if

The family gathers for dinner at Ballerina Farm, where ready meals are off the menu

not it will overtake you.” It doesn’t have an impact on her at all? “I mean, it does. I’ll hear things. It’s no fun, like...” She pauses, looking up at Daniel, who is now standing behind her. “What do you think upsets us the most?” she asks him. “For whatever reason I’m kind of numb to it,” he says.

Trad wives are an internet phenomenon; women who have rejected modern gender roles for the more traditional existence of wife, mother and homemaker — and who then promote that life online, some to millions of followers. Their lifestyle is often, though not always, bound to Christianity. They film themselves cooking mad things from scratch (chewing gum from corn syrup, waffles from a sourdough starter), their faces glowing in beams of sunlight, their voices soft and breathy, their children free range.

In order to explain trad wives — and their popularity — we need to look back 15 years or so, when the fourth wave of feminism was breaking. This was the “girl boss” era, when women were told to be bolder in the workplace, to lean in further, to break glass ceilings. The poster woman for the movement at the time was the Facebook boss Sheryl Sandberg. But as the years went on women realised they’d been sold a lie: this individualistic feminism didn’t resolve anything unless you were a millionaire. For normal working mothers the girl-boss era achieved virtually nothing.

After years of silence there also began a very public purging, women talking about how mind-numbing weaning is, about the isolation of maternity leave, the challenges of everyday life with irrational toddlers. Paradoxically this made it harder for women to be ►

A DEVOUT MORMON, NEELEMAN BAKES PERFECTLY SCORED SOURDOUGH LOAVES, MILKS COWS STRAIGHT INTO HER COFFEE CUP AND GIVES BIRTH BY CANDLELIGHT WITH NO PAIN RELIEF

honest about any of motherhood's joys. Those who succeeded were seen as smug — or saboteurs.

And so, as a reaction to both the girl bosses and the frazzled mothers, along came a group of women who didn't seem to care about any of that. They advocated for a life that rejected the drive for money, public power and success, and elevated gentle domesticity and hands-on motherhood to an almost divine state. Enter the trad wives.

One of the most influential trad wives is Nara Smith, a 22-year-old Mormon model (four million Instagram followers) who talks in a voice so soft she sounds as though she has been brainwashed by a cult, and is constantly pregnant and draining something fermented through muslin. "Keep up your beauty," says Estee C Williams (120,000 Instagram followers), who gives off more of a submissive Fifties housewife vibe. "You and your husband will benefit."

Many women I know, who have and want a life that looks totally different, are addicted to watching all this, though others are served it by an algorithm as if it is grooming us into submission. Some watch it as a sort of thrilling escapism, others simply find it soothing. And others still use it as a sort of rage-bait, taking pleasure in being annoyed by it all.

"Trad wives are seen as a counterculture against the 'rot' of low birth rates," says Leslie Root, a behavioural scientist at the University of Colorado. "This isn't isolated, it is part of a wider political anxiety that I am worried might ultimately end in attempts to circumscribe women's lives."

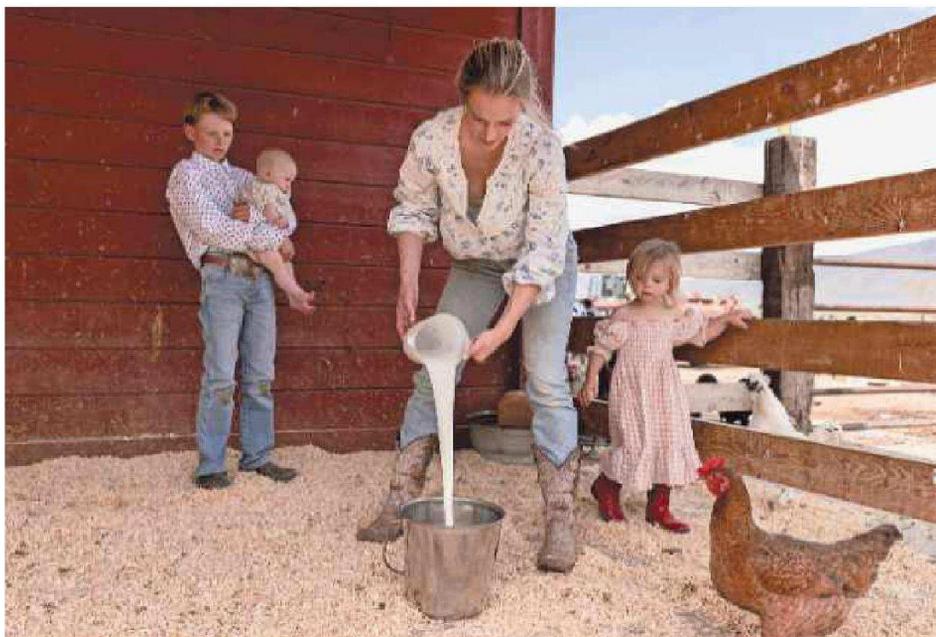
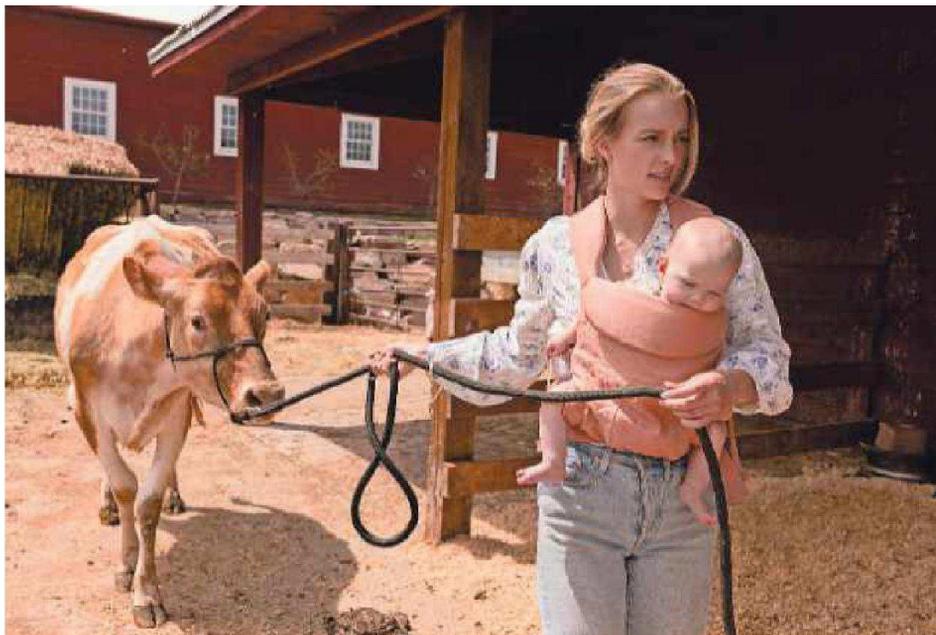
Neeleman is the most well-known trad wife, despite having never attached herself to the movement or even used the term. How does she feel about it? "We were already together, doing what we were doing," Daniel replies instead. "And then 'trad wife' came along. We can't help it. This is what we are. If we're trad dad, trad wife, so be it."

Neeleman, however, thinks otherwise. "I don't necessarily identify with it," she says, "because we are traditional in the sense that it's a man and a woman, we have children, but I do feel like we're paving a lot of paths that haven't been paved before." That is the biggest paradox: in selling the life of a stay-at-home mother, Neeleman and the other trad wives have created high-earning jobs. They are being paid to act out a fantasy. "So for me to have the label of a traditional woman," she continues cautiously, "I'm kinda like, I don't know if I identify with that."

Is the husband the head of the household here? "No," Daniel answers. "We're co-CEOs." "Yeah," Neeleman says. "We are."

Is she a feminist? "I feel like I'm a femin-," she stops herself. "There's so many different ways you could take that word. I don't even know what feminism means any more." She "absolutely" feels as though she has become politicised by other people. "We try so hard to be neutral and be ourselves and people will put a label on everything. This is just our normal life."

We head outside and into the truck, Daniel driving, me in the front, Neeleman and the toddlers in the back. The other kids are being home schooled in the barn, where they learn a Mormon-Christian syllabus, taught by a woman who lives down the track. I am told I will sit down with Neeleman, one on one, later in the afternoon.



We pass the family's minibus — a 15-seater. Is the aim to fill it? "Some day, yeah," Daniel says. "We are getting old and worn out," Neeleman says, baby Flora strapped to her chest, sounding less sure. "So we'll see."

Online the Neelemans sell meat boxes from their cows and pigs as well as branded sourdough starters, rock salt, copper measuring cups and beeswax candles. They have three full-time employees on the farm, thirty at the warehouse, more than ten in the office, and a creative director who manages the website visuals.

We drive past the dairy cows, looking out across a river valley and the arid mountains beyond. Was this what she always wanted, I ask when we get a moment alone, while Daniel checks on the animals. "No," she says. "I mean, I was, like —" She pauses. "My goal was New York City. I left home at 17 and I was so excited to get there, I just loved that energy. And I was going to be a ballerina. I was a good ballerina." She pauses again. "But I knew that when I started to have kids my life would start to look different."

Neeleman was the eighth of nine children born to Mormon parents in Springville, near Salt Lake City. The family ran a florist and the children were home schooled. Neeleman gravitated towards ballet. At 14 she went to summer school at Juilliard, returning for her undergraduate degree, which she paid for by competing in "scholarship pageants" — beauty pageants that offer academic scholarships or sometimes tuition money to winners.

Daniel also grew up in a Mormon family, one of nine, in Connecticut, the son of David Neeleman, billionaire founder of a number of commercial airlines, including JetBlue. His upbringing was moneyed and suburban. Was this what he always wanted, I ask him when he walks back over. "Yes," he says. "I expected Hannah to be more at home with the kids, but she said, 'I watched my parents working together and so whatever we do, we got to do it together.'"

He was 23 and she was nearly two years his junior when they were introduced by a mutual friend at a college basketball game. "I saw her and I was ready to go," he says. "Sign me up. I was thinking, 'Let's get married.' But she wouldn't go on a date with me for six months."

One day she mentioned to Daniel that she was getting the five-hour flight from Salt Lake City to New York, back to Juilliard. She didn't realise his dad owned the airline. "So Daniel was, like, 'I'm on that same flight!'" she says. "I remember checking in and them saying, 'You're 5A and you're 5B.' I just thought, no way, that's crazy!" Daniel smiles: "I made a call." He had pulled strings at JetBlue. And so began their first date.

"Back then I thought we should date for a year [before marriage]," she continues. "So I could finish



Performing in China, 2010, and getting ready for the natural birth of her seventh child, Mabel, 2022



Left, from top: Neeleman and Flora tend to the dairy herd; fresh milk for the family; Charles shows off his riding skills

school and whatever. And Daniel was, like, 'It's not going to work, we've got to get married now.'" After a month they were engaged. Two months after that they were married, moving into an apartment Daniel rented on the Upper West Side. And three months after that she was pregnant, the first Juilliard undergraduate to be expecting "in modern history".

Daniel got a job as the director of his father's security company, moving their young family to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where before long she had three kids under four. At first she was still dancing professionally. The family eventually settled in Utah.

"Our first few years of marriage were really hard, we sacrificed a lot," she says. "But we did have this vision, this dream and —" Daniel interrupts: "We still do." What kind of sacrifices, I ask her. "Well, I gave up dance, which was hard. You give up a piece of yourself. And Daniel gave up his career ambitions."

I look out at the vastness and don't totally agree. Daniel wanted to live in the great western wilds, so they did; he wanted to farm, so they do; he likes date nights once a week, so they go (they have a babysitter on those evenings); he didn't want nannies in the house, so there aren't any. The only space earmarked to be Neeleman's own — a small barn she wanted to convert into a ballet studio — ended up becoming the kids' schoolroom.

Daniel wants to take me to see the new dairy farm buildings, while Neeleman goes back into the house to make lunch for the "kiddos". We stop at an irrigation ditch (which he explains); the offices (which he explains); the milking stations (which he explains). I check my watch, feeling edgy. I want to talk to Neeleman.

"Just one more stop," he says. Neeleman calls him. "OK," he says to her. "We're just heading your way," he adds, driving in the opposite direction out into the fields to show me another ditch.

Finally we get back into the kitchen, sitting at the table surrounded by an ever-changing number of children. One is clattering a can opener next to my tape recorder, another is pulling a whole roast chicken from the Aga, three more gather around it with forks, eating it from the pan. Another spills a pail of milk over the floor. We have half an hour to talk before Neeleman has to take some of them to a ballet class.

I notice there's no TV. "We watch some stuff on the computer," one of her daughters says. YouTube videos? "No, just *Little House on the Prairie*." How ➤

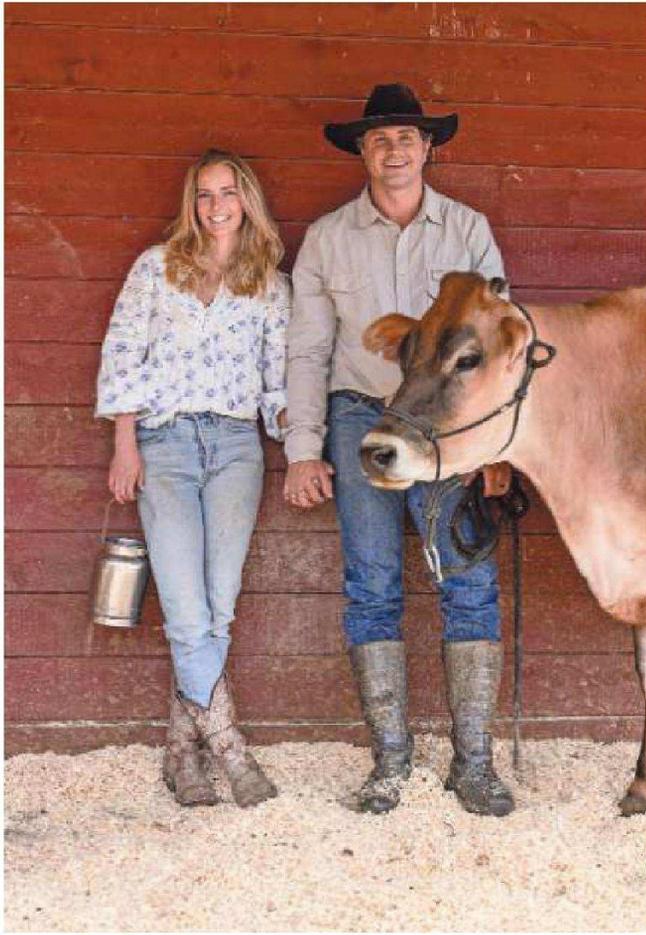
MANY WOMEN, WHO HAVE AND WANT A LIFE THAT LOOKS TOTALLY DIFFERENT, ARE ADDICTED TO WATCHING ALL THIS. FOR SOME IT IS THRILLING ESCAPISM. OTHERS USE IT AS A FORM OF RAGE-BAIT

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about iPads? “No,” another little girl says. “Except we can play ring-a-ring-o’-roses and jump on the tramp and play lacrosse and that’s everything.” How about phones? “No,” says eight-year-old George, one of the older kids. “Sometimes if we go with our cousins and we play [on a phone], then we’re, like, addicted to ’em.”

They have a cleaner but no childcare; Neeleman does all the food shopping — kids in tow — and cooks from scratch (they “don’t do” ready meals). Despite the more traditional aspects of their relationship, Daniel is a hands-on father, taking the kids out to the farm and doing all the laundry. The children appear to look after each other quite well too — there are so many that they seem to have become an almost self-sustaining entity. Still, Daniel says, Neeleman sometimes gets so ill from exhaustion that she can’t get out of bed for a week.

The bedroom is also where she had her children, with the exception of Henry and Martha, who were

Daniel pulled strings at his father’s airline to secure his first date with Hannah

“OUR FIRST FEW YEARS OF MARRIAGE WERE REALLY HARD, WE SACRIFICED A LOT. BUT WE DID HAVE THIS VISION, THIS DREAM AND —” DANIEL INTERRUPTS: “WE STILL DO”

born in a hospital (a fact that did not escape some of her followers). “After that I was, like, I’m ready to go back home,” she says. “I just love having them at home. It’s so quiet.” She also gave birth to them without pain relief. None at all? She shakes her head. Why? “I don’t know, I just have never loved taking it.” She stops herself. “Except with Martha — I was two weeks overdue and she was 10lb and Daniel wasn’t with me...” She lowers her voice. Daniel is currently out of the room taking a phone call. “So I got an epidural. And it was an amazing experience.” Where was Daniel that day? “It was shipping day [for the meat boxes] and he was manning the crew.” But the epidural was kind of great? She pauses — and smiles. “It was kinda great.”

I want to ask her about birth control, but we are surrounded by so many of her children and Daniel is back in the room now too. Do you — I pause and look at her fixedly — plan pregnancies? “No,” Daniel says. “When he says no,” Neeleman responds gently, “it’s very much a matter of prayer for me. I’m, like, ‘God, is it time to bring another one to the Earth?’ And I’ve never been told no.”

“But for whatever reason it’s exactly nine months [after a baby] that she’s ready for the next one,” he says.

“It’s definitely a matter of prayer,” she says.

“It’s a matter of prayer but somehow it’s exactly nine months,” he says.

The Neelemans have strongly held Mormon beliefs, which they mention far more in person than they do online. The Mormon church emphasises heterosexual unions and sexual purity. It opposes elective abortions, allowing for exceptions only when the pregnancy results from rape or incest, or when there is a threat of life to mother or foetus.

Does Neeleman agree with the stance on abortion? “The church is a lot more lenient than a lot of states in the US,” Daniel says.

“The church is against ‘I’m going to get an abortion because I’m not happy I’m pregnant’. We see the joy of having kids.”

“And the sanctity of life,” Neeleman says.

“Absolutely,” he continues. “And that’s probably why the church tells you, ‘Don’t have sexual relations, get married’ — because if not you might have a kid that you regret having and all of a sudden you get an abortion and that’s not good.”

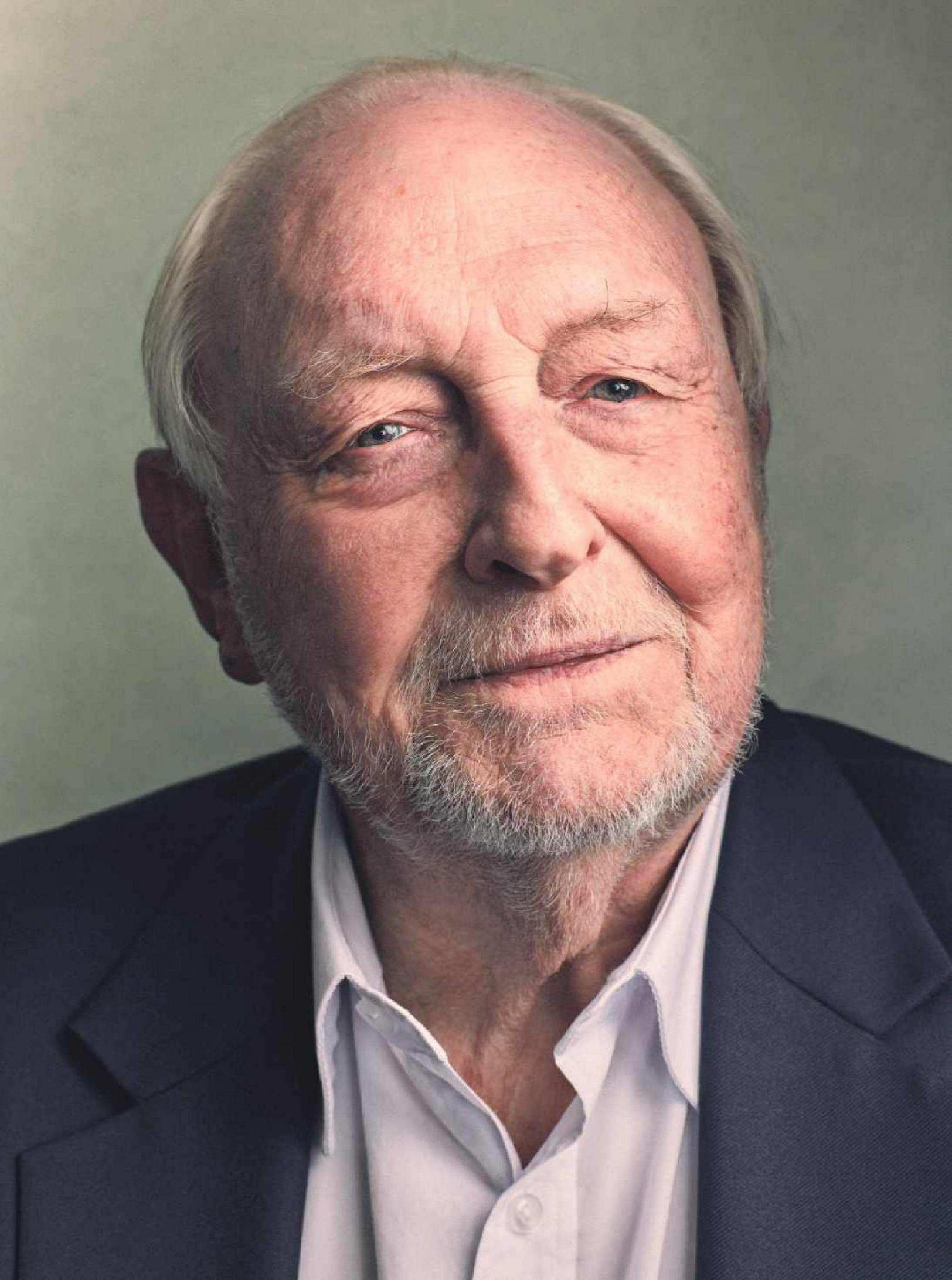
And they would see that as a sinful act? “Yes,” Daniel says. “You need Jesus,” Neeleman adds.

“Mom-mom-mom-mom-mom!” a little girl cries. “I want to go to ballet now!”

I can’t, it seems, get an answer out of Neeleman without her being corrected, interrupted or answered for by either her husband or a child. Usually I am doing battle with steely Hollywood publicists; today I am up against an army of toddlers who all want their mum and a husband who thinks he knows better.

Why, I ask before I leave, did she do those pageants in between babies? “Well, my sister called me and said, ‘There’s a Mrs Utah, let’s do it together.’ Just to —” she gestures at the children around her — “break things up.”

And the sequined gowns? Well, they used to be in her bedroom cupboard, but with all of her stuff — and Daniel’s and Henry’s and Charles’s and George’s and Frances’s and Lois’s and Martha’s and Mabel’s and Flora’s — the cupboard got so full that there wasn’t any more room. So Daniel put them in the garage ■



THIS IS LIKE A BLOODY THERAPY SESSION

Neil Kinnock, the nearly prime minister, is overjoyed his friend Keir Starmer is in No 10. He just wishes his wife, Glenys, who died last year, was here to see it, he tearfully tells *Decca Aitkenhead*

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loody lovely! Terrific.” It is 20 hours since the 10pm exit poll announced a Labour landslide and Lord Kinnock has barely slept, but unalloyed joy booms down the phone line. The night before I call him, in the early hours he had been rejoicing live on air in the BBC studio at the defeat at the Rochdale count of the “repulsive” George Galloway, before heading to the Tate Modern at 3am to join the new Labour prime minister at the party’s victory celebrations. He got home at about 6.30am and was back on the airwaves at 11am.

For Kinnock, the night must have felt like a sliding doors moment, a glimpse of a parallel universe in which he could have been PM. After his party’s disastrous election defeat in 1983, he himself had succeeded an unelectably socialist leader and defeated Labour’s hard left to lead the party on the long road back to electability. In April 1992, facing an unelected and unpopular PM, and a tired Tory government widely considered at the tail end of office, Kinnock was predicted by the polls to win. The election was supposed to be unlosable — until he lost.

Thirty-two years later, he interrupts supper with his grandchildren for my call to hoot down the line that he is “ecstatic”. “We had little lovely apples of ecstasy all night, didn’t we? Like the defeat of Galloway, that was beautiful. And then Liz Truss! Who couldn’t even depart with grace. She’s an odd woman,” he says with a chuckle.

This euphoric Kinnock sounds nothing like the man I visit ten weeks before the

election, at the north London home he shared with his wife, Glenys. He spends much of that meeting in floods of tears.

Their marriage had been one of the strongest in British politics. Four days before the 1992 election, which he had guessed by then he would lose, Kinnock began his final campaign speech by reading Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 29*, which ends: “For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings/ That then I scorn to change my state with kings.” Only he understood its meaning; Glenys meant more to him than even high office ever could. Last year, after 56 years of marriage, she died in their bed on December 3, with him at her side.

At 82, Kinnock looks in remarkable health as he bustles around his kitchen, hunting for the remote to quieten the television, which is playing the BBC News channel. I get the feeling it is permanently on. He also seems, for a man who has been in public life for more than 50 years, remarkably unselfconscious about weeping. “This is like a bloody therapy session!” he manages to joke at one point between sobs. “And I’ve never had one of those in my life.”

Glenys was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s in 2017, and her decline had been gradual. Only four years ago, “if you had had a 20-minute conversation with her, she would have managed to sustain the fiction of being Glenys. But after she repeated herself three times, and not picked up on something you’d said, you’d think, bloody hell, she’s drunk, or tired.” Did that fiction demand a huge effort from her? “Oh yes. I mean, she was a wonderful actress. And once she tuned in to what you were interested in, especially if it was development, democracy or climate, she might have even spun it out for an hour or so and you’d have been none the wiser.”

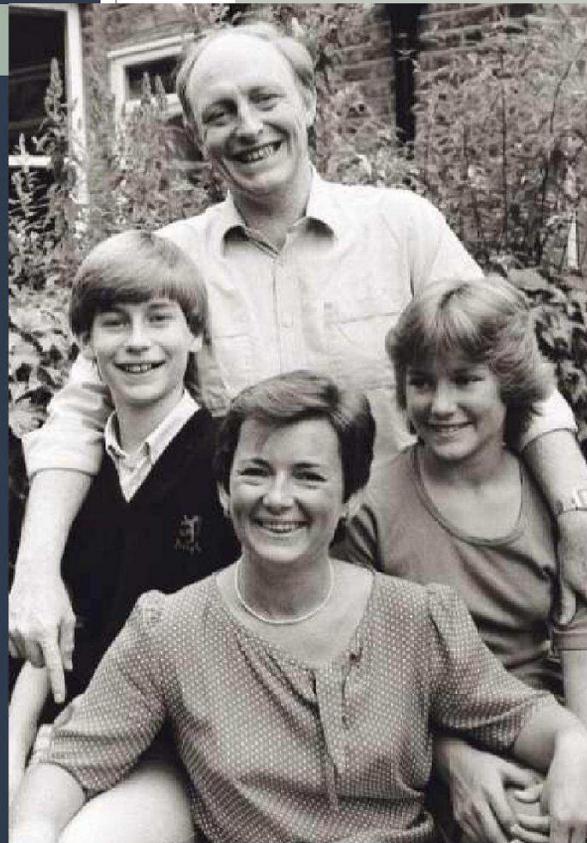
Even to her husband, at times the decline was almost imperceptible. Looking back now, he can see that her death was foretold in her final months by the disappearance of her smile. Their daughter, Rachel, sensed it was imminent; living only around the corner, she went to bed wearing her tracksuit on the last few nights of Glenys’s life, ready for the call. But to Kinnock, “in a peculiar way, it’s always sudden”.

He is grateful that she could die at home. “I suppose there is such a thing as a satisfactory death, and Glenys sliding into sleep in her own bed was the best I could hope for. I mean, it was fine for her. But selfishly, you always want one further lucid conversation. Just one. There is nothing you wouldn’t give for that.”

He took sole charge of her care until he was hospitalised with a chest infection during the pandemic. Their son, Stephen, the Labour MP for Aberafan Maesteg, who before the election was the shadow immigration minister, moved in to take his place and saw that they needed professional care. By the end, carers ➤



Kinnock greets Keir Starmer at Tate Modern on election night. Below: with Glenys and their children, Stephen and Rachel, 1983



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At the Labour Party conference with the party leader Michael Foot, c1982. Right: as a young MP in 1976



were there for eight hours every day. “Absolutely stunningly wonderful women.”

Kinnock won’t let me report the eye-watering cost. “I could afford it. But there can’t have been a day that passed without me thinking, what the hell would I do if I didn’t have these resources? We were just lucky. If she and I had remained as teachers, there’s no way in the world we could have sustained that level of care. Even though we would have had, quote-unquote, decent pensions.” The tears dry as the political Kinnock re-emerges.

“People are subject to dreadful indignity, with those who do care for them feeling woefully inadequate. And I don’t just mean people like me, spouses. I mean professional carers. The women who are given 15 minutes to be with a 90-year-old to provide them with food and cleanliness. No comfort, no company, no conversation. Just the most rudimentary basics. That’s not good enough in a democracy. Some governments have made a stab at it, but nobody has really taken this inevitable level of demand seriously.”

This will be only one of the problems on the next government’s long to-do list — specifically his son’s, for Keir Starmer has appointed Stephen the minister for adult social care. When we meet in April, though, the election hasn’t yet been called, and we assume it won’t be until the autumn — but it still dominates our conversation.

Everyone had asked Kinnock if it will be another 1997 — a Labour landslide — or another 1992. Kinnock’s stock answer, which he repeats to me, is, “Neither. Every election is unique.” This is an obvious truism. In hindsight, however, his caution sounds like emotional scar tissue from the 1992 campaign.

When I ask if he can picture a triple-digit majority for Labour, for example, he looks alarmed. “Oh God, no. No, no, no, no, no!” Is that an objective, analytic prediction, or —



With Glenys on the campaign trail in Llandudno for the 1987 general election

“CARERS HAVE 15 MINUTES WITH A 90-YEAR-OLD TO PROVIDE THEM WITH FOOD AND CLEANLINESS. IT’S NOT GOOD ENOUGH IN A DEMOCRACY”

I suggest — emotional self-defence? “Oh, it’s objective.” Even three days before the election, he still couldn’t allow himself to hope. “I’ll believe it when I see it,” he texts me. “I have some real worries about turnout after all the stuff about ‘supermajority’”

He is proved right, it turns out, to worry about turnout. Kinnock thinks the UK should make voting compulsory. “It would be a very difficult law to pass in this day and age. But the rationale of, if you are a citizen of a country you not only have a right but a responsibility to participate in democratic decisions, is a faultless rationale.”

Born in Tredgar, Wales, the son of a miner and a district nurse, he was elected to the Commons in 1970, aged 28. Following his second election defeat as Labour leader in 1992, to John Major’s Conservatives, he withdrew to the back benches. Reflecting on how he made ➤

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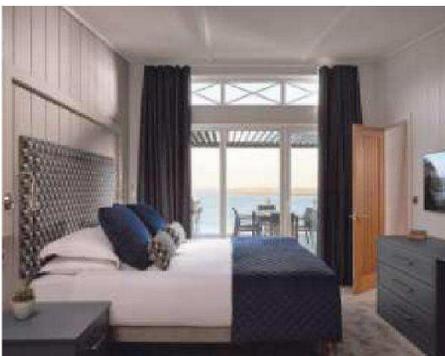
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Above: the MP Stephen Kinnock with his wife, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the former prime minister of Denmark. Left: Neil and Glenys on Brighton beach, 1983



peace with defeat, “I didn’t focus on being beaten, but on what was going to happen to the team who had worked for me.” As Glenys pointed out to him, years later, this preoccupation protected him from the pain. “But my other huge cushion was Glenys and my kids.”

In 1995 Kinnock stood down from parliament to become the European Union’s transport commissioner. His wife had been elected as an MEP the previous year, and the couple spent the next decade in Brussels, where in 1999 he became vice-president of the EU Commission and commissioner for administrative reform. Months after his second commission term ended, in 2005 he was appointed to the House of Lords, joined in 2009 by Glenys when she was ennobled and appointed minister for Europe.

Democratic politics have been the backbone running through Kinnock’s entire life and family. Before becoming a Labour MP in 2015, his son was a researcher in the European parliament, and is married to Helle Thorning-Schmidt, the former prime minister of Denmark. Two of Kinnock’s grandchildren lived four years of their teens in the Danish equivalent of No 10. On election night his granddaughter Grace, one of Rachel’s three children, was tasked with chaperoning Kinnock, in a futile attempt by the family to try to stop him overexerting himself. If the European left were a royal family, Kinnock would be on its throne. But despite his jubilation at the election result, he now worries for the future of our democracy.

“It’s 68 years since I joined the Labour Party. And in that 68 years it’s only in the past few years that I thought that British

democracy was in jeopardy. There have always been rogues and charlatans, but the system had enough checks and balances — of expectation, embarrassment, honour, fear of being caught, professionalism, whatever it is, not to be corrupt. So there have always been some dirty bastards. But they haven’t got to the top.”

I ask what about this particular moment feels so dangerous to him. “There’s no one, single reason. But let’s kick it off with austerity, so-called. That wide-scale destruction of the public sphere and crucial services has made life not just more inconvenient, but more mean. And those physical deprivations have a psychological impact. People’s expectations go down, their ambition, their generosity is reduced. They will help their neighbours, but not necessarily ten streets away.”

He thinks austerity rewired the way we feel about ourselves and one another? “Yeah. If somebody tried to do it quickly, it couldn’t happen. Because people would say, wait, hold on, we’re not having that. But it’s like what Hemingway said about bankruptcy. How does it happen? Slowly, and then quickly.”

In our phone call after the election, I ask if this fear was confirmed by the success of Reform, which now has five MPs. “Nigel Farage is a political fraudster who offers utterly simple answers to the most massively complex questions. If it’s on a small scale, democracy can absorb that. If it becomes on a big scale, it imperils democracy. Farage, he’s not alone, [Richard] Tice is another one, [Lee] Anderson is another one — they absolutely crave and love personal attention. ‘We’re the cheeky destabilisers who are being persecuted by the establishment elite that has betrayed our country.’ I think we’ve got to take Reform very seriously.”

I wonder if he shares others’ worry that Starmer is too dry a personality to see off the appeal of “cheeky destabilisers”. A staunch supporter of the new PM, and personal friend — Starmer visited Kinnock the day Glenys died — he flashes back, “He’s not there to excite. He’s there to change and to lead. If it’s thrills and spills [people] want, what they should do is buy a ticket for the circus. If they want Technicolor, go to the cinema.”

Starmer’s job, he goes on, is to restore public faith in the integrity of the political class. “By looking straight into the lens and telling people the difficult truth. Now that was very, very, very difficult to do in opposition. Because if you look into the television lens and spell out the extent of our current economic weakness, it is a long list. Then you are, quote-unquote, talking Britain down. You are depressing people to the point that they can’t believe that any improvement can be made. That is a lousy formula for getting votes. But in government you can say it. And you ➤

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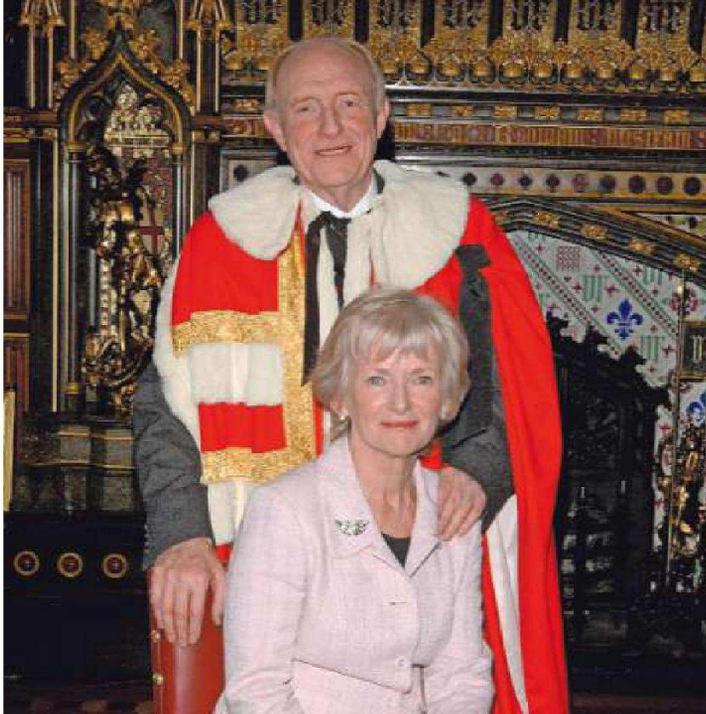
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Being introduced to the House of Lords, January 2005. Glenys was awarded a life peerage four years later

have to say it, so that people know they are not being treated like kids any longer.”

He won't be offering Starmer advice, as Tony Blair did in a Sunday Times article just days after the election. “Maybe if I had been prime minister, like Tony,” he muses at first. “But no, I don't think I would anyway. Tony was entitled to write it. But the thing about [giving] advice to someone like Keir Starmer is he either knows it already or has realised it and discarded it. The guy is 61. He's been around the block.”

Kinnock doesn't think we've seen the end of Galloway. “No, no, no, no, no, no. He'll invent some cause and arrive with a great blast of trumpet, and convince people who are looking for reassurance and want their beliefs, or prejudices, to be matched up by somebody who appears to be famous. That's what he does. I mean, he's the mirror image of Farage.” But he doesn't worry about a dissident far left faction troubling the new government. “There is no intellectual force, there's no Tony Benn with charismatic appeal.” What about Jeremy Corbyn? The former Labour leader was expelled from the party but won his old Islington North seat as an independent. “Not really.” His tone is crushingly indifferent.

The dangers Kinnock worries about lie well outside parliament. In 2016 he told me, “I just don't think the lessons of the 1930s have been forgotten.” I ask if he would still say that now. “No, I wouldn't. I think they've been obscured.” People increasingly say we are living in prewar times. Would he agree?

“Well, in a sense, yes. But we're also — and I come back to the point that I was making about the scale of the crisis — in a postwar time. The quality of public services and our economic performance has deteriorated to the point where it feels as if we've been preoccupied by fighting a

war — but there hasn't been any war. So that means that the task of rebuilding is gigantic, but we've got to do it without the sense of public sacrifice and patience of a postwar democracy.”

Social media, he fears, only makes the job harder. “Just imagine if Hitler and Goebbels had had social media. They used the technology of the age of radio to influence millions. Think what they could have done — and what others are doing — with social media. I don't know how democracy is supposed to function in this world.” His tone has grown uncharacteristically pessimistic.

“What we've got to do now,” he rallies, “before the founders of the social media platforms are superseded by a different generation, is form a legislative alliance with them, using their insights and knowledge, and the power of democracy, to make laws. I just hope, and I actually

“I WISH FOR HIS OWN SAKE, FOR THE WORLD'S SAKE, THAT BIDEN WOULD SAY, ‘OK, LET'S FIND A REALLY GREAT ALTERNATIVE’”

believe, that there will be enough people who will want to exercise the human gift of rationality, of discernment, not to be ruled by this garbage of the malignant social media. I do think that, often, human conduct has got to be guided in a civilised direction. And that's where the law comes in. And it has got to be international.”

Which brings us, of course, to the presidential election in America. In April he tells me, “That's the one thing that really does keep me awake. Worrying about Trump getting elected.” I ask if he would trade a Joe Biden victory for a Labour defeat. “For the world,” he says softly, “I'd have to go with Joe. Yeah, I'd have to. For the world.”

Since then we have seen Biden's calamitous debate performance and an increasingly frantic clamour for him to step aside. A year younger than Kinnock, is Biden simply too old to run?

“He's done great things,” Kinnock replies on the phone, sounding pained. “But he has aged faster than I thought he would. And the bloody thing is, you know, anything that can assist Trump, it has just got to be discouraged. And the reality is that, even if [the debate performance] was a temporary lapse by Joe, the very fact of his age is of assistance to Trump now. So, yeah. I wish for his own sake, for America's sake, for the world's sake, that Joe would say, ‘OK, let's find a really great alternative.’”

Kinnock's choice would be the Michigan governor, Gretchen Whitmer. “But I actually,” he adds softly, sadly, “don't think Joe will step back.”

Whether Kinnock would have made a good prime minister he declines to say. I ask which of his many job titles made him happiest, and he doesn't need to think. “Member of parliament.” Not leader of the opposition? “God, no!” Member of parliament was better than Lord Kinnock? “Oh yes. Lord Kinnock makes me sound like a pub, doesn't it?”

He is enjoying being back at work in the Lords, having missed four years while caring for Glenys. One issue he expects to come before the House again is assisted dying. “I think it might happen in the next parliament.” Both he and Glenys voted in favour of previous attempts to legalise assisted dying, so I'm curious to know if anything about her death made him revise his view.

He starts to cry again but quickly composes himself and replies emphatically, “Not at all. And when we get the next rational, safeguarded set of proposals, I will vote for it.” Does he expect the law change? “Oh, it'll happen, love, yeah.” In our lifetime?

“Oh yes.” He pauses, then grins. “Well, your lifetime, definitely. I'm in my eighties, love. That's more dangerous than being in the bloody SAS. The casualty rates are higher.” ■



Why are so many young



g people getting cancer?

These men and women are all in their twenties and thirties. They have all been diagnosed with cancer. As scientists race to explain surging rates, *Jenny Kleeman* hears what it's like to work, date and live when your future is so uncertain

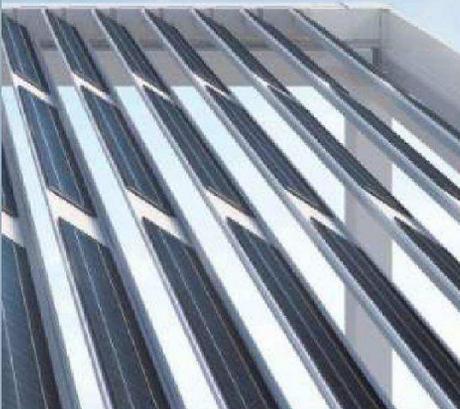
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Becca, 28, was diagnosed with bladder cancer in 2021; David Carter, 28, was diagnosed with stomach cancer in 2023

Becca used to have formidable life plans. She was a corporate lawyer, happy to work long days across different time zones. Her goal had been to save up enough to retire at 30. “I thought, I’m going to work really hard and then I’m going to live my life. And all of a sudden that stopped — overnight.” She broke her ankle on a night out in 2021 and routine blood tests led to investigations that revealed Becca had bladder cancer. She was 25. “It was a real shock. I didn’t even feel unwell.”

When she told her bosses about her diagnosis she was offered a payout, which she felt she had no choice but to accept. (She doesn’t want to give me her last name because she doesn’t want her old employer to be identified.) Now aged 28, Becca has been through chemotherapy, radiotherapy, immunotherapy and surgery — “You name it, I’ve done it” — and holds little hope of getting another job in law due to the three-year gap on her CV. “Deciding if and when you should look for a job is difficult, knowing that in a few weeks, or months, or years, your health is going to decline.”

Years, months or weeks? Becca has no idea what unit of time she should be using to measure the rest of her life. Her cancer was diagnosed as stage 4, which means it has already spread to other parts of her body. No one can tell her exactly how effective her treatment has been or what her prognosis is: when she asks her doctors they hold their hands up. “The data doesn’t apply to you — it’s all about people in their seventies, eighties, nineties. For now I have always exceeded expectations. Young people

recover from surgeries and treatments much better than older people. I went into this much fitter than the average patient.” She gestures at the twentysomethings and thirtysomethings around us. “It’s not like when your grandmother has cancer. Look around the room — we all look healthy. And you know we’re not because you know why we’re here.”

We are in a central London pub at a gathering organised by Shine, a cancer support network for people in their twenties, thirties and forties. The charity arranges regular meet-ups across the country (Becca now volunteers with Shine, organising events in Yorkshire from her home in Leeds). All the young people gathered here will be living with cancer for the rest of their lives — even if doctors tell them they are cancer-free, they may have an elevated risk of it returning. For some that will mean keeping decades of vigilant watch over their

Cancer rates for 20 to 34-year-olds in G20 countries are at their highest in 30 years. Cases for over-75s peaked in 2005

health, with their careers, love lives and fertility permanently changed by the diagnosis. For others the rest of their lives may last only a matter of months.

Shine caters to a growing demographic. The number of under-50s diagnosed with cancer in the UK increased by 24 per cent between 1995 and 2019, according to figures released by Cancer Research UK (CRUK). The incidence of these “early onset” cases is increasing faster than any other age group, with almost 35,000 British 25 to 49-year-olds receiving a diagnosis in 2019. While cases among over-75s in G20 countries peaked in 2005 and are now in decline, rates for the youngest adults — 20 to 34-year-olds — are at their highest in 30 years.

You would never think that David Carter, 28, had his entire stomach removed only three months ago. He was diagnosed with stomach cancer last autumn, and only then because he has private medical insurance through his job in finance. When he first went to his NHS GP last March complaining of persistent acid reflux, he was “basically laughed out the door”, he tells me. “You’re probably drinking too much,” they said. “Take it easy and it should go away.” A month later, after he had been doubled up in pain at his desk, he was told he could be referred to a specialist, but his age meant he was low priority and could face a nine-month wait on the NHS. He shudders to think what might have happened had he waited that long.

After chemotherapy and surgery David’s life will never be the same. “I’ve always been a huge foodie. I love eating, I love eating out. Now I don’t get hungry any more — I have to remind myself to eat,” he says. Without a stomach his food passes straight into his small intestine, requiring him to eat frequent small meals. “Being told I don’t need any more treatment should have been a ►



Laragh Rendall Blythe, 26, was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 2022; Will Ford, 33, was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2016

celebratory moment, but I found it so hard. They tell me, 'We think we've cured you but we can't say for certain.' It's just wait and see. That's really tough." The mental changes have been as hard to take as the physical ones. "As a young man you have a certain element of invincibility about you. That has just been completely ripped out of me. I love my friends — they've been fantastic, a great support — but I do look on them with quite a bit of envy now."

Modern life's role

This new face of cancer poses a challenge to researchers and a conundrum for the health system. So why are so many young people getting cancer? Is it something about how we live today — in our diet, lifestyle or environment — that is posing an emerging threat to young people? And, on a human level, how is cancer different if you experience it as a young adult?

The rise in diagnoses can't be explained by greater awareness, wider screening or more people having genes that predispose them to cancer, according to Professor Charles Swanton, CRUK's chief clinician. A clue, Swanton says, may be found in the kinds of cancers that are on the increase.

"Eight out of the twelve cancer types that are becoming more common in people under fifty are related to the digestive system. In the UK the rate of bowel cancers in the under-50s has increased by 50 per cent since the mid-1990s; we're also seeing increases in rates of pancreas and stomach cancer." With digestive cancers the cause may be found in changes in the microbiome or the food we eat: high-fructose corn syrup (a sweetener found in processed foods such as biscuits and ice cream) and other ultra-processed foods, for example. Breast cancer is the most common form for

women over the age of 25, which Swanton says may be due to hormonal changes related to women having babies later or breastfeeding less.

Across all cancers, inflammation may have a vital role to play in priming cells for the disease — because inflamed tissues are more likely to turn cancerous. Cancers form when a vulnerable cell has a mutation in the presence of an external "promoter", something that can stimulate chronic inflammation — "anything from alcohol to tobacco smoke to air pollution to other

THE POSSIBLE CANCER CULPRITS

Ultra-processed foods such as the sweetener high-fructose corn syrup may cause cancerous cells to divide more often

Air pollution is known to cause lung cancer, but inhaled carcinogens may also cause other forms by triggering cells with cancer-forming mutations

Microplastics can cause gut inflammation when ingested, which may lead to DNA damage in cells and promote cancer

Obesity can increase levels of hormones, growth factors and inflammation, which can cause cells to divide more often

Alcohol consumption is linked to an increased risk of throat, breast, liver, esophageal and other cancers

Gut bacteria, when altered, may play a role in gastrointestinal cancers

chemicals", Swanton says. The presence of different bacteria in the gut might also be able to generate inflammation that could lead to cancer.

This is a global phenomenon, but there are regional variations in rates and types of cancer. The highest rates of early onset cancer are in western Europe, North America and Oceania, but a useful comparison can be made between South Korea and neighbouring Japan. "South Korea is seeing a rise in early onset cancer rates related to the digestive system similar to western, higher-income countries," Swanton says. "South Korea and Japan are economically and ethnically similar, but South Korean lifestyles are closer to US and western European ones, and the early onset cancers are rising sharply in South Korea but not Japan. That speaks to something in the western diet that might be responsible."

The phenomenon is marked in postwar western economies: since 1950 each successive generation has had a higher risk of early onset cancer. Obesity has been rising in the same places during the same period, but a precise causal link is yet to be established. "Obesity may be a contributor, but it's not the whole answer," Swanton says. "I wonder whether the factors that are contributing to obesity are also contributing to the rise in early onset cancer." Animal models have shown that high-fructose corn syrup can influence cancer cell biology by enhancing cellular proliferation, making them more likely to divide and grow, he adds. Diet — perhaps in the form of ultra-processed foods — may be the critical factor here, rather than excess weight itself.

Dr Aparna Parikh, associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and medical director for young adult colorectal cancer at Massachusetts General Hospital,



Quinn Longman, 22, was diagnosed with leukaemia in 2022; Erin Johnstone, 26, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2019

agrees. “Alcohol and obesity — yes, they are important and modifiable, but that’s definitely not entirely what’s driving it,” she tells me. “Massachusetts is a very fit state. BMI is not very high, a lot of the patients I’m seeing in my clinic are not overweight. They are not smokers. They are active. They don’t have a family history of cancer or underlying metabolic conditions.”

Parikh thinks the culprits could be related to environmental exposures that are not yet well understood. “Microplastics, for example — they are ubiquitous,” she suggests. “It’s definitely an interplay of environment and lifestyle that’s happening over the course of a person’s young lifespan that’s driving it.”

Work, love and travel insurance

For years Laragh Rendall Blythe had been going to her GP in Dorchester with what she was told must be recurrent infections. “My lymph nodes were swollen. Spoiler alert, my lymph nodes were cancerous. That’s how bad it had got,” she tells me. “I got labelled as a hypochondriac, as though I was overthinking it. It was all, ‘No, this isn’t going to be a problem. Take some antibiotics, you’ll be fine.’” After she was taken to A&E for the second time in a month with suspected severe tonsillitis, Laragh was ultimately diagnosed with thyroid cancer, aged 24.

She traces her fingers across a thin scar on her neck from surgery to remove her thyroid and a cluster of lymph nodes. She also had radioactive iodine therapy that meant she had to be kept in isolation for three days. Then a scan revealed the cancer had spread to her lungs. Now 26, no one can tell her what her prognosis might be. “I have no idea. I had a scan over a month ago and they’ve yet to get back to me. I’ve

got used to not knowing at this point,” she says, shrugging.

“I’ve barely had a chance to live my life as an adult yet. I’m trying to find work. Even though employers aren’t allowed to discriminate, the moment you mention that you have a long-term illness there’s definitely a few that like to turn their heads. I’ve been rejected from over 150 jobs at this point.”

Laragh got engaged during the pandemic but cannot plan the wedding because she has no idea what’s next for her treatment. “We’ve barely got to do anything together. We haven’t had the chance to go on the big holidays that we wanted to — we don’t even know if that’s ever something we’ll be able to do, because travel insurance is insane the moment you bring cancer into the equation.”

In some cases travel insurance quotes for people who have been diagnosed with cancer can be more than the cost of the

“Potential dates have a habit of what we call ‘cancer ghosting’ — when they find out, you don’t hear from them again”

entire holiday, even if their doctors have told them they are now cancer-free.

On the other side of the room Will Ford, 33, is talking to Quinn Longman, 22. Quinn was diagnosed with leukaemia a year and a half ago and is in remission following chemotherapy. He lives with his parents in Buckinghamshire. He is in the second year of a criminology degree at the University of Westminster and hopes one day to become a detective constable, but he’ll have to pass a physical test to join the police. “I know I’m not ready for that,” he says. “It’s a matter of building myself up to it.”

Will had finished a master’s degree and was planning to work in government when he was diagnosed with brain cancer at 25. He now walks dogs for a living. “My tumour was only partly operable, which means it’s not curable but it is treatable. It has been neither growing nor shrinking for five or six years.” When I ask if he is facing a lifetime of watching and waiting, Will is startlingly matter-of-fact: “I’m going to, until it kills me. I’d like to be the exception, but we’ll see.”

He has found it hard to form relationships. “Potential dates have a habit of what we call ‘cancer ghosting’ — when they find out, you don’t hear from them again. A lot of people just don’t want to deal with it.” Will had two brain surgeries within seven months, as well as radiotherapy and three forms of chemotherapy at the same time. It has left him infertile, but he banked sperm before he embarked on treatment. “If I ever have the chance to have kids — which is debatable — that’s there.”

When Erin Johnstone, a primary school teacher from Eltham in southeast London, was diagnosed with breast cancer aged 22, she had her eggs frozen before her treatment. The NHS will cover the cost of storing them for only five years. “From ▶

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Aimee Togher, 23, was diagnosed with Hodgkin lymphoma in 2023; Jesse Tristram, 26, was diagnosed with brain cancer in 2021

next year I'm going to have to start paying, which is a bit crazy because I will be only 27," she says. It will cost her £350 a year. She is prepared to pay, but is writing to her MP. "It's about the principle of it."

Erin knew to check her breasts after seeing social media campaigns from CoppaFeel!, the breast cancer awareness charity for young people founded by Kris Hallenga, who was diagnosed with stage 4 breast cancer at 23. (Hallenga died in May, aged 38.) "I actually don't think of myself as unlucky at all. I'm really thankful I caught it when I did," Erin says. Despite two lumpectomies, hormone therapy and chemotherapy in 2020, Erin had a recurrence last year, leading to yet more surgery and radiotherapy. But everything looks positive today. "At the minute I am cancer-free."

Aimee Togher, wearing a Beatles T-shirt, tells me she was working in cancer research for the health programme Our Future Health last year when she found a lump in her neck and was told she had stage 2 Hodgkin lymphoma. She was 22 and had just moved in with her boyfriend. Her mother was already battling stage 4 breast cancer. "I thought, oh my God, how am I going to tell my nan that both her daughter and her granddaughter have cancer?"

It was only after Aimee finished her chemotherapy that she began to ask questions. "Is it my diet? Is it stress? I grew up in London — is it pollution? I've met so many other young people with cancer. You think, no one deserves this."

Early life exposures

Cancer researchers hope the answers to these questions may be found by comparing data sets collected from different parts of the globe. But there are gaps, says Dr Paul Brennan, an epidemiologist at the World

Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer. "Most epidemiology studies have looked at people in their forties and fifties," he says. "We haven't really done big studies on what's happening in children. If something changes when you are a child, does it prime the cancers so they are much more likely to occur 30 or 40 years later?" Early life exposures may be important. "What is it about infancy and young childhood that changed in the 1960s and 1970s?"

Brennan believes that clues could be found in the microbiome, which forms at a very young age. Changes in diet and breastfeeding since the 1960s (when breastfeeding was in decline, before a resurgence from the mid-1970s), along with antibiotic use and the rise in caesarean births — which mean that newborns aren't exposed to bacteria as they pass through the birth canal — have meant the cocktail

"I actually don't think of myself as unlucky at all. I'm really thankful I caught the breast cancer when I did"

of bacteria that lives in our guts has changed. "That could be an important factor in priming or increasing the risk of children subsequently developing cancer. We know there are bacteria that do increase genetic mutations and we think this happens in children, maybe even in babies."

Brennan also warns of the dangers of overdiagnosis, where cancers that have no symptoms and may never have become clinically significant are picked up during routine investigations for other conditions. Some cancers proliferate rapidly, others grow so slowly that they will never pose a threat to a person's life, or even health. Cancers don't always kill us.

"Part of the cost of ensuring that you do pick up a lot of the nasty cases is that you're going to sweep in a lot of the cases that would not have become clinical," Brennan says. But he thinks the increase in incidence of early onset cancer is genuine — and should be taken seriously. "With colorectal cancer you're seeing an increase in incidence and an increase in mortality. It's killing people."

This is why bowel cancer has been a particular focus for research. "American Cancer Society statistics from 2024 suggest that, for men under the age of 50, it's now the leading cause of cancer mortality in the US," Parikh says. "Over the next decade it's projected in women potentially to surpass breast cancer." Bowel cancer is so deadly because it is often only diagnosed at an advanced stage.

Team Prospect, funded by CRUK, is an international quest to find out why cancer rates among young people are on the rise. "It's a team of epidemiologists, medical oncologists, gastrologists and other scientists, spanning the globe to figure out what is happening," says Parikh, one of ►

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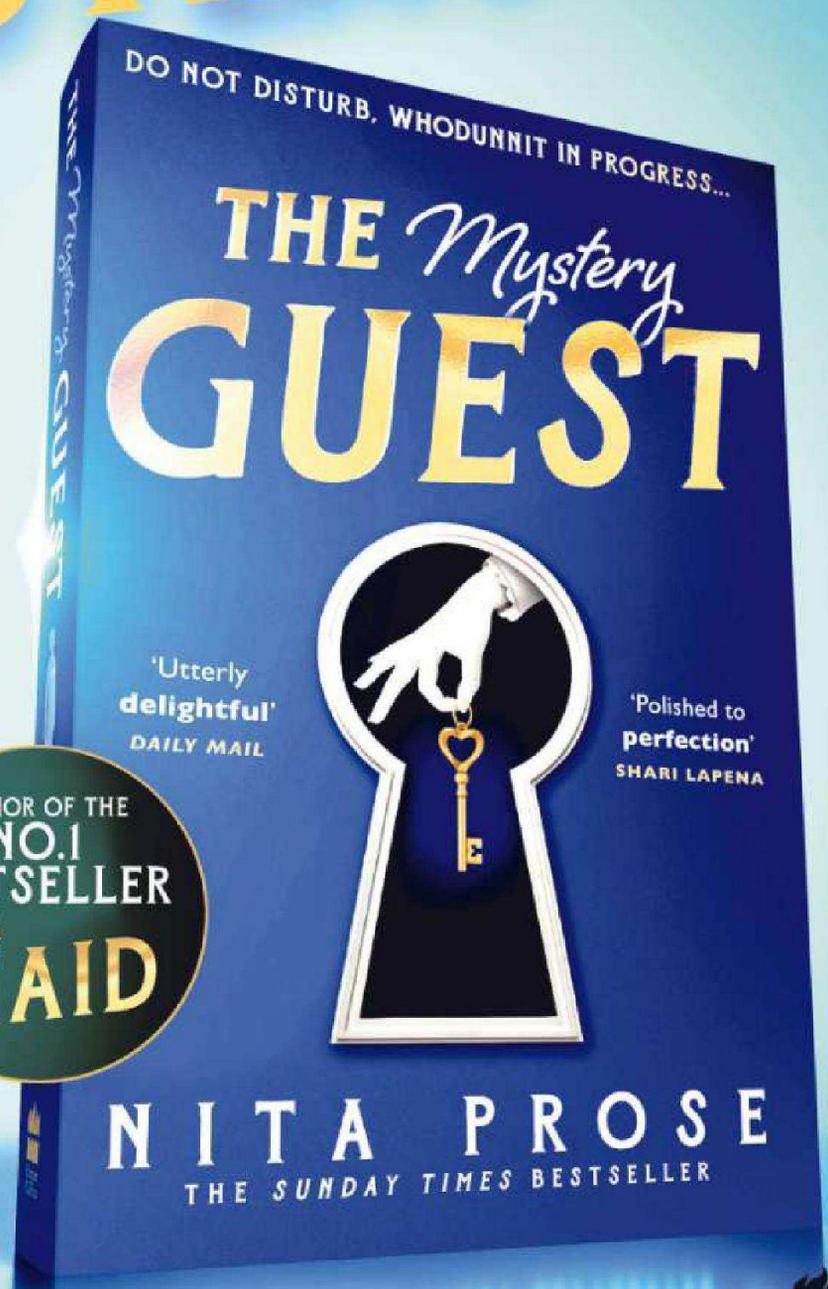
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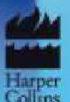


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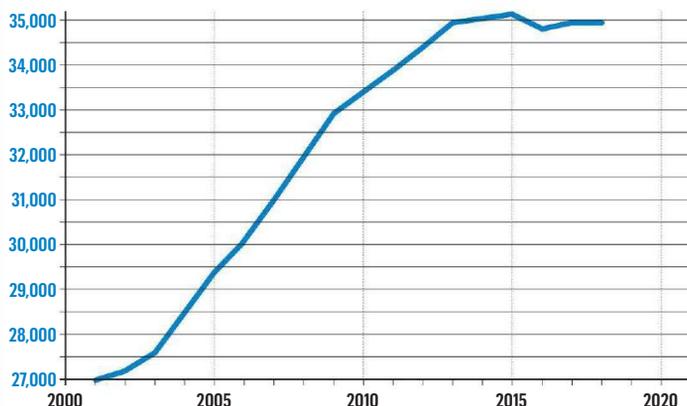
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TOTAL UK CANCER CASES FOR 25 TO 49-YEAR-OLDS

Three-year rolling average for newly diagnosed cases



its researchers. “It’s a big team but with complementary knowledge.” They are looking for any variation between regions — even comparing trends in different Indian states — in search of clues. “What’s alarming is, it’s happening everywhere. I know we’re seeing similar trends in Africa as well.”

The challenge of teasing out which factors are responsible is enormous: there are so many variables. “It’s genetics, it’s chemicals, it’s lifestyles, it’s environment, it’s social determinants of health. It’s what’s happening over the course of a lifespan — a short lifespan — but still over a long time,” Parikh says. “We’re trying to figure out what that combination is. Are certain things driving it more than others? Can you intervene on those exposures, or predict who is at risk to screen those people more?”

“I’d be very surprised if there was one underpinning factor for this,” Swanton says. “It could be a particular bacteria and microplastics, or a bacteria and high-fructose corn syrup. There could be multiple different reasons for this that we don’t yet fully understand.”

Bad luck is still a large part of the equation. “It’s the wrong mutation in the wrong cell at the wrong time with the wrong stimulus,” Swanton says. The chances of any given individual developing early onset cancer are slim.

This creates a particular challenge for primary care providers. While cancer is common in the population at large, on average a full-time GP in England will see a total of nine cancer cases a year across all cancers and ages. When the patient is under 50 that average falls to one case a year — and the young patient will often be describing symptoms that are very similar to other conditions.

“It’s hard for GPs to make meaningful changes to their practice in response to this issue,” says Naser Turabi, CRUK’s director of evidence and implementation. “GPs themselves would be the first to say it’s very difficult to get to the root of the problem in a ten-minute conversation.”

Extending screening to younger people might sound sensible, but Turabi says it would increase the danger of overdiagnosis and unnecessary invasive procedures. “You would flood hospital services with people of an extremely low risk of cancer, and that would mean you would start to spot fewer cancers because you would be overwhelming those services with lower likelihood cases. The harms outweigh the benefits of extending these diagnostics to younger people.”

New blood tests for cancer — so-called “liquid biopsies” that pick up cancers at a very early stage by identifying fragments of tumour DNA circulating in the bloodstream — may be a promising area, Turabi says, but these are still in trials. “At the moment we are five or ten years away from a useable test in this context.”

Living with uncertainty

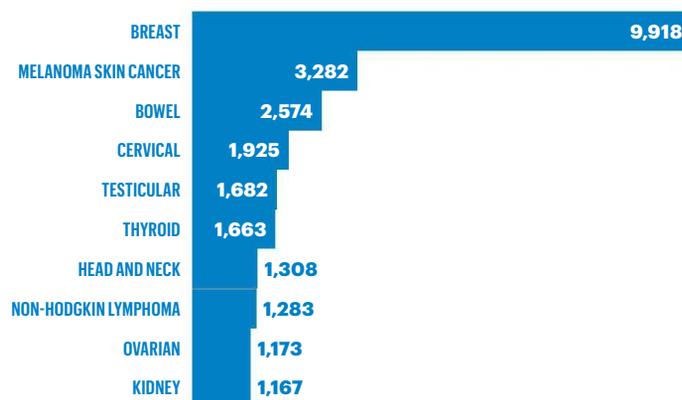
Your twenties and thirties are a time for trying things out, for making the choices that end up carving out the shape of the rest of your life. “When I was first diagnosed, what I grieved most, what I found hardest, was the ability to make plans. It’s the most indescribably horrendous way of living,” Jesse Tristram, 26, tells me. “You assume you have opportunities to do all these different things, to change things. But it’s a real liberty to be able to plan.”

Jesse was 23 when she woke up with nausea, a horrible sense of taste and smell

Bad luck is a large part of the equation. “It could just be the wrong mutation in the wrong cell with the wrong stimulus”

MOST COMMON CANCERS FOR 25 TO 49-YEAR-OLDS

Number of newly diagnosed UK cases, 2017-19



and an extreme sense of déjà vu. She was terrified that she was going mad. “I thought the worst-case scenario was that I would never find the cause.” Her “fantastic” GP sent her for brain scans and a neurologist gave her a referral to a specialist unit, along with a number to call to book an appointment. “I got through to the answerphone, which said, ‘Welcome to the brain tumour unit.’ That’s how I found out I had a brain tumour.”

Her dry sense of humour allows Jesse to laugh about this now. “I have grade 4, incurable, terminal brain cancer,” she declares without a drop of self-pity. “They gave me fourteen months to live — two and a half years ago.”

Jesse was working in London as a civil servant at the Department of Health when she got her diagnosis. She had just moved in with her partner of three and a half years. At first she felt utterly robbed. “My freedom had been taken away. Even the idea of making a plan is a reminder of all the things you’ll never do, all the news you’ll never hear, the events you’ll never attend.”

Then she made the conscious decision to just keep going, because there was no point spending the time she had left grieving what she might miss out on. “I *can* make plans,” she says. “It actually doesn’t matter whether I get to do these plans. Planning has value — now, in the present.”

Eight months after her diagnosis Jesse and her girlfriend bought a flat and signed a 35-year mortgage. “I’m not allowed life insurance, but there’s a pretty decent death-in-service plan in the civil service,” Jesse says. “You learn all these other things that no other 26-year-old knows, about early withdrawal of pension, death-in-service payments, these sorts of things.”

In a week’s time they are getting married. “I’ve reclaimed my options,” she says with a broad smile. “I have no idea what’s going to happen a year from now. Something better could happen, you just don’t know.” ■

Some names have been changed



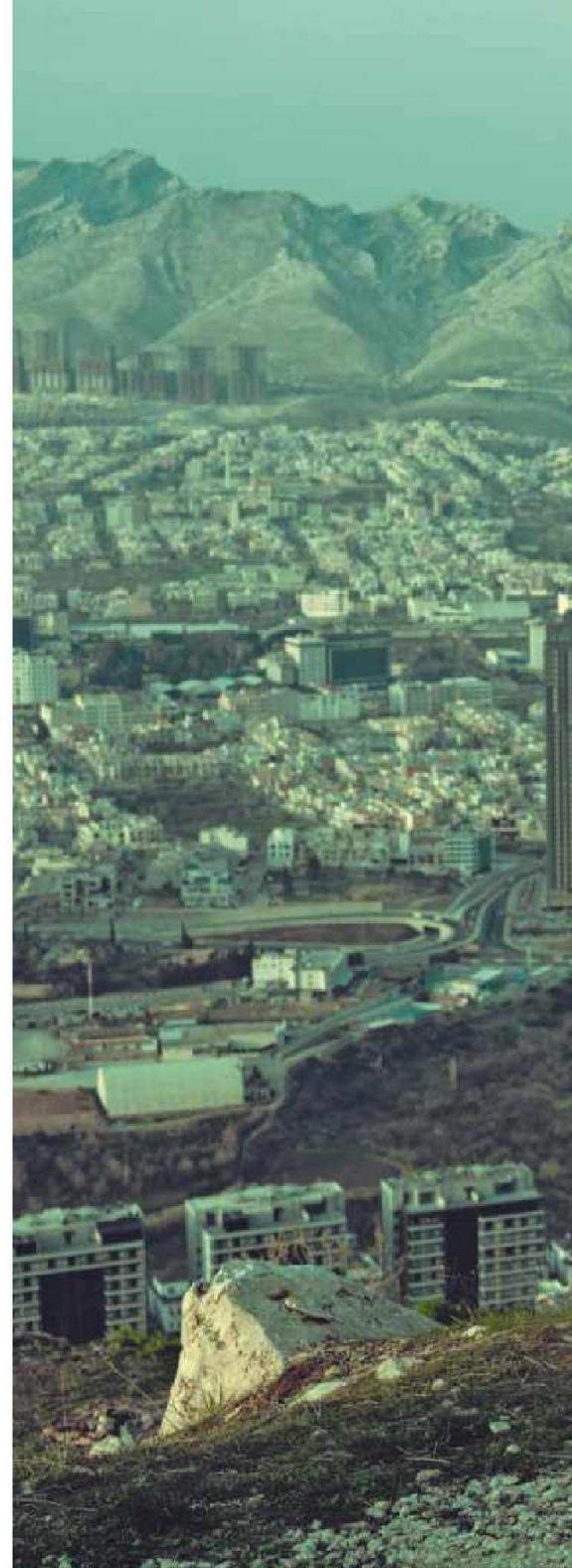
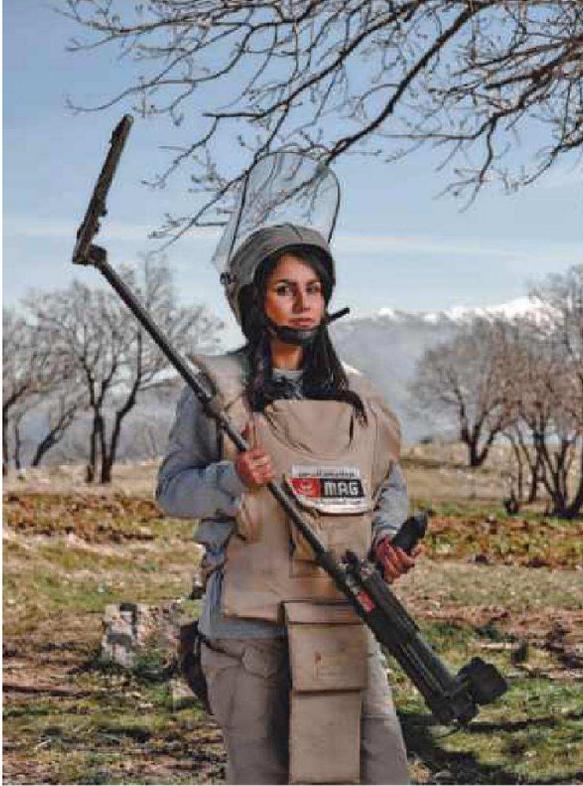
A workshop for demining. In the foreground, a large, dark, cylindrical object, possibly a bomb or a component, is out of focus. In the background, a workbench is covered with a blue cloth and holds several glass bottles, some containing dark liquids, and other tools. A window with multiple panes is visible behind the workbench. To the left, there is a large, woven, brown partition screen.

BOMB SQUAD

Meet the amazing women of Iraq's all-female demining unit, who are risking their lives clearing up the lethal munitions Isis left behind. *Sane Seven* photographed them in traditional dress and out in the field

Sanaria, 31, at a Mines Advisory Group training facility in Chamchamal, Iraqi Kurdistan. A former clinic worker, she has spent three years clearing her homeland of mines

Halala, 33, in her work attire near the minefields of Dokan and, bottom, in traditional Kurdish dress. She previously worked as a psychologist in a child protection unit



Ever since Isis was ousted from Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017 the region has been littered with landmines, cluster munitions and unexploded bombs left by the terror group. Women whose families were torn apart under Isis rule are now working with the Mines Advisory Group, an international humanitarian organisation that trains them to safely detect and dispose of the hidden killers that are still preventing displaced communities from returning home.

In March this year Sane Seven, 40, and Marius Janciauskas, 42 — a husband-and-wife photography duo — travelled to Iraqi Kurdistan to take portraits of these remarkable women posing proudly in traditional dress in defiance of the regime that once



barred them from education and work. One deminer, Siham Fayruz, 24, from Mosul, was 14 when Isis arrived in her city. “I wanted to become a doctor or engineer but we couldn’t continue our education,” she says. Her husband was later shot by an Isis fighter and died in her arms. “I lost my youth because of Isis.”

Her colleague Rawa Ahmed, 45, is a former hairdresser. Her husband fell and broke his back when they were fleeing Mosul, so she is now the breadwinner — something they have faced prejudice about. “People used to ask my husband, ‘How do you let her go and do this job?’ I don’t let them discourage me,” she says.

“We expected the women to be quite conservative,” Janciauskas admits. “This did not match the reality. ‘I want to look like Angelina Jolie,’ one of them said as we took her photo. They had deep respect for their traditional dress but underneath we saw Adidas sneakers.” ■

The deminers Rawa Ahmed, left, and Siham Fayruz look out over the city of Duhok. They fled Mosul, 50 miles to the south, after it was captured by Isis in 2014



Above: the remnants of war — defused landmines, mortar shells, hand grenades and other munitions — at the MAG training base in Chamchamal



Below: Houras, 33, a former teacher, enjoys working with the female team but admits her son and daughter, aged nine and eight, get scared at times about her job



Right: Avan, 26, used to work as an electrical engineer. She says of her colleagues: “We spend most of the time with each other rather than our families. We are like sisters”





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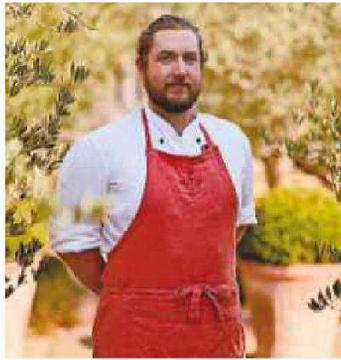
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TABLE TALK



Charlie Hibbert's roasted peach, ricotta and almond bruschetta

PLUS Squeezy does it — supermarket mayo ranked ● Portuguese wine comes of age ● Chicken and rice fit for an oligarch ➔



**CHARLIE
HIBBERT**

Growing up, we used to pick damsons from an ancient tree in my grandma's back garden in Eynsham, Oxfordshire. We'd get buckets of fruit and eat them as is — or steeped in vodka, pickled in vinegar or cooked with sugar to go on top of meringues. This year at our hotel Thyme the young orchard has just started to produce its first Victoria plums, and in the hedgerows are mirabelles, greengages, sloes and wild cherries — which my father is always racing to get to before the birds. Stone fruit are wide in variety, versatile in cooking and among my favourite things to eat. Here are a few ideas for what to do with some of the more common types.

Roasted peach, ricotta and almond bruschetta

Roast peaches are great for a speedy starter or dessert — whether on toast, in a salad or scattered with sugar, cooked and served with ice cream.

Ingredients

(Serves 4)

- 2 ripe peaches, halved and stoned
- 2 tbsp olive oil, plus extra
- 1 tbsp honey
- 1 tbsp cider vinegar
- 25ml vegetable oil
- 75g slivered almonds
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- Zest of 2 lemons
- 200g ricotta
- 2 slices of sourdough bread, halved
- 4 sprigs of basil, leaves picked from the stems

1 Heat the oven to 140C fan/gas 2. Pack the peaches in a roasting tray and dress with the olive oil, honey and vinegar and some salt and pepper, then roast for 5-8 min, or until just soft yet holding their form. If they are a little underripe, they will take a bit longer.

2 Place a frying pan over a medium heat and add the vegetable oil and almonds, then fry until the almonds are golden brown, about 3 min.

3 Tip in the garlic and the zest of 1 lemon and cook for a further 30 seconds before pouring out the almonds onto a piece of kitchen towel to cool. Sprinkle with a good pinch of salt. Stir the zest of the second lemon into the ricotta and season with a little salt.

4 Brush the bread with olive oil and fry it in a pan for 2 min on each side or until golden and crisp. Spread a liberal amount of ricotta on each piece of toast. Slice each

peach half into 3 segments and stack them on top of the bruschetta. Sprinkle with the fried almonds and scatter over the basil leaves before adding a final crack of pepper.

Pork chop with roasted plums, beetroot and sage

Earthy beetroot, cooked alongside ripe plums spiked with a little vinegar, makes a good accompaniment to fatty pork chops. Pick the ripest plums as they will cook down into the salad.

Ingredients

(Serves 4)

- 4 medium red beetroots (about 500g)
- 4 tbsp olive oil, plus extra
- 2 small red onions
- 8 ripe plums
- 2 tbsp fruit jelly (redcurrant, crab apple or similar)
- ½ tbsp good red wine vinegar
- 2 handfuls of chopped walnuts
- 4 pork chops
- Lemon juice
- 1 tbsp butter
- 6 sprigs of fresh sage

1 Heat oven to 160C fan/gas 3. Boil the beetroots in salted boiling water for 25 min or until soft when pierced with a paring knife. Drain the pan, then when the beetroots are cool enough to handle, peel away the skins and set aside.

2 Add 1 tablespoon of olive oil and a pinch of salt to a roasting tray. Halve the onions from root to tip and put them cut side down on the tray. Bake for 15 min or until soft and gently caramelised.

3 Halve the plums and remove the stones. Put them cut side up in a small roasting tray and spoon over the fruit jelly, red wine vinegar, 2 tablespoons of olive oil, a pinch of salt and plenty of pepper. Cover with foil and roast them for 8 min or until they are just beginning to lose their shape.

4 Finally, toast the walnuts for 5 min or until golden brown. Put everything to one side and allow it all to cool to room temperature.





5 Season the pork chops with salt, pepper and olive oil. Place fat side down in a hot pan and allow the fat to render. This may take a couple of minutes and you may need to hold them upright with a pair of tongs.

6 Turn the pork chops over and cook for 5 min until golden brown, then flip them and repeat on the other side. Set them aside to rest, dressing them with some lemon juice and a little extra olive oil.

7 Add the butter to the pan and allow it to melt and foam, then throw in the sage and stir with a wooden spoon for a minute, before tipping everything over the chops. Let them rest for at least 5 min.

8 Cut the beetroot into rough, bite-sized chunks and add them to the plums along with the peeled onions. Serve with the pork chops and the sage butter, with walnuts scattered over the top.

Cherry clafoutis

A really simple dessert for a family lunch, where the batter soufflés and sinks, becoming almost custardy. Serve it just warm and enjoy any leftovers for breakfast the next morning.

Ingredients

- (Serves 4)
- 250g cherries
 - 1 tbsp kirsch
 - 75g caster sugar
 - 2 eggs
 - 35g flour
 - 150ml milk
 - ¼ tsp vanilla essence
 - Zest of ½ a lemon
 - 2 drops of almond extract
 - 15g butter
 - Icing sugar and whipped cream, to serve

1 Heat the oven to 160C fan/gas 3. Halve and destone the cherries, then stir in the kirsch and 2 tablespoons (25g) of the sugar and allow the cherries to sit for an hour.

2 Whisk the remaining sugar and the eggs in a stand mixer until thick, pale and creamy.

Stir in the flour and incorporate well, ensuring that there are no lumps. Finally, stir in the rest of the ingredients apart from the butter, until you have a uniform batter.

3 Heat a baking dish wide enough to contain the cherries in a single layer in the oven for 5 min. Put the butter in the dish and allow it to melt, rotating the pan to cover every corner.

4 Pour the batter into the dish, then scatter in the cherries and all the residual juices as evenly as you can.

5 Bake for 25 min or until a skewer comes out clean. The clafoutis will soufflé, then sink — do not be disheartened.

6 Serve at room temperature, sprinkled with icing sugar and a spoon of thick or whipped cream ■

Charlie Hibbert is the chef director of Thyme, thyme.co.uk

Tasted! The best supermarket MAYONNAISE



OUR PICK

Heinz Seriously Good Sainsbury's, 800ml, £3.40 Slightly sharp, with a hint of lemon. I'd happily have this at my next barbecue **4/5**

Tesco Squeezy 450ml, 86p Excessively vinegary, but at least you can taste a smidgen of mustard **3/5**

Bramwells Squeezy Real Aldi, 500ml, 95p Quite sticky and leaves a film in the mouth, although it has pleasing notes of vinegar **3/5**

Hellmann's Real Squeezy Tesco, 430ml, £2.49 Salty and a bit runny but not unpleasant. Doesn't catch in the throat like some others **3/5**

Kewpie Ocado, 500ml, £5.65 Glossy, oily and the sweetest of the bunch. Also has an off-putting yellow tinge **1/5**

Sainsbury's Squeezy 500ml, 95p Tongue-tingling, and not in a good way. Has a strong metallic flavour and a peculiar aftertaste **1/5**

Essential Squeezy Waitrose, 500ml, £1.40 Tastes like a salt and vinegar crisp dipped in sour cream. Extremely vinegary **1/5**

Hannah Evans

Pea guacamole at the burrito bar for billionaires



ABC KITCHENS THE EMORY, LONDON SW1



I worry about the super-rich. No, really, I do. I got an email the other day from the Emory: “A new landmark of modern architecture and luxury hospitality in the heart of London.” Or “a new hotel” to the likes of you and me. Suites start at £1,620 a night. And it’s only suites: how mortifying to be caught sleeping in just one room these days. They include “two-way airport transfer from London’s private airfields” if you want, which I would given that price.

I worry that, once the global elite are whisked in from Biggin Hill, they will arrive on a grey, polluted bypass by Hyde Park Corner. There, they will be ushered into a building that looks like a miserable modernist take on a Soviet office block. All the hotels round there look like this. Of course, the surroundings inside are opulent. There are indoor trees — the universal sign of money. But I worry we are giving a poor impression of our capital to the jet-set set.

Hopefully, then, the Emory’s residents stop by the in-house restaurant — abc kitchens. This alone should give them a more rosy perspective on the UK. OK, it’s an outpost of three New York restaurants: abc kitchen, which does farm to table, abcV, where the food is “plant-based”, and abc cocina, which is Mexican. The one in London combines all three, all under one extremely expensive roof.



In a city such as New York, where restaurants come and go out of fashion like trainers, the original abc has remained cool since its opening in 2010. The chef and owner Jean-Georges Vongerichten has created something permanent in an impermanent city. Plus, its chicken and rice is “the single best thing I’ve ever eaten”, says a friend who is a regular. Sold.

The only problem is, as I said, London’s abc is the restaurant for a luxury hotel. That means two things. First, it is rather sleeker than the shabby-chic of the New York versions, with the sort of beige citizen-of-nowhere glamour you find in Dubai. Second, at this sort of hotel, dinner will usually be marred by

the bored offspring of the global elite, for whom these places are as quotidian as Pizza Express.

Sure enough, on the table next to us a ten-year-old boy sits furiously dipping his pizza in ketchup. What a miserable life it must be, dragged around the world’s air-conditioned rooms by your glamorous parents.

In the absence of a parental private jet, we order the pea guacamole — a dish that once caused a scandal when The New York Times published the recipe. The response fell into two camps: pearl-clutching coastal Americans saw cultural appropriation, possibly a hate crime; Brits said, “Hang on, isn’t that just mushy peas?”

Well, both were wrong. There

THE DAMAGE

Pea guacamole	£17
Carrot salad	£18
Dover sole tacos	£19
Arroz con pollo	£30
Matcha sponge	£15

4 x margarita	£88
Café con leche	£14

Subtotal	£201
Service charge (15%)	£30.15

Total for 2	£231.15
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are a few peas pureed into the mashed avocado, but you can't really taste them beyond a slight extra freshness. Otherwise they are scattered on top alongside sunflower seeds and the saltiest tortilla chips I've encountered. It's a lovely innovation: the fat, bouncy peas adding crunch to a dip that can sometimes descend into glorified mush.

Arriving with unseemly haste, a salad of garlicky, cuminy roast carrots, covered in peashoots and a blob of sour cream. Plus slabs of avocado and croutons that once again overdo it on the salt. You can take a restaurant out of America, but...

Nonetheless, inspired by the pea guac, we stick with the Mexican theme: good Mexican food is so rare in the UK that you've got to take your chances.

A pair of crispy Dover sole tacos comprise healthy chunks of battered fish inside fresh corn tortillas, with a dollop of spicy aioli. A moment of pride for our island nation as the New York equivalents come with flounder, a vastly inferior flatfish. Lest I descend into jingoism, fish tacos in London are usually no good. I fear our chefs cannot resist the temptation to batter them like a seaside takeaway. But these are up to scratch: light tempura with a fun surprise hit of apple.

Finally, the arroz con pollo — the dish my friend claims as the crowning achievement of humanity. She is correct. There's extraordinary depth: a jalapeño warmth, a shiitake mushroom earthiness. A nice kick to the chicken, but the real standout is its skin: wonderfully salty (in a good way this time), impeccably crispy. So crispy it stands up unaided. A dish to cheer even the sulkiest of oligarchic teens.

Less cheering are the drinks prices. In a fit of Mexican enthusiasm we had a margarita each without looking at the menu. Then another, because why not? Eighty-eight of His Majesty's British pounds is why not. The cheapest white and red are both £65 — £14 for 125ml. Go dry, however, and the prices are pretty reasonable. Perhaps this is one for a Tuesday working lunch. Unless you've flown in on your private jet, of course ■



ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX GREEN/FOLIO ART FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. JASON ALDEN, SANE SEVEN

WINE • Will Lyons

Pick Portugal for the world's best value wine

Portugal, the powerhouse of fortified wine, is once again experiencing a golden age, but this time it's the quality of its table wines rather than its port that is exciting wine buyers. We're seeing a lot more of the country's wines on our high streets, and rightly so because Portugal has everything. With more than 250 native grape varieties to explore, a winemaking tradition to rival any European country's and an offering that ranges from young, spritzy whites in the north to deeply satisfying, unctuous sweet wines in the south, via some soft rich reds, it will satisfy even the most finicky of oenophiles.

Gone are the days of inconsistent wines. New equipment, new estates and a clutch of very competent producers make it feel as if it's a new world winemaking country dropped at the edge of Europe. Affordability is where it excels, and Majestic's LB7 range is a case in point: its 2022 Vinho Verde (10 per cent, £8.99) brims with zesty green fruit, while the 2022 Casa Ferreirinha Planalto Reserva (13 per cent, £9.99), a blend of seven grape varieties, is packed full of zesty citrus. Or take Sainsbury's silky and smooth 2022 Taste the Difference Lisboa (13.5 per cent, £7.50), a hugely consistent wine with abundant dark fruit and spice.

Good value doesn't have to mean cheap. The Wine Society's 2022 Pedra a Pedra Branco from the Douro (11.5 per cent, £13.50), a crisp, tangy white, perfectly demonstrates the huge leap in quality that

Portuguese whites have taken in recent years. Another region on the up is the Dão in the north, where the vines are sheltered by mountains and planted on granite soil. They produce elegant, expressive reds made primarily from the old port grape touriga nacional, as well as a small number of increasingly crisp, light whites ■

2020 Torre de Ferro Reserva (13.5%) Lidl, £7.49 This cracking-value red is ideal for barbecues and casual meals. It's supple and uncomplicated, with succulent dark fruit.

2021 The Wine Atlas Jaen Dão (13%) Asda, £7 Made from the little-known jaen grape, this silky, medium-bodied red has plenty of ripe, dark cherry and a pleasing juicy finish.

2023 Maria Fadista Vinho Verde (8.5%) The Sunday Times Wine Club, £8.99 or £6.99 in a mix of six A classic zesty vinho verde, exploding with citrus. Ideal for summer.

2023 Loved & Found Cerceal (12.5%) Waitrose, £8.99 Produced in the south of the Dão at high altitude from the cerceal grape, this crisp dry white has plenty of vitality.

2021 Crasto Douro (13.5%) The Wine Society, £11.95 A wonderful, fragrant red with black berries and dark fruity aromas, finishing with a blast of dry, savoury flavour.

2022 Quinta de la Rosa Reserva (12.5%) Berry Bros & Rudd, £20.50 Made from a blend of native grape varieties, this is a fresh, citrusy white with a smooth finish.

Bargain of the week

2022 Bordeaux AOP France (13.5%) Lidl, £5.29 There has been a glut of reds in Bordeaux and this claret is oaky, smooth — and ridiculously cheap.





What's really in our tap water — and is bottled better for us? *Simon Usborne reports*

When suspected animal faeces entered damaged water pipework in Devon in May, it left a nasty taste in the mouth for the residents of Brixham. Dozens became ill in the town after ingesting a parasite and thousands were told to boil their tap water while the network was flushed.

It was a rare case of contamination of the water we draw into our homes, but raised questions at a time when water companies are already facing intense scrutiny. What is in tap water — and why does it vary across regions? And should we all be switching to bottled?

Hard v soft

Hard water has a high mineral content, whereas soft has fewer minerals. Minerals change the way water reacts to soaps: you'll get more of a lather with soft water, while hard water leaves minerals behind as limescale. Which type comes out of your

tap depends largely on the geology of the area where it is processed, and factors such as whether it has recently fallen as rain (surface water) or spent ages percolating among rocks (groundwater).

“Surface water typically comes from rivers, lakes and reservoirs and may taste earthier, while groundwater often comes from underground and may have more of a mineral taste,” says Francis Hassard, a reader in water microbiology at Cranfield University. “For Southern Water, 73 per cent of the water will be groundwater, whereas if you live in Wales, it's only 4 per cent.” Surface water tends to be softer, while groundwater is exposed to rocks, creating high levels of calcium and magnesium, and is more likely to be hard.

Healthwise, there is some evidence that harder water can contribute to dry skin and hair (if you notice this, slather on the moisturiser and conditioner). On the other hand, due to its higher mineral content, it can make it easier to get your daily recommended allowance of magnesium and calcium. Those

FITNESS

Glued to the telly? Try “sofarobics”

As Team GB go for gold in Paris, many of us will be watching Dina Asher-Smith's record-breaking sprints, Tom Daley's precision dives or the gravity-defying elegance of the gymnastics squad, thinking: “I really ought to do some exercise.” We resolve to join a gym. Then we have a biscuit, well aware that the motivation is fleeting, *writes Rosamund Dean.*

Put the McVitie's down. You don't need to join a gym to be fit — in fact, you can do it in front of the TV. Think of it as sofarobics. “Short bursts of exercise can be as effective as a longer session,” says Lavina Mehta, a personal trainer and the author of *The Feel Good Fix*. Where to start? “Ideally, you'll include a bit of everything: stretch, mobility, cardio, strength and balance, but you can pick and mix what you feel like.”

On your marks, get set — go.

Stretch

Try a seated spinal twist. Sit with your feet flat on the floor and place your right hand on the back of the chair, your left on your right knee. Inhale, lengthen your spine and exhale as you twist right and look over your right shoulder. Hold for a few breaths, then repeat on the other side.



whose water is soft may want to add a supplement. Soft water has higher levels of sodium, albeit at a fraction of recommended daily amounts.

What you prefer, though, is probably down to conditioning. I'm a loyal south Londoner — the water in Peckham is harder than Jason Statham.

What chemicals are we drinking?

In terms of treatment, metals might need to be removed from hard water, while chemicals added to surface water cause unwanted particles and material to clump together and sink so they can easily be removed. Water is also filtered through ever finer gravel, sand and carbon to remove impurities, and disinfected with chlorine and ultraviolet light treatment to make it safe for us to drink.

Fluoride, another naturally occurring mineral, is adjusted to 1mg per litre to help protect our tooth enamel. Trace amounts of the chemical orthophosphate are then added to inhibit the corrosion of lead pipes.

Failures are highly unusual in the UK. "Globally, modern water treatment has been credited for adding 30-plus years to the average life expectancy," Hassard says.



Doran Binder bottles water directly from a source beneath his pub in the Peak District

“Modern water treatment has been credited for adding 30-plus years to life expectancy”

Tap v bottle

Tap is not to everyone's taste. We guzzle about ten million bottles of water a day — enough to fill three Olympic swimming pools — for as little as 20p a litre for a bulk supermarket own brand, up to £2.20 for a litre bottle of imported Fiji “artesian” water. That's more than 1,000 times the cost of tap water, which Hassard says ranges from about 0.1p to 0.3p a litre. Then there's the environmental

impact of production, shipping and all that plastic.

“But I'm not interested in drinking other people's urinated medication,” says Doran Binder, the founder of Crag Spring Water, a boutique bottling plant in rural Cheshire. He's referring to pharmaceutical contamination, which comes from sources such as birth control pills and agriculture. But the Drinking Water Inspectorate cites studies finding that “the

very low detectable levels of pharmaceuticals in drinking water do not pose an appreciable risk to human health”.

Binder never drinks tap. Using cans or reused glass, his team of 15 bottles about 1,000 litres a day from a spring under the struggling pub he bought following a divorce in 2016. He says his water is rich in minerals and unusually pure.

I order a case of Crag cans, which look a bit like macho energy drinks. The water tastes very different from the piped Peckham stuff: there's a touch of minerality yet it's also as silky as an Hermès scarf. “That's weird!” says my six-year-old son. “It doesn't really make a noise when it goes down my throat.”

Would I pay £2.30 a litre for Crag, or anything else that hasn't sloshed through a water company's treatment plant? Hassard says bottled water is subject to less rigorous checks than drinking water because it's regulated as a food product. For all that I deplore the state of the water industry and the stuff discharged further along the cycle, I decide to stick with tap ■

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DOM MCKENZIE FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE. GETTY IMAGES, SHUTTERSTOCK

Mobility and balance

Release any tension in the hips before you try the cardio section of your workout. Kneeling on the floor, with your toes together and knees wide, push your hips back towards your toes and relax the upper body. This is a good move if you've been sitting in front of the TV for a while.



Cardio

Now to feel the burn. Move the coffee table aside and run on the spot, lifting your knees as high as you can, until you're hot and breathless. Star jumps are great for cardio too, as is marching on the spot while punching your arms. Try doing a short circuit including these moves during an ad break.



Upper body strength

Use dumbbells, tins of beans (or beer cans) to add weight. Lucie Cowan, a master trainer at Third Space, suggests alternating between biceps curls, a shoulder press — where you raise the weights straight up over your shoulders — and triceps extensions, lowering one weight behind your head.



Lower body strength

Mehta recommends heel raises: stand on tiptoes for a few moments before lowering down. “They work the soleus muscle in the calf, which helps to absorb excess blood sugar.” The soleus muscle can't store it, so draws it from the bloodstream, lowering your blood-sugar levels ■





DRIVING • Jeremy Clarkson

A luxury hatchback — minus the luxury



REVIEW LEXUS LBX

If you are very old, you will remember the Renault 5. But you will almost certainly not remember a version of it called the Monaco. Which is weird as it was a very important car, a car that launched a brilliant trend, a trend that never caught on. Even though it should have done.

Back then in the late Eighties, all the mainstream carmakers were engaged in a mad rush to see who could make the fastest, grippiest, maddest hot hatchback. Hot hatchbacks were massively popular because they cost no more to repair than

a normal hatchback, but they went like stink. They were sports cars into which you could fit a dog and some children. They were brilliant.

And it was important for a carmaker to say that theirs was the fastest of them all. So they were using trick differentials and four-wheel drive and as many valves per cylinder as would fit. And then along came MG, who fitted the hot Maestro with a turbocharger the size of a wheelie bin. It was so big the car would go from 0 to 60mph only once. Then it would explode.

Over in Japan Daihatsu announced it had managed to extricate 100 horsepower from a one-litre engine, while in Europe Lancia and Ford were engaged in a bare-chested festival of lunacy with the increasingly mad Delta Integrale and the Escort

Cosworth. These were fantastic, heady, delirious times. A period when the bars of Fulham echoed every night to relentless arguments about which was best: the Volkswagen Golf GTI or the Peugeot 205 GTi.

Then along came Renault, no strangers to the idea of hot hatchbacks. They made some stunners, including the mid-engined 5 that wasn't even a hatchback at all. But they realised that not everyone who wanted a hatchback wanted to go round corners at 400mph. Some people, they figured, would prefer some comfort and quietness. So they came up with the long-forgotten 5 Monaco.

Here was a small, convenient hatchback that, instead of red stripes, fat tyres and a rear spoiler the size of a squash court, had thick carpets and sumptuous leather upholstery.

It was for BMW or Mercedes drivers who wanted something small and convenient for urban life but didn't want to sacrifice the cow and wool-based luxury. It was a clever idea, and it completely didn't catch on.

I've racked my brains and since it was axed the only follow-up I can think of was the hilarious(ly awful) Aston Martin Cygnet. But this wasn't the same, really. It was a Toyota IQ with an Aston badge and it was created not for someone who wanted a pint-sized supercar but solely to get round one of the EU's more hare-brained regulations on emissions.

I don't get it. You don't pay big money for a Rolls-Royce because it's big but because it's quiet and cossetting and it rides beautifully. And a small car can be like that. So why has the small luxury car never become a thing?

It's so cramped that when I climbed aboard I got a good idea of what it's like to be corned beef



All of which brings me on to the Lexus LBX. This, in theory, is an ordinary Toyota Yaris Cross full of luxury Lexus goodness. A modern-day Monaco. For the person who wants everything they would normally get from a big car. In a small car.

They've certainly made a lot of effort on small unseen things to disguise the fact that it started out in life as a Yaris on stilts. But it does have the same engine, I'm afraid. A hybridised 1.5-litre with three cylinders. The full Prius. Self-charging. Super-economical. And not interesting. Or powerful. Or fun in any way. It's all about exploiting the medium. Medium throttle movements. Medium power

delivery. Medium braking.

If you put your foot down — and let's be honest, you won't because this isn't that sort of car — you'd go from 0 to 62mph in 9.2 seconds. Which is about what ordinary hatchbacks were doing in 1989. If you want for it to take longer than that, there's a four-wheel-drive version that's noticeably slower.

It's fair to say this car was not designed with the motoring enthusiast in mind, a point hammered home by the CVT gearbox. If you want a lot of noise and a sense that the clutch is slipping, this technology works very well. But I don't. It's odd and annoying and makes everything much louder than

is necessary, which is not what you want in a "luxury" car.

Handling? Well, I didn't crash so it's got some, I suppose, but the steering, the brakes and the cornering are all mostly forgettable. Actually, they must be because I've forgotten about them already and I only drove the car yesterday.

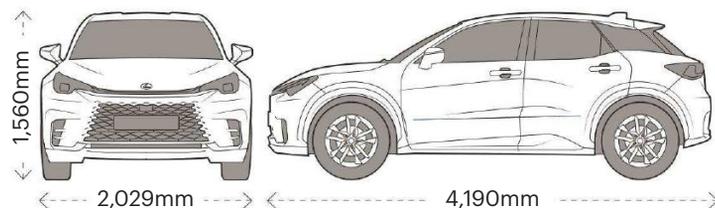
But, and this is where things get important, none of this mechanical mush matters one jot because the Lexus is not aimed at the hard-charging youth. It's aimed, as I said, at the person who wants all the accoutrements of gracious living that you get in a large car in a package that's easy to park.

Yes, but it fails on this front too. Sure, you get a snazzy stereo and a clever air filter and a camera washer and a head-up display, but these are gimmicks and gadgets. If items like this defined "luxury", then your local branch of Dixons would be the most luxurious place on earth, and it isn't. In the LBX your feet don't sink into the carpets, the leather isn't soft and it all feels a bit gloomy. And gloominess is not something that's ever been associated with luxury either.

Sure, it all feels extremely well put together, but I can't imagine that the much cheaper Yaris is full of cross-threaded screws and wonky wiring. Which brings me on to the price. The front-wheel-drive car I tested is north of £35,000, but if you go for even more gadgets and four-wheel drive you can take that to beyond £40,000. Which might just about be justifiable if it was a nice place to sit. And it isn't, principally because it's so cramped. When I climbed aboard I got a pretty good idea of what it might be like to be corned beef. Things are even worse in the back, where there's basically not enough room for any known human life form. The boot's tiny too.

So what we have here is a small, expensive car that's not fast, exciting or trimmed to anything like the right level. I'd say if you wanted an eco-box like this you'd be far better off buying a Toyota Yaris. Or, if you really do like the idea of a small luxurious car, comb the second-hand websites. Because I saw a Renault 5 Monaco on there last week for £5,000 ■

The Clarkometer Lexus LBX Premium Plus



Engine 1490cc, 3 cylinders, turbo, petrol, plus electric motor
Power 134bhp (combined) **Torque** 136 lb ft (combined)
0-62mph 9.2sec **Top speed** 106mph **Fuel** 61.4mpg **CO₂** 103g/km
Weight 1,280kg **Price** £35,605 **Release date** On sale now

Jeremy's rating ★★☆☆☆

CAR CLINIC Our experts answer your questions



Q I'm buying an electric car but I worry about running out of battery on long journeys. I've heard Tesla has opened up its charging network to other types of EV. If that's right, how much does it cost?

TM, London

A Yes, even if your EV isn't a Tesla you can still use about half of all Tesla's charging points, provided your vehicle has CCS charging (the most popular type, as distinct from CHAdeMO). This is a big step forward in charging convenience for electric car owners.

Tesla was quick to snap up some of the best spots and invest in infrastructure. It has more than 150 sites across the UK and Ireland, with over 1,500 charging bays. Of those, 65 sites with 650 bays are open to other EVs.

The cost for charging per kW is 32p-63p for non-Tesla EVs, which compares with 85p/kW for Instavolt and 79p/kW for BP Pulse. For regular users it may be worth paying a monthly £8.99 "membership" fee through the Tesla app to match the price most Tesla owners pay: 24p-47p/kW.

For a full list of locations, download the Tesla app. There's also a map to view chargers and toggle between Tesla and non-Tesla charging at tesla.com/en_GB/findus ■



By Nick Rufford,
driving editor

Send questions to carclinic@sunday-times.co.uk

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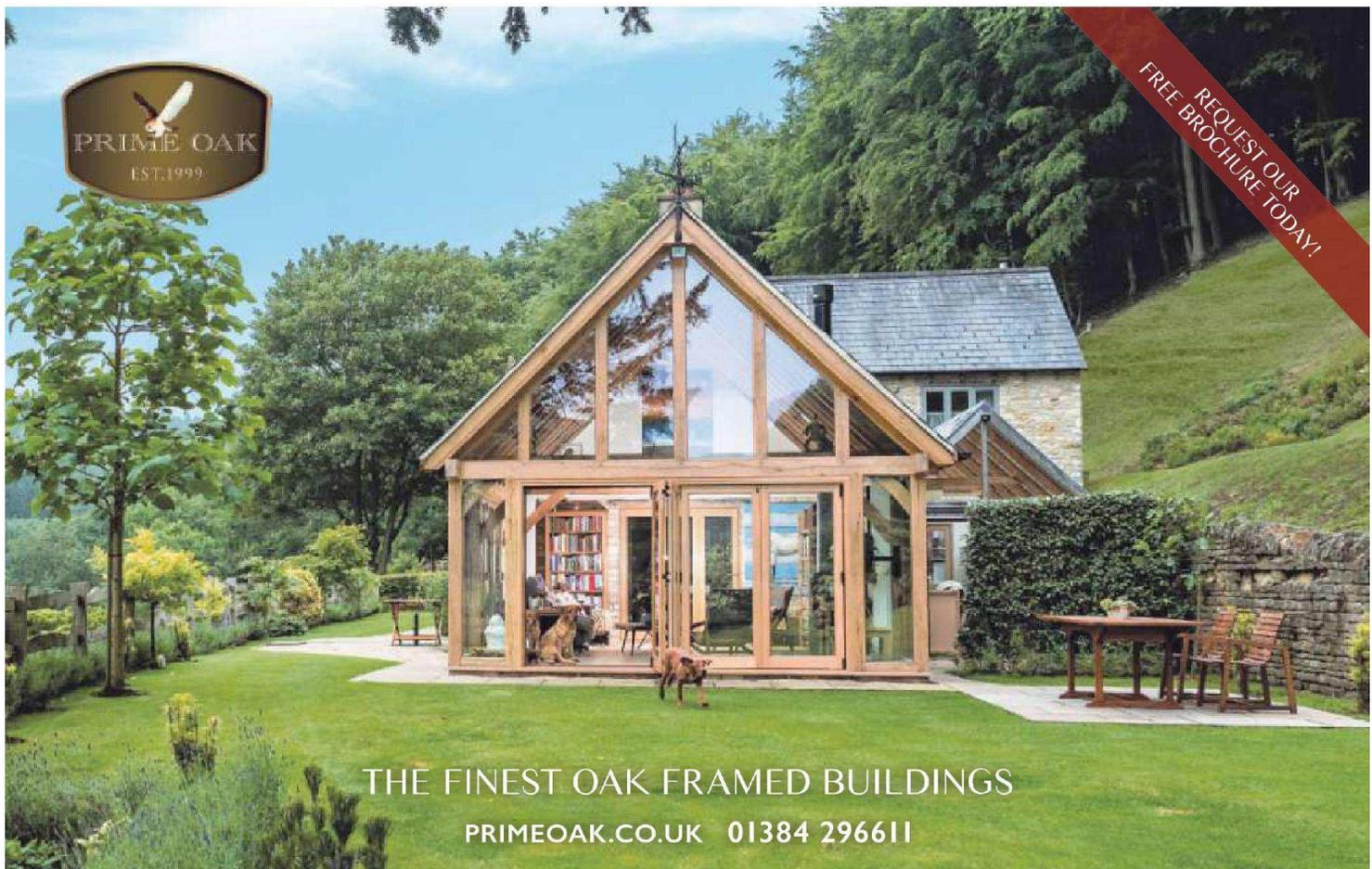
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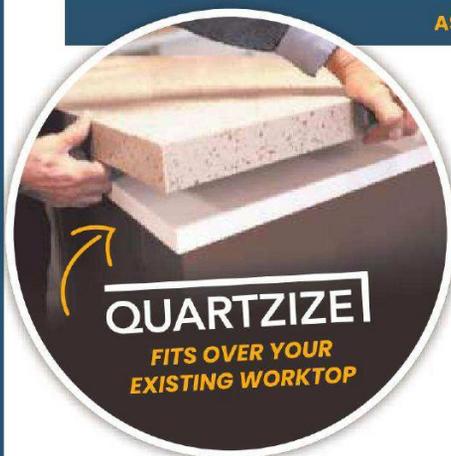
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Sandra K ★★★★★

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Nick

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A LIFE IN THE DAY

Natasha Kaplinsky

President of the British Board of Film Classification, 51

Kaplinsky was born in Brighton and read English at Oxford. She went on to work as a presenter for Sky News and to front BBC Breakfast, BBC News at Six and Five News. In 2018 Kaplinsky, her father and daughter suffered serious burns when their boat caught fire three miles offshore in Corfu. She lives in East Sussex with her husband, Justin, who works in private equity, and their teenage son and daughter.

My ideal day starts in wellingtons and ends in stilettos. I get up at 6.30 and don't really bother with breakfast — maybe a coffee, some fudge. I do like fudge. Instead I sort breakfast for everybody else. We live on a 200-acre farm. It's arable, but we have a lot of animals: six dogs, two cats, six sheep, ten ducks, thirty chickens, nine alpacas and a Highland cow.

My biggest joy in the morning is to come downstairs to the dogs who, upon seeing me, get so excited: "Oh my God! She's here! She's here!" They have an order in which they are fed and have to wait until I give them the signal. I take pride in how well trained they are.

I feel privileged that I'm able to pick and choose the work I do. I work with many charities and the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), which I love. But most days I'm on the train to London for meetings.

My problem is that my answer to everything is invariably yes. I'm often hideously overcommitted but then I absolutely love being manically busy. I actually find it



stressful not having a really packed diary. Unless I'm busy, I feel like I'm wasting my time.

I was born in the UK but my parents are South African and I grew up in Kenya. I didn't see a television until the age of eight, but the first time I did — this magical box — I knew that I wanted to work somewhere in TV.

After school I worked for Neil Kinnock when he was leader of the Labour Party, then went to Oxford and was a secretary at the BBC before someone recommended I do a screen test for TV. I presented a children's programme called *F2F* with Sacha Baron Cohen in 1996. We were both very green but even then he was a superstar

in the making. I was essentially his stooge. One time a guest he'd booked, someone called Kenny Slide, took his clothes off in front of an audience full of children. Sacha swiftly got put on gardening leave as a result. He came up with Ali G shortly after.

I've done lots of TV news presenting but after having children I knew that I needed some time away from the newsroom. Children didn't come easily for me and having waited so long to be a mum I didn't want to spend time away from them.

I don't really bother with lunch. I'm a snacker — coffee, nuts, more fudge. I have a lot of lunch meetings, so I'll eat then, but food for me is functional. I do like to keep fit. At 19 I broke my back on a boat in Italy and realised that the more exercise I do, the better I feel. Half an hour on the Peloton is the most liberating thing.

The BBFC offer came through a recruitment consultant, when they were looking for a new president in 2022. I've always been an obsessive cinemagoer and as a mother I know how important it is that children are exposed to the right kind of content. It's fascinating to watch how society changes over time. Take the recent Bob Marley biopic, *One Love*. In the past that would have received a 15 certificate because of cannabis use, but there is context here: the Rastafarian religion. Our resting state is to allow as many people as possible to see films, so we don't give them a higher rating unless we have to.

Family dinners are very important but during the week we're all in and out at different times. The children have become much better cooks than me out of necessity. They would starve otherwise. When I come in I may have some soup.

In the evening I love to watch my animals hanging out. A dog has a lot to say at the end of the day. I'm an avid bather too, no matter how late I'm home, even after midnight. That to me is the perfect end to my day ■

Interview by Nick Duerden

WORDS OF WISDOM

Best advice I was given

Stay curious, never stop questioning

Advice I'd give

Never accept no for an answer

What I wish I'd known

That fudge is addictive



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