

THE TIMES

MAGAZINE

30.11.24

I DIDN'T WANT TO BE THE FAT ONE IN BLUR

How the rock star farmer
Alex James got his mojo back

CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE

*Starring Alex's cheese
and guitar, page 70*





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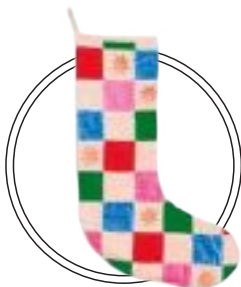
By Caitlin Moran, Jeremy Langmead, Vogue's
Chioma Nnadi and Alex James from Blur



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CAITLIN MORAN

Why am I so excited about my new tea towel rack? Is it a breakdown or a real life victory?

It's been a good month. Some really exciting things happened. I finished writing a new book. I won an award. The dog was revealed to have lost a whole, necessary kilo at her check-up – a considerable achievement, given that her primary talent is “going up to strangers and making them give her meats and/or sausages”.

Nonetheless, whenever anyone texted me to congratulate me on these things, I replied, “Yes – *and* I fitted this tea towel rack in the kitchen. Look!” And then sent them a picture of it.

I must assure you – this is in no way a fancy tea towel rack. If such a thing even exists. It's from Ikea. It might even have been put on the wall *slightly* skewwhiff. Ostensibly, it's not in any way a superlative event.

And yet, as the week went on, it continued to be the thing that excited me the most. I texted a picture of it to my daughter's boyfriend. I told my agent about it. Every morning, I said to Pete, “Man! Look at that tea towel rack! It's *really* transformed the place. I can't get over it.”

Eventually – five days into Tea Towel Rack Mania – I decided to sit down with a cup of tea, on a chair from which I could look at the tea towel rack, and work out why the tea towel rack meant *so much*. Was this obsession the start of a full-blown nervous breakdown? Or, conversely, did it mean I was actually entering some kind of visionary state – achieving an ecstatic, appreciative oneness with everything? Psychodrama – or lama? As you can see, there was a *lot* resting on this towel rack. Including six quite tatty tea towels.

Here, then, are my eventual findings.

The First Finding: it is a genuine and considerable life victory.

Every woman has a To-Do List. The washing, the shopping. Work. Food, in its various stages.

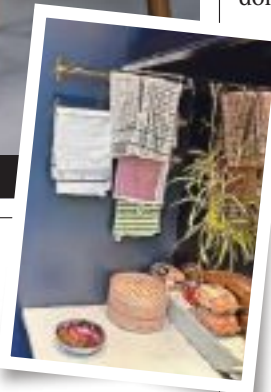
But then, below this, there is, to paraphrase Aslan, a deeper list still. Lists of things that, in rare states of total honesty, you know you will *never* get round to, like “hemming trousers so they actually fit” or “reinventing your relationship with your father”.

“Instigate tea towel rack” had been on the Deep List for three years. And was, therefore, to all intents and purposes, a dead wish. It required a trip to Ikea, *and* the purchase of a new drill bit, *and* the finding of the drill's charging cable. As the



Caitlin's tea towel rack, right

It's been on my Deep To-Do list for years, like ‘hem trousers’ or ‘reinvent relationship with father’



old Kinder advert used to go, “Three things? It's just not possible!”

However, last week, I seemed to enter the same state of powerful, manic inspiration that saw Vincent Van Gogh complete most of his major works in six weeks in Arles – ordering the rack *online*, then getting *someone else* to put up the towel rack, with *their* much *better* drill.

And so, for the first time in many years, something has gone from the Deep List to done. I now know it is possible. So, maybe I could call my father, after all.

The Second Finding: the only constant is change. I've been in this house for 21 years. I have watched 124 episodes of *Bake Off* on that sofa. I have taken in a DPD parcel for next door over 1 million times. Things are pretty predictable and same-y.

Which is why the advent of the tea towel rack is like the sudden advent of a new comet in the sky, or a giant iceberg calving from a glacier. *There is a new place in our house, now. A new co-ordinate.*

Previously, if someone asked me, “Where are my glasses?” or, “Where are my AirPods?” – which they do, *all the time* – I'd have had to say, “On the sideboard on the left-hand side of the cooker, if you are facing the cooker.” Now? Now I can just say, “By the tea towel rack.” It's like a domestic version of what3words. A new

landmark. The kitchen's Shard, or Angel of the North.

The Third Finding: the symbolism of the tea towels is unignorable. As a younger woman, I saw myself in a magnificent, galloping pony, say; or the unknowable depths of the ocean. In middle age, I definitely relate more to the tea towel. There they are, mopping up other people's problems. The older and more tattered they get, the more they can absorb. Increasingly crumpled, but the first thing everyone reaches for when things go wrong.

And so, to have given these doughty domestic battleaxes a home of their own – essentially a spa area, where they can dry out on their own, and socialise with other like-minded high-absorption fabrics – feels like they have now entered Towel Valhalla. Their valour *has* been noticed. There is a prize at the end of all this. If you put in those years of service, there is a reward at the end of it.

One day, I'll get to hang out somewhere cool all day. *Ich bin ein tea towel.* ■

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What I've learnt James Haskell

*James Haskell, 39, is a former rugby union player who was a flanker for Wasps and represented England 77 times. He retired from professional rugby in 2019. Alongside Mike Tindall and Alex Payne, he presents the podcast *The Good, the Bad & the Rugby*. He is separated from Chloe Madeley, with whom he has a daughter, and lives in London.*

I'm a bit like Marmite. I have a larger-than-life character. Someone with whom I worked said they wanted to punch me in the face when they first met me, until they got to know me. I'm a team player.

I don't like most people anyway. Someone wrote online saying, "If James would shut up, *The Good, the Bad & the Rugby* would be a great podcast." Some other guy said, "I listen to Alex [Payne] and Mike [Tindall]. They've got good points. The rest, I mute." The truth is, I don't care that much.

My relationship [with Chloe Madeley] was not working. I never intended to get separated and we tried very hard to ensure that didn't happen. Chloe is utterly brilliant – she's intelligent and she's a fantastic mum. Our differences have to be put to one side.

The tabloids play very fast and loose with the truth. Unfortunately now, with my separation, I'll be photographed with numerous girls and I'm not dating any of them. I can't do anything about it.

I've spent time with the royals. Some aren't as great as others. They do amazing work – but they're also a modern family that's very dysfunctional. I went to Harry and Meghan's wedding. I went to Mike and Zara's wedding. To those who want to get rid of the monarchy – once they're gone, they're gone. There's no way back from that, so remember that they serve an important role. I love what they do.

I told a joke about when I was at Mike's wedding: Prince Andrew was sweating up a storm on the dancefloor, but then he realised that everyone was over 18 so he left. It was inappropriate, but it was funny.

Mike and Zara's wedding was full of rugby players. It was the perfect combination of ceremony and romance, coupled with the fact that both of them like to enjoy themselves. Did I wake up the next morning on my bed still in my black tie thinking, "Jesus, what did I do last night?" Potentially, yes.

I was diagnosed with ADHD at eight. I was put on Ritalin.

I didn't always love rugby. I wanted to be in the army or drive a JCB. My mum lied about my age to sign me up for Maidenhead Rugby Club when I was five. I only started to enjoy the sport when I was 14.

I grew up in a pretty privileged environment. My parents worked themselves to the bone to provide my brother and me with



PORTRAIT
Chelsea White

'I've spent time with the royals. Some aren't as great as others. They're a very dysfunctional family'

INTERVIEW Elisabeth Perlman

a lifestyle that ultimately caused them financial issues.

I was suspended from Wellington College, not because I was rebellious, but because I was stupid. My friend was sleeping with a girl. He asked me if I had a camera. I said, "Yeah." We set it up in a cupboard. Obviously, that was wrong. One of our classmates sold the story and then we were on the front pages. Would I do it again? No. But it's difficult as a 17-year-old in a boarding school because you just think something will be funny.

I put off seeing a psychologist. I had visions of laying on a chaise longue crying about my childhood. But it was brilliant.

Nobody wants a fat rugby player – there's enough of them around. At the height of my career I was tracking my calories and sticking to a strict diet. A lot of my public

profile is still wrapped up with my appearance, even after my retirement. There's a certain level of vanity there. I was getting into the best shape I've ever been in, but I tore the bicep off my bone picking up Mike Tindall for a stupid TikTok video. So that put paid to that. **Forget the Wim Hof method – try the Haskoff method.** Get into a hot pool, put your feet up, have a minute, do some breathing, and then you're absolutely sweet. I'm saying I want to invent a new trend – warm baths!

I've had my fair share of heartbreak. Ultimately, people don't change, and if it's not right, it will never be right. But you have to find your own way through it. ■

The Good, the Bad & the Rugby: Unleashed by Alex Payne, James Haskell and Mike Tindall (HarperCollins, £22) is available now. To order a copy, go to timesbookshop.co.uk

**'IT'S THE ROCK STAR CLICHÉ:
YOU EITHER DIE OR END UP
LIVING ON A FARM'**





Alex James, 56,
photographed on his
farm in Oxfordshire
by Tom Jackson.
Styling: Lloyd Almond

The rifts between the members of Blur were legendary. But when the possibility of getting back together for a gig at Wembley was suggested, Alex James jumped at the chance. Now he's written a book about what happened next – including a desperate bid to get into his original Britpop trousers. Polly Vernon meets him on his farm in the Cotswolds

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s it more dangerous to be a rock star or a farmer, I ask Alex James, who is both. He's been the bass guitarist in Blur, the band that built Britpop, for 36 years (he joined Blur in 1988, aged 19; he's now 56), and he's owned and run 200 acres of land in Kingham in the Cotswolds since 2003, producing cheese and, latterly, booze, keeping

chickens and ducks and running an annual festival. His farm neighbours those of Jeremy Clarkson and Carole "Daylesford" Bamford.

"Oh my God, farmer," James says. "Farmer." James has nearly died twice on his farm. The first time was when he and his wife, the film producer Claire Neate, tried cattle farming. "I was going to Chelsea Flower Show. I put on my Versace suit. Walking down to the station – it's a nice, breezy walk – and the steers [young, neutered bulls] had been moved. I saw them in the corner of the field. Thought, 'F***, the steers are in there.' They're the only things you meet in the countryside that really aren't scared of you. They just stare straight back at you.

"So they were right in the other corner. I thought, 'Well, there's a pond in the middle, barbed wire fence round it. If it does all go to shit, I should be able to make it there before I get trampled to death.' And I was exactly halfway and they all started running towards me. Couple of dozen. Weigh more than a tonne, these things. F***ing huge. Ran for my life; made it. Put my hand on the fence post, vaulted the barbed wire fence. Up to my knees in the pond in my Versace suit. Completely exhilarated, completely out of breath." He'd had to phone Neate to come and get him.

The other time, James had been getting into shape in advance of last summer's Blur reunion tour. He hadn't wanted to be the fat one in Blur, he tells me, so, "I really got into running at night with the head torch on. It's like floating in space. I got some spikes. It was like f***ing flying! One day, one of the neighbours said, 'There's a lot of deer in those woods.' He's got a high seat, where you sit up waiting to shoot the one you want to eat. He said, 'I was just about to take a shot and you ran right through my telescopic sight...'"

Blimey.

"And we've got both of the UK's venomous spiders in the tomato shed. The false widow's everywhere and also the woodlouse spider. They're really nasty. They've got these sharp little fangs."

We're sitting – safely – in the farm's TV room, painted snugly dark (according to the instructions of the couple's five children), smoking (him) and talking (both of us). We go back. We worked together as columnists on another newspaper in the Noughties. This is my second time at



Alex James, Damon Albarn, Graham Coxon and Dave Rowntree at the premiere of the Blur documentary *To the End* earlier this year

'I WAS ALMOST SHOT ON A NIGHT RUN. MY NEIGHBOUR WAS AIMING AT DEER'



The band photographed by Kevin Cummins in 1993

his very big house in the country. The first, we estimate, was 16 years ago, based on me remembering that Geronimo, the eldest of the kids, was 4 (he's now 20, well over 6ft, a DJ with management), and their twins, Artemis and Galileo, were 2 (Artemis, 18, has just made me coffee). Their daughters – Sable, 15, and Beatrix, 14 – had not yet been born.

James and Neate bought the farm on a whim while on honeymoon. They'd decided they wanted to live in the Cotswolds, had viewed some places before seeing it – then a ramshackle, barely functioning semi-wreck – and, "The minute we got here, we both just felt the same. We didn't want to leave." Now? It is breathtaking. Sloping and sweeping,

unutterably lovely, carefully developed, clearly a working farm, a place of purpose. It looks, I think, like the chic, fashionable nearby members' retreat Soho Farmhouse wishes it looked.

It is ruinously costly – Neate and James both tell me they never don't worry about money. "We nearly went bankrupt so many times," Neate tells me. But they make it work. They make cheese, they're pivoting into booze – they've developed a sparkling wine range called Britpop – and they've built a glamorous suite of offices that are rented out to glamorous people (among them the extremely fashionable illustrator Luke Edward Hall and his design consultant husband, Duncan Campbell, and a matchmaking agency ➔

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so high end that it doesn't have a website). Neate's growing profitable heritage tomatoes in the spider-ridden shed ("The secret is Carole Bamford's fertiliser"), they're renting out a field to Bamford's sheep, and everywhere you turn you see infrastructure for the Big Feastival, the very successful food and music festival Neate and James hold each summer.

I'm here to talk to James about his new book. *Over the Rainbow* documents a year in his life, 2022-23, during which Blur reformed, played two sell-out gigs at Wembley and went on an international tour, and James, Neate and their children planned and staged 2023's Big Feastival. The book starts in extreme leisure, with a riotous, decadent round of parties – the Cotswolds at Christmas don't sound entirely removed from the version in Jilly Cooper's *Rivals*. If there isn't as much illicit bonking, there's certainly a great deal of people getting so drunk they do the splits when they really shouldn't, and everyone using everything as an ashtray and no one minding... After which, things get busy.

It is a gorgeous book. Warm and funny and generous. James is a true writer; good at it, and not just for a celebrity. I can hear your voice when I read it, I tell him – the trick to writing really well. "Ah, cheers, Polly," he says. He beams.

Right, so, Blur. The four-piece band that set the tone, literally and metaphorically, for everything joyous and cool and sexy and arty in Nineties Britain back in its now unthinkable luxurious Blairite era. The band that, alongside their nemesis Oasis, made us feel so good about being British. That band.

"Yes," James says.

In the book, when the live music management guy first sounds you out about a potential reunion, he just says the word "Wembley" and you reply, "Yes." He thinks you mean, "Do tell me more," but what you actually mean is, "Yes. I'll do it. I'm in."

"Yes. It's Wembley. I'm in. End of conversation. It's *Wembley*."

The mooted Wembley gig would be the biggest Blur had ever played, an accomplishment by any standards, more than enough to make a middle-aged musician offer up an unconditional "yes" although, actually, James's "yes" wasn't just about Wembley. He'd been longing for a rapprochement. Blur, like any fantastically successful band (and presumably a few unsuccessful ones), have had a rollercoaster of a time on a personal level – like a desperately rocky marriage between four people who don't live together any more and really only still love each other in theory half the time.

Blur comprises James, drummer Dave Rowntree, singer-songwriter Damon Albarn and lead guitarist Graham

'I THINK ABOUT BLUR EVERY DAY. NOT BEFORE I CLEAN MY TEETH, BUT...'



James with his wife, Claire Neate, and their three sons. Below, from left: with neighbour Jeremy Clarkson and on stage with Jamie Oliver at the Big Feastival in 2016



Coxon. Coxon and Albarn – best friends in childhood and mercurial geniuses according to anyone you care to ask, not least Alex James – have fallen out epically, over and over again, from the point they first started hitting the big time. They also fell out with James and Rowntree over everything from creative differences to James's playboy lifestyle. (James cheerfully refers to his pre-married self as "the number one slag in Soho", a phase of which Coxon did not, apparently, approve.) While Blur never broke up, they have been on extensive, multiple hiatuses over the three decades since their Nineties heyday. The individual members have gone solo and worked with other people. Rowntree became a Labour politician. Coxon dealt with his alcoholism. Years have gone by when no one really spoke to anyone else – apart from James who, like a diligent, eternally hopeful sibling, tried to keep the channels of communication open. "Sent them cheese at Christmas, messages on their birthdays, yeah..."

And...

"It was making me sad. Because we'd had a meeting a couple of years previously..."

This was circa 2021, and according to the book the meeting went horribly wrong. "Yeah."

How wrong? Screaming, accusations, fisticuffs? "I've sort of blocked it out. But we... couldn't. Weren't really communicating at all. I think about Blur every day. Or someone reminds me. I thought, 'I'll make a mental note of when the first time in the day I think about Blur is.' It's not before I clean my teeth, but around when I'm in the bath. Always before I've had my coffee. Always early. One of them, or something about it, will come into my head. A memory or a song or, 'He's being annoying,' or just *something*. It's part of my consciousness, and it was actually making me sad. So to get that phone call it was like, 'Oh, hallelujah! Yes! Go!'"

Unfortunately the other members of Blur were not as instantly charmed by the idea of reuniting, and so a meeting was

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proposed. "I wasn't entirely sure what there was to discuss," James writes. "A discussion sounded quite tricky, in fact."

"Oh no, another meeting," he tells me. "I got there. I saw Dave. Dave and I [always] tend to be the first ones."

Eager?

"No, just... f***ing turn up on time. Get the basic stuff right. Dave was really pale. Looked really sad. Said, 'I don't think it's going to happen.'"

Eventually, Coxon and Albarn arrived. "There was a little bit of awks. Five minutes of, 'How's this going to go?' But all the gear was set up and we played *She's So High*, which is the very first song we wrote at our first rehearsal. We wrote the song the first time we were all in a room together. The song that we still play today. It was just absolutely instant. The minute we start playing together, the world falls away and we're all 19 years old again, the same as we were in that room, and it's blissful and joyous."

Blur formed in London at the end of 1988 because James joined. Albarn, Coxon and Rowntree were already playing together. James made it four. Alex James made it Blur.

He was born in 1968 and raised in Bournemouth. His dad, Jason, was a sales director, his mum, Kelly, raised him and his younger sister, Deborah. ("Mum and Dad would much rather I'd been an accountant, until Blur started getting written about, by which point they were very pleased to tell all their friends," he said in an interview in 2011.)

He started playing guitar as a kid after becoming obsessed by a VHS of the Beatles film *Help!*. At 18, he went to Goldsmiths College in London to study French. There, he became friends with Coxon. "Graham was the first person I saw when I arrived," he tells me. "I was very lucky."

Coxon introduced him to Albarn and Rowntree. They had that first miraculous rehearsal, during which they wrote *She's So High*. In 1990 they were signed, after which they set out – shakily; Blur's was not an effortless ascendance – towards stardom, which they finally achieved unequivocally in 1994 with the album *Parklife*. Albarn, Coxon, Rowntree and James became massive stars, the biggest in the country, as big – as rich and famous and adored – as it got in the UK in the Nineties. They stayed stars even as internal ructions sent them spinning off on different paths.

Despite – or perhaps because of – which, one session in a rehearsal room, one play-through of *She's So High*, and they all said "yes" to Wembley.

Tickets sold out in five minutes ("Welllll, they say that. It takes about a week for that to happen, because they do it in presales"), so they thought they'd add a second night.

'THE MINUTE WE START PLAYING, THE WORLD FALLS AWAY AND WE'RE 19 AGAIN'



James on his farm

"I was walking into Winter Wonderland when I got that call. 'Do you think we should add another night?' The first thing Claire said was, 'Harry Styles is doing four.' Keeping it real."

But when Blur finally did get back on stage together, it was, James says, magical.

Is it the best feeling in the entire world? Does nothing else compare? Even come close?

"No. Well, actually, I tell you what: you know when you're in the car and *Uptown Funk*'s on and you're singing your head off and it feels brilliant? It just feels like that. It feels *exactly* like that."

Wembley was also, James tells me, the first time his children were impressed by him.

"Oh yeah. 'It was so brilliant, Dad.' 'Well, Festival's good as well, and cheese?' 'Yes, but Dad, that was...' Normally it's just, go in there in the morning, 'F*** off, fatty.'"

Regarding 'fatty': much of *Over the Rainbow* details James's efforts to lose weight for the tour. He hires a trainer, Angela, who's still working with him and Neate – due the following morning at 8am in fact, only James keeps trying to get Neate to cancel her – and starts substituting meals for home-brewed broth. He pins up in the office his "Britpop trousers", the pair he wore in the Nineties, as inspiration – he's determined to get back into them.

Was that a matter of vanity or health? "Oh, vanity, absolutely. I mean, I didn't need to be told. It wasn't a cry for help. We run a food festival. I make cheese. I was just happy. It was happy fat. But there's a hard line. You've absolutely got to be ready for photography."

You didn't want to be the fattest one in Blur?

"If you're not the fattest or the drunkest, you're fine."

James did get back into his Britpop trousers for Wembley.

The tour ended, hugely successfully, and James made enough money out of it to convert another barn into an annexe to house the kids and a grandparent. "It's all gone now," he says of the Blur dosh. You don't strike me as especially money driven, I say. "I've been rich, I've been poor. Rich is definitely better, but there are so many other things more important than money."

What does he make of the government's introduction of inheritance tax on farmers?

"That is a kick in the nuts, isn't it? I've faced worst. But yes, not great."

How does he get on with his neighbour Jeremy Clarkson? The broadcaster, journalist and semi-accidental farmer's advocate has been very vocal about how the inheritance tax rule is "shafting" farmers.

"Genuinely, I f***ing love him to bits. I absolutely love him."

(Earlier, Neate told me that she regularly ships her tomatoes to Clarkson's farm shop because Clarkson's partner, Lisa Hogan, who runs it, has a well-documented problem with ensuring all the goods have been produced locally, something on which the council insists. Neate's tomatoes help tip the balance.)

Didn't Clarkson nearly die recently?

"Yes." In October, Clarkson had two emergency stents fitted to improve blood flow to his heart. "And then he was like, 'Marco Pierre White's coming for lunch. Do you want to come too?' So, OK, you've gone on a massive diet, stopped drinking, you invite the best chef in history and a f***ing notorious caner for lunch? Literally the next day?"

I ask how he feels about Oasis, who will reunite for some Wembley gigs next year. Blur and Oasis went into battle in the mid-Nineties for some sort of musical and cultural supremacy; they released records on the same day, and Albarn went on *News at Ten* to discuss it all. How fabricated or how honestly felt it was, and how much of a marketing ploy, has never been clear. Though

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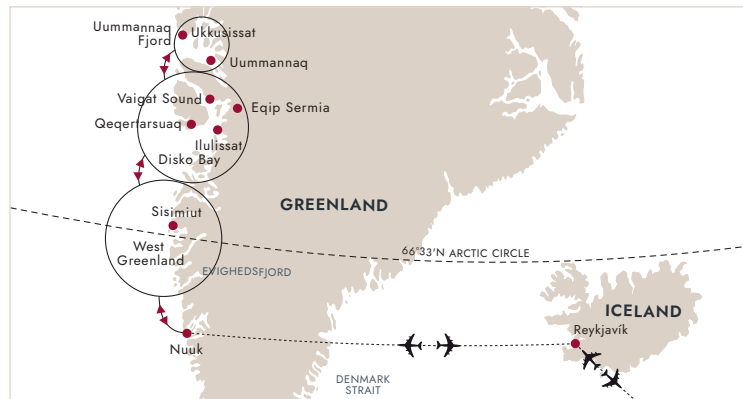
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BEST ADVENTURE CRUISE OPERATOR

James does seem a bit chilly where Oasis are concerned.

They're just cashing in, aren't they, I say.

"I'm delighted for them," he replies. Will he go?

"I don't think so. I saw them play in a pub in San Francisco in 1994. They were great. I'd go back to that one. It was good. They both really had something."

But this is about as arch, brittle, cool, as Alex James is capable of being. There's a bit in his book where one of his friends, Dom, says to him, "You know why I like you, Alex? Cos you're happy. I can't be dealing with sad people." This is, I think when I read it, very true. James is definitely the only famous person I've met who's capable of sitting in companionable silence. He thinks he gets it from his dad. "He had a younger sibling who died. He was evacuated to Wales in the Second World War as a child. He was the most contented, easygoing [man]."

Has James ever felt dark, bleak, low?

"I think when I was younger, didn't have a family and was basically richer than Croesus... I think there was probably some existential angst then."

Being No 1 slag in Soho didn't make you happy?

"No. But the minute we got here, the existential angst just went. The farm kind of saved me. I thought this was a kind of reckless, daring, romantic leap into the unknown: moving to a farm. It's just the next cliché in the book of clichés, isn't it? In a band, you either die or end up living on a farm, don't you?"

We talk about what's next, which might be more Blur. Who knows. The point is, he doesn't feel sad when he remembers them early every morning any more. We talk about *Rivals*, the TV adaptation which he hasn't yet watched because he's worried it might spoil the book (it really doesn't, I reassure him). We talk about next year's Big Festival (he's already got two headline acts in place, but no, he couldn't possibly tell me who). And he tells me what he tells the kids about fame.

"Just be good at something. Don't worry about famous."

And I ask if Damon Albarn's a bit terrifying.

"Yes, in the same way that my wife's a bit terrifying. Do you know what I mean?"

Then I switch off my tape and we retire to the kitchen in the main barn, where we eat Crunchie Bits, share a bottle of his Britpop sparkling wine – the rosé, with which he is, with reason, pleased – gossip and bitch wildly, until it's time for me to catch my train back to London, with a punnet of Claire Neate's heritage tomatoes on my lap. ■

'THE OTHERS TOLD DAMON WHAT THEY WERE UP TO. I SAID I WAS TRYING TO MAKE A REALLY BIG FRAZZLE'

The four members of Blur get together to discuss a reunion

Damon Albarn and Alex James on stage in Gothenburg last year



I was quite looking forward to getting some work done. And yikes, was there work to do. Five kids, a bunch of cats and two hundred acres of exploding farmland is quite a handful.

And this year, 2023, there was more.

I've been in a band, exactly the same band with exactly the same people, since I was 19. On and off. For eight years it had been off, but completely unexpectedly, a band meeting had been called in London just prior to Christmas. The first one in years. The previous meeting was a car crash that had haunted me daily ever since, and there had been very little communication between us or with management. Until the live rep had called.

"Wembley," he'd said.

"Yes," I said. "Yes."

I meant, "Yes, I'll do it," not, "Yes, I'm listening," but the conversation didn't seem to be over.

"That's the national stadium..."

– he went on slowly, patiently, clearly, like he was talking to a child. Or an idiot – "... has made a successful application to Brent Council to stage additional live shows in July." He took a breath. For ages.

So I said, "Yes," again.

"The FA, that's Wembley's owners, has just signed it all off."

"Yes?"

"As such," he said, and he paused again, "there is now an extra slot available. At Wembley. The stadium. I think you should all try to talk about it?"

"Hmmm."

I wasn't entirely sure what there was to discuss. A discussion sounded quite tricky, in fact. It was a yes or no question, and it looked like a pretty simple "yes" to me.

I'd found my erstwhile copilot and bridge partner, drummer Dave "David" Rowntree, outside on his phone when I got to the hastily convened summit. When he saw me, he moved it away from his ear, shook his head and waved his hand across his throat.

"Don't think it's gonna happen," he whispered, and looked very sad. I don't know what he'd got wind of but he was pale and despondent, and it was cold, and London was horrible and grey and ugly and smelly.

I stood there fidgeting and smoking, shivering and nauseous, while he wrapped up his call. Then we stood there silently facing each other for a moment, minds whirring.

Was it all back on or not?

He shrugged. Then he pushed on the buzzer.

And then there we all were, all

four of us. Damon, the singer and the boss, said, "So what are you doing now?" like it was a job interview. Graham, guitar, said well, yeah, he was doing a film score for Jez Butterworth, and Dave said, oh, yeah, he was scoring a new show for Disney. And they all had records coming out.

And I said I was, well, basically trying to make a really, really big Frazzle. Really big: a sort of crispy, bacon-flavoured edible plate type of thing, but it was proving much more difficult than I had expected.

Formalities dispensed with, we got down to business. We bashed through a few songs to see how it felt, and it felt good, and less than half an hour later, to my great surprise, that was that.

I was in a band again, and we were going to play at Wembley – that's the national stadium.

And we were going to make a new album as well.

Which, once the giddy euphoria had worn off, presented numerous challenges.

That one meeting aside, it had been eight winters since the band had last played a note together. We hadn't spoken to, or even shouted at, each other for two years. And there was no guarantee that anyone else was still interested. That's something you never really know until you actually start trying to sell tickets – and we had a lot of tickets to sell. This would be our biggest ever show. Would anyone really be persuaded to go to downtown Brent on a Saturday night in summertime?

Tickets went on sale just before Christmas. Booking lines opened at 7pm. At about five past the phone rang: the whole thing had sold out and the next night was available and we should grab that as well, the agent said.

So that was all much easier than expected – and it was on that note I'd parked everything for Christmas and let my hair down. But now it was January.

I live on a farm that has 19 kitchens, where I make cheese and cider and giant crisp prototypes. I am surrounded by chefs because we spend all year devising a world-beating food festival. So, as explained, I've got my hands full, and often my mouth as well.

I had become enormously fat. Hadn't, in fact, seen my own scrotum since halfway through lockdown. It was pretty bad: Jim Morrison just before his last bath, only much older.

I had been making up for it by being funnier and kinder in my daily life, but now I had to get in decent shape. No ifs or buts. You can't point a Super Trouper at a lard-arse.

Doesn't work.

So, on January 2, I gave up smoking and stopped drinking and drove straight to Oxford to get some gym shoes at Decathlon. When I finally found the one person who seemed to work in that enormous warehouse full of enormous people – a child – I said:

"I need some running shoes type-thing."

"Who for?" he said.

"For me, actually."

"Oh! Sorry," he said.

What was perhaps most unsettling, I reflected on the drive home, was the fact that it's usually a successful career in popular music that is the trigger for excess and Fat-Elvis muppet-ward mayhem. My band, never the earliest to bed, was actually going to be the balancing factor here: I would be deploying rock'n'roll as a form of rehab, which could be tricky.

Contemplating going to the gym is quite similar to having a hangover. There's nausea. There's dread. There's a strong inclination to go to bed and watch *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.

But the good thing about going to

I swear so much and make so much noise I wouldn't be welcome in a public fitness centre. Even running around London parks, people used to give me funny looks because of all the huffing and puffing.

On we soldiered. On and on. Kettlebells, dumbbells, barbells. Pull-ups and push-ups. Weights, cardio and core. I learnt to fear any exercise with Russian or Bulgarian in its name, or spider or gorilla or donkey.

Angela would often turn up with a cheap new gym gizmo she'd found on the internet, or a huge tractor tyre or length of fat rope that she'd found in one of her sheds. We worked every single muscle until it sang, and for the entire first fortnight it was like I'd been squished by a juggernaut.

I did, in fact, break the running machine, much to Claire's annoyance, and then I broke the massage chair and I felt broken too, but the programme was working.

There are endless diets and endless different exercises, but the weight-loss formula is a very simple

I'D START GETTING FIT ON THE RUNNING MACHINE. 'YOU'RE TOO FAT TO GO ON THERE,' SAID MY WIFE

the gym is that, unlike giant Frazzles or mid to late-career albums, there is no hit and miss about it. It's absolutely guaranteed to work every time. I was going to have to hit the gym hard. I needed professional help.

Fortunately, Claire likes going to the gym and it was agreed that we'd both see a trainer twice a day, every day, until I fitted into the trousers I wore the last time Blur played together.

Cashflow was tight. Getting a trainer wasn't going to be cheap, but this was a big fat emergency. I hung the Britpop trousers above the big table in the office as a reminder.

The long journey back to my old trousers began with a gentle warm-up on the running machine.

"You're too fat to go on there, Alex. You'll break it," Claire protested.

Angela, the personal trainer, guffawed, but Claire was getting cross. And she was wearing boxing gloves.

Angela soon got used to us arguing in there. She banned us from talking about work because that was when it tended to get most heated.

But that didn't stop me shouting. And swearing. Often both at the same time. I lose all sense of self-consciousness when I am in the fat-burning zone.

one indeed: exercise more and eat less.

Eating less is the worst part.

We'd been to a so-called spa retreat in Thailand many years ago and done a week-long fast, living off nothing but broth and coconut water (with a slice of pineapple on the Wednesday), but going to Thailand wasn't a viable option.

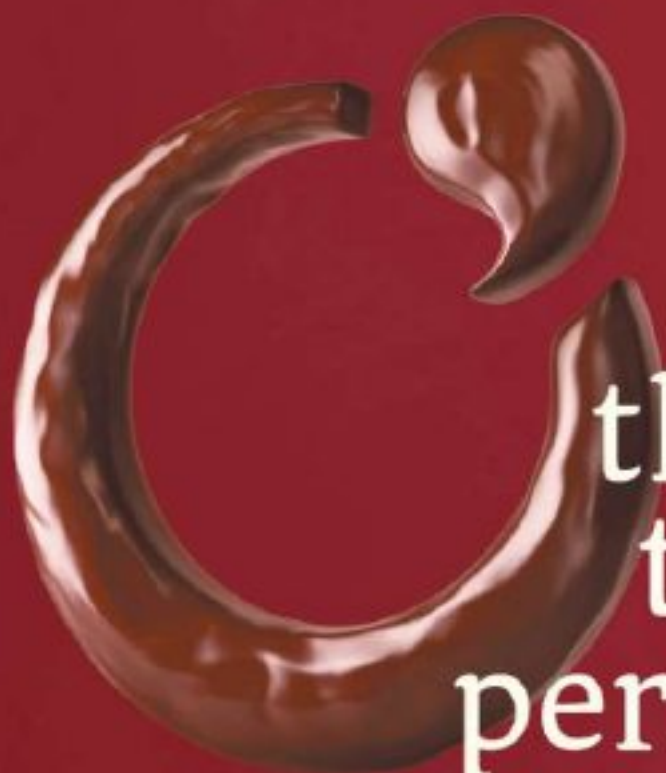
The plan was to broth it, nevertheless. We'd fattened up a couple of pigs for Christmas and the extended household had smashed through numerous roast shoulders, baked hams and a truly extraordinary amount of bacon over the holidays. There was a shed full of ripening salami that would be ready in spring and, more importantly, a chest freezer full of all the best bits: the bones and the trotters.

I was pretty excited by the idea of living on that broth. ■

Over the Rainbow: Tales from an Unexpected Year by Alex James (*Particular Books*, £18.99) is published on December 5. To order a copy, go to timesbookshop.co.uk or call 020 3176 2935. Free UK standard P&P on online orders over £25. Special discount available for Times+ members

What Alex James would like for Christmas: pages 70 and 71

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'I was anxious I might say the wrong thing unintentionally'

INSIDE THE TOXIC WORLD OF CANCEL CULTURE ON CAMPUS



The tragic death of 'cancelled' Oxford student Alexander Rogers, above, made headlines earlier this month. But undergraduates at some universities are not surprised. Alice Thomson finds out what's really going on



From left: Bella, who's recently finished university in America, Oxford graduate Charlie and Ceci, who went to Cambridge, photographed by Eva Pentel. Styling: Hannah Rogers



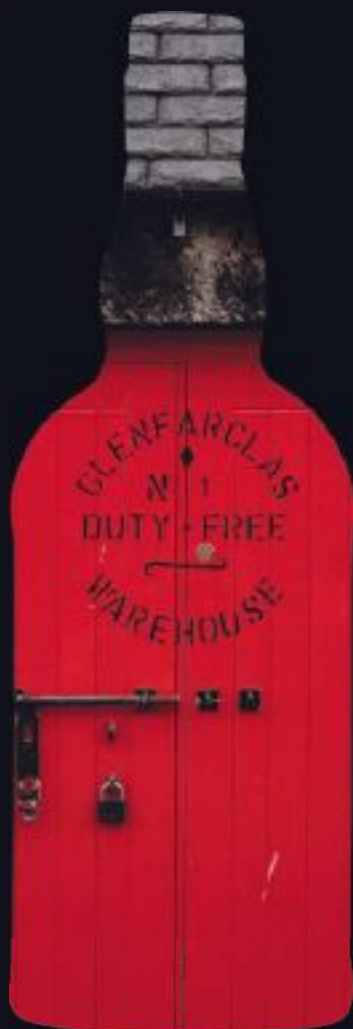
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'Cancellation' led to student suicide

Mario Ledwith

An Oxford University student killed himself after becoming the victim of "pervasive cancel culture", an inquest has found.

Alexander Rogers, 29, a third-year materials science student at Corpus Christi College, died in January days after discovering that he had been shunned by other students.

Following a request by Rogers's family, a coroner said he would write to the Department for Education to address the prevalence of cancel cul-

ture. An independent review commissioned by Corpus Christi College after his death found that cancel culture had become "established and normalised".

Dr Dominique Thompson, a GP and expert in young people's mental health, said there was a "pervasive culture of social ostracisation".

Thompson is understood to have concluded that this culture led to the "exclusion of students accused of wrongdoing without evidence".

Recording a conclusion of suicide, the coroner expressed his condolences to Rogers's family.



Corpus Christi College, where Rogers was a student, and Times coverage of the tragedy

It started with a kiss. Felix was walking a fellow student back to her room after a boozy night out at the end of his first term at Oxford. The chemistry undergraduate had drunk one too many pints to give himself the courage to ask a historian he admired in his college on a date. "I hadn't had a relationship before, but I thought we liked each other, so I clumsily made my move." It was a catastrophic mistake. Both felt embarrassed as she struggled to push him away.

The next day, he noticed students he had recently befriended sidestepping him on the street. There was silence when he entered the college bar and he was uninvited from Christmas parties. "It took me several days to realise I had been cancelled. It was horrifying and humiliating. In the end I went home and hid. My parents were so excited I had got into the best university in the world; I couldn't tell them I had become a pariah. I felt deeply ashamed but unable to apologise in case I was thrown out. No one contacted me over the holidays," he says. "The next two years were pretty grim as I clung to a few friends who were also outcasts. I'd always been socially awkward but I couldn't even face attending my graduation. I now work abroad."

Public speakers are sometimes no-platformed on campuses when students fundamentally disagree with their views, but this is a different kind of cancel culture. This is peer-on-peer policing in a highly charged atmosphere away from home about deemed misdemeanours while at university. The kind of issues that can cause students to be shunned by each other range from inappropriate sexual behaviour and rape culture to "offensive views" on Israel and Gaza, perceived sexist, racist and homophobic language or deliberately using the wrong pronouns.

Many of these allegations are serious and concerning, but students are taking matters into their own hands, acting as judge, jury and executioner. To an older

The coroner in the Rogers case has urged ministers to take cancel culture seriously

generation this can seem priggish and censorious, risking harm both to the accused and the victims, ruining young reputations while often failing to console those who may have suffered.

The recent case of this so-called cancel culture at Oxford University shows the dangerous consequences of students naming and blaming each other at such an impressionable age. Twenty-year-old Alexander Rogers killed himself within a week of being shamed by university friends earlier this year. According to the coroner, he too had become the subject of rumours after a post-pub tryst. While no formal allegation was lodged, the woman involved told friends that it had left her feeling "uncomfortable" while others explained he had "messed up" and they needed space from him. Shortly afterwards, the third-year material sciences student wrote a remorseful goodbye note describing an "unintentional but unforgivable" act.

At 20 you should be old enough to take responsibility for your actions, but nothing should be unforgivable. It's an oversimplification to assume a suicide is caused by a single precipitating event. But the coroner, Nicholas Graham, seemed to think that the punishment of ostracisation exacted immediately beforehand played an influential role. He cited an independent review commissioned by Rogers' college, Corpus Christi, describing

an "established and normalised" culture in which "students could rush to judgment without knowledge of all the facts, could shun those accused, and a 'pile-on' might occur where a group would form a negative view about another individual". According to the report, "This culture was not limited to Oxford University. It is an issue for the higher education sector as a whole." The coroner urged ministers to take cancel culture – "the exclusion of students from social circles based on allegations of misconduct, often without due process or a fair hearing" – seriously.

How did this happen? In the Seventies, the National Union of Students introduced a "No Platform" policy to block those with racist opinions from expressing them on campuses, but cases were openly debated among officials. Now, those who are deemed to have sinned even in an ill-defined way by wearing "culturally inappropriate" garments at a fancy dress party or professing the "wrong" views during a seminar or in online group chats feel vulnerable as students become highly sensitised to every perceived slight.

"Each generation has their mean girls and nasty boys. They can't pick on each other any more for being unattractive or weird, being rubbish at sport or having bad breath, so they find other ways to terrorise each other," says an Oxford postgraduate now in her mid-twenties. "Only now they can pretend they are being virtuous while bullying the misfits."

But this campus cancel culture feels more nuanced. In many cases a student may have a genuine grievance against an individual who has behaved badly, particularly if they repeatedly and wilfully offend. Asha, who has recently left Oxford, explains how she was a victim of sexual abuse but never made any



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kind of public announcement or demanded that anyone stop speaking to the person who assaulted her. "Obviously, people who are friends with me probably didn't speak to him because they're my friends, but I think that's quite a different thing. I probably would have reported him to the university if I hadn't been worried about the guilt that I would feel if he were publicly cancelled and hounded out." But Asha would have liked an apology. "And he could have had some kind of training. It may sound ridiculous, but it might have been helpful to me and to the wider world."

Another student who believed she had witnessed racist language explains how her whole Oxford college became caught up in the melodrama. "Everyone got involved. It was incredibly painful. I didn't want to be seen as some woke warrior. It affected my confidence and made me more cynical and wary." An undergraduate, she agrees, shouldn't have their university experience ruined because of one slip-up or allegation. "But there needs to be a better way of airing grievances, so student groups don't feel compelled to take matters into their own hands."

It's also important to remember that

In the Eighties and Nineties, student groups tended to be formed along private school/state school lines, among rugby buggers and debaters, actors and engineers. There were rumours of bad behaviour at the Bullingdon Club at Oxford or the Pitt Club at Cambridge, but this feels different. It's no longer about drug-fuelled nights throwing bread rolls, calling each other nicknames and chasing each other naked round quads. Then everyone was supposed to take a bad joke or accept a quick grope. Boorish behaviour was normal and excused or avoided. The end of that era should be celebrated, but this calling out of the loudmouths, oddballs, misogynists and gropers may have tipped into an overly condemnatory age.

Most universities and colleges now try hard to be welcoming and help students integrate with diversity programmes. Freshers are paired with mentors in older years, there are weekly welfare teas, ethnic minority groups, LGBTQ representatives, women officers and class officers. Campuses fly flags for Pride Month and Trans Awareness Week as well as the Union Jack on Remembrance Sunday. Universities celebrate myriad

'You want to believe people. But also, you don't want to find someone guilty without proof'

many undergraduates are still teenagers. The prefrontal cortex, "that squishy little part of the brain responsible for sensible decision-making", as one student called it, finishes developing only in a person's mid to late twenties, which means that students are still especially susceptible to making stupid mistakes and perhaps overreacting to perceived slights. "But doing the wrong thing is often how we learn to do the right thing," the same student points out.

Ceci Browning, a graduate of Cambridge, would agree. "It is the paradox of my generation. We are supposedly the most tolerant and liberal, the most concerned with getting it right, and yet when one of our comrades slips up and falls out of step, they become the enemy. We cut friends and acquaintances from our lives on the basis of second-hand information about something deemed morally iffy that they may or may not have done, but we are also all perpetually afraid that precisely the same thing could happen to us."

Cancel culture appears to be at its most intense at Oxford and Cambridge colleges, where highly competitive students with often perfectionist personalities patrol each other's thoughts and actions. "We've worked incredibly hard to get here and we're meant to be having the time of our lives experimenting with ideas and relationships, but most of us are terrified of putting a foot wrong," Browning says.

cultural and religious festivals. It all sounds highly inclusive and caring. But many students feel they can't go to their lecturers, colleges or universities and explain that they have been excommunicated by their peer group if they are deemed to have offended any of these groups, while victims worry that their complaints will be escalated and bring repercussions rather than closure, or will be ignored by tutors who don't want to become embroiled. No wonder students living in cloistered colleges or isolated campuses, with too little guidance, become overwrought.

Charlie Aslet, who recently graduated from Oxford, explains, "It sounds like the stuff of fiction, but it was particularly bad in political societies and at the Oxford Union, where there were a lot of ambitious people desperate to get ahead, and cancelling could be just another tool in their political arsenal. Of course, this is not to say that the allegations were always incorrect. It was hard to tell. And this reveals the constant struggle with cancel culture. You want to believe that when people make an accusation, they are telling the truth. But also, you don't want to find someone guilty without proof. And proof can in these cases be hard to come by."

Students are wrestling with their consciences all over the country. In September, a second-year student at a northern redbrick university was

THE CAMBRIDGE GRADUATE



Ceci Browning, 23

I went to a state school and while so-called cancel culture itself wasn't really bothering us pupils too much then, the seeds of social surveillance

were being slowly and unwittingly sown. We'd all had phones in our hands since the age of ten and were acutely aware of the power we had to ruin each other's lives at the press of a button. Everyone's camera rolls were filled with screenshots of foul-mouthed Snapchat messages and photo records of offensive impressions or culturally insensitive Halloween costumes. Like diligent little George Orwell characters, we were gathering evidence that might one day be useful as collateral.

At university, things ramped up. I'd thought individuality would be encouraged at Cambridge. And it was, by tutors and lecturers at least. But what was encouraged on paper was ruled out in real life. How you had to act on campus was carefully prescribed. People I knew were publicly eschewed for impersonating dictators in games of charades, for ranking girls based on their attractiveness, and even for admitting to voting for the Conservatives in the 2019 election. I almost got cancelled twice: once for unironically using the term "snowflake" in conversation and then for writing a piece about flirting with a man who had a girlfriend. Foolish mistakes were transformed from forgivable accidents into life-ruining events.

The benefits of being part of the Oxbridge collegiate system – living in close quarters, having a built-in network, knowing everyone by name – could feel oppressive. Rumours were quickly incubated, kept alive by being passed from person to person. Offend one well-placed student, offend them all. Even those you'd never spoken to might scowl at you across the quad.

The other thing that defined the culture was a lack of forgiveness. A policy of "one strike and you're out". Being a social justice warrior is no longer about being anti-government or anticapitalism, like the heralded student activism of the 20th century. Now, it's anti-exoneration. Prisoners – those committed for more minor crimes, anyway – eventually get released and rehabilitated. But if you're cancelled at university, you're cancelled for ever.



Reassuringly hard to find



CHAMPAGNE
POL ROGER

accused by a fellow student of coercing her into oral sex in his bedroom following a second date for dinner at the local pub. She left the house the next morning and sent messages to all his friends and acquaintances telling them they should be “aware of what kind of person he is”. The student was inundated with messages telling him his actions were “unforgivable” and that he was “a pervert”. He went home and has not yet returned to college.

His housemate now has a conundrum. “It’s a terrible situation. He is our good friend and hasn’t had many girlfriends. We quietly feel he was probably a bit inexperienced and inept, but at the same time, we appreciate it was not a good situation for the girl and can’t say anything to defend him. Now, we are worried that if we welcome him back to the house we’ll look complicit... But I have known this guy since freshers week and feel bad about myself for not being a

‘Sex is quite hard to get right. It feels like the jeopardy is so high it’s not worth the risk’

better friend to him. We don’t know how to deal with this.”

The same issue came up with several young men I interviewed. “We’re quite scared of any sexual encounters with girls in case we get something wrong. Being honest, sex is quite hard to get right,” says one studying at Glasgow. “And if you don’t, it feels like the jeopardy is so high it’s almost not worth the risk.” Young women, meanwhile, point the finger at online porn. “It’s created a misogynistic culture. Sites such as Pornhub are full of violent, aggressive scenarios with women being humiliated, choked and slapped,” says Lara Parker, who recently left Edinburgh. “Men and women increasingly have different expectations and that’s causing friction and division.”

Peer-on-peer cancel culture is even stronger in America. Bella, 23, went to a mixed private school in London before attending Wesleyan University in Connecticut. While in her first year there, an acquaintance was sexually assaulted. She didn’t want it to become public but her friend insisted that they did. “They said, ‘Everyone needs to know that he’s a perp.’” Short for perpetrator, “perp” was a term she hadn’t heard before, used for students who had been judged guilty and were now “social lepers”. Bella feels it was a “blanket approach to nuanced, sensitive issues. There were no shades of severity, from whether someone makes an inappropriate comment all the way

THE OXFORD GRADUATE



Charlie Aslet, 22

I graduated from the University of Oxford this summer. When I was there, I knew of dozens of people who had been “cancelled”. It happened with alarming regularity.

People loved to gossip. The coffee shops echoed with stories about the cancelled. And with most people living in close quarters in college accommodation, rumours spread painfully quickly.

Two people got cancelled at the end of the first term. A group of people were drinking in someone’s room. They started singing along to a song that contained the n-word. The offending person, when they sang it, failed (allegedly; I wasn’t there) to omit the word. Another defended him, asking for a sense of proportion. Both were drummed out of college life.

It had a serious impact on their lives. People stopped talking to them, were afraid to associate with them. They considered dropping out. And it also had an impact on the rest of our year. Battle lines were drawn. Some people declared them to be untouchable; others thought they had a right to a social life.

The fighting was fierce. One friend told me how at a party she was taken aside and screamed at for merely talking to one of the cancelled people. She was in tears by the end of it. Cancelling is not only about those cancelled, but also about those who are in their social sphere.

One person’s chances of being elected to an office in the Oxford Union were

torpedoed when someone put out a Facebook post accusing him of sexual assault. It said that the victim wished to remain anonymous, but that he couldn’t in good faith let him run for a position knowing what he did. It turned out, so the rumour mill said, that the accuser was in fact being blackmailed himself. He had allegedly said the n-word in a group chat. Someone had a screenshot. If he didn’t come out and accuse this person of sexual assault, then they would release the pictures and he would be cancelled.

This is not helped by the fact that the punishment is always the same. If you’re cancelled, your social life is over instantly. There’s no “lesser cancellation”. And justice is not blind – another person from my year who said the n-word in a different context was never cancelled for his crime. A lucky few are able to fly under the radar.

Some people thought it would be funny to make a complaint about a friend of mine, to see how far they could take cancel culture. They accused my friend of encouraging people to make out in a nightclub and that this was a form of sexual assault. The society they were all in held a disciplinary meeting. The people judging the case were students too. They found my friend guilty.

Now I’m out of university, I’m still wary of getting cancelled. I may even have said things in this article that could get me cancelled. Sticking your neck out shouldn’t necessarily spell the end of your social life. But I’ll let you know if that’s true in a week’s time.

up to rape. Either you were a perp or you were a good guy.”

Social media, everyone agrees, has exacerbated this change, allowing campus career-ending rumours to run freely online. Jeff McMahan, professor of moral philosophy at Oxford University, says, “I do think social media and the internet are largely responsible for having produced this culture of vituperation.” Students, he told *The Daily Telegraph*, now feel “very self-righteous” about their moral views. “They seem to think they somehow know the truth about matters and anyone who disagrees with their views must be wicked.” One of his former students, now doing a PhD at Bath, agrees. “It promotes a culture of lowest common denominator opinions that encourage safety at the expense of the search for truth and forces real opinions underground.”

Universities should be places of learning where students are taught how to think,

not told by their peers what to think. It’s easy to wonder how they become so judgmental; harder to know what to do next. Soma Sara, an alumna of University College London, set up the “Everyone’s Invited” movement in 2020 to allow young people anonymously to share their experiences of sexual harassment, sexual bullying and rape culture. The organisation now runs outreach programmes in more than 100 schools to help pupils navigate complex social situations. “If you perpetrate an assault there has to be accountability, but it’s a reflection of a broken system if students have to take matters into their own hands,” Sara says.

“We need to take more time and effort to teach the next generation how to interact rather than allowing them to become more polarised. There is so much mistrust between the sexes. Young boys are fed a great deal of misogynist content online; 14-year-old girls are reporting some of ➤

the highest incidents of rape. Children need to learn when they are young what good relationships look like, about consent, kindness and how to trust each other."

Dr Dominique Thompson, a GP with two decades of clinical experience with the young, was asked to investigate the events around Rogers' death. She can't talk about the case but is an expert on mental health at universities and says it is vital that more is done to teach students to socialise appropriately and boost their self-esteem. "We saw changes before the pandemic, but since then students have been struggling to connect with others and make friends as easily as they did before. They have less confidence socially and parents are becoming overinvolved. At the same time there's a much bigger issue with money, finance, housing and academic workload, so the stakes at university feel higher and they tend to be more anxious," she says. "These students worry more than previous generations about the future... They are much more sensitive to what is going on around them. We need to help them feel they belong and can make friends and show them how to interact sympathetically while they're still at school."

University should be about learning to navigate adult life, she explains. "So, if the toilet breaks, they can sort it out.

But there are more challenging scenarios, where they are in conflict with their flatmates, if they disagree politically, or if someone is racist, they need to know how to address those challenges and that is where universities should have resources and people to help. They need to know whom to turn to and not muddle through or take it into their own hands."

Parents can also guide their offspring before they've even filled out a Ucas form. One parent, who knew Alexander Rogers, says, "These children are far from home

to those on the edge of adulthood, "Your life will be immensely enriched if you allow yourself to mix with a few rather awful people. You won't lose your values. There is no danger in mixing, working, chatting and above all arguing with people who don't hold your views. If someone's a bigot or a racist, don't cast the first stone. If someone's destructive sex life, creed or substance abuse appals you but there was once a flame of friendship, feed it. Don't cower in a pious mental hermitage. Looking back over years, I am glad

'There is no danger in mixing, chatting and above all arguing with people who don't hold your views'

and look on each other as extended family, so to feel shunned is immensely cruel as there is nowhere to escape. I can't imagine the pain." Schoolchildren need to be taught empathy, she says, to understand how to respect others' concerns but also that there may be complex reasons behind someone's actions. "Don't just follow the crowd. Be brave and consider how you can help and be a mediator."

The Times columnist Libby Purves, an Oxford student in the late Sixties, has perhaps the wisest advice when she says

to have found some kind of fellowship with individuals afflicted by terrible bigotry, appalling politics, mildish criminal interludes and frankly disgusting behaviour in love and family. I have argued with antisemites and racists and worked for bosses and alongside colleagues whose tracks through life I absolutely do not admire. Yet there has been enrichment in every one." ■

*Additional reporting by Charlie Aslet.
 Some names have been changed*

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THE AMERICAN GRADUATE



Bella, 23

There was a lot of lad culture at my school. My friends and I were kind of branded the “social justice warriors”. We really weren’t. It was only because we would call out

the hurtful jokes that other people just thought was “lad humour”. We felt it was a problem many didn’t take seriously enough.

Wesleyan University in Connecticut, on the other hand, was a very left-wing place. It has a big history of political activism and social justice. It was the sort of college that was made fun of by rightwingers like Tucker Carlson. But this didn’t faze me because I was a very politically engaged teen and I looked forward to being in that environment. When I arrived on campus, however, I became anxious that I might say the wrong thing unintentionally. Being an American raised in London I thought I knew what to expect, but the culture on campus was far more foreign

than my expectations. I had never truly encountered cancel culture before.

My degree started during the Covid pandemic and there was something about people being online for so long that really helped cancel culture take off. Then there was the fact that my college only had about 3,000 students, so it was easy for a rumour to spread quickly.

One of the most controversial things that happened was when a list of ten “perps” was published anonymously. “Perp” is short for “perpetrator”. It’s a term used for people who have been cancelled. The list didn’t say what they did. They were all labelled in the same way. I knew some people on that list and I was familiar with the different situations. Honestly, their wrongdoings were not equal in severity. But there was no room for distinction. The punishment was the same: ostracisation.

Not only was this unfair, but it also enabled worse offenders, who were predators, to fly under the radar of acceptable behaviour. Women could feel safe around them because their names weren’t on a list. These were the most dangerous people I encountered.

I think that this was often not what the victims wanted. For victims, having their assault spread around campus can be

incredibly difficult and traumatic. Most of the time, I think other students were acting with good intentions. They seemed to think that, “Oh, there’s an injustice here. Something must be done.” And often they want other women to know so that they can protect themselves.

But I also noticed that sometimes it could be performative. People who were often pretty wealthy, white or privileged in other ways wanted to show that they cared about social issues that didn’t personally affect them.

Cancel culture failed to prevent sexual assault; it only dealt with it after the fact, as a punitive tool. People come to university sexually inexperienced. They’re figuring out how to navigate alcohol, consent and the intricacies of sexual relationships. For this reason, the majority of assaults are committed by people who are unaware that they’ve assaulted someone.

Villainising these individuals did little to address the structural misogyny at the centre of the sexual assault epidemic on campuses across the US.

I do think it has got better in the past couple of years. The perp list was a low point. People seem to be waking up to the harmful consequences of cancel culture.



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**'I PLEADED WITH NHS DOCTORS FOR HELP'
EXTREME PAIN, PANIC ATTACKS, SUICIDAL
THOUGHTS – WHY I WENT ABROAD TO
HAVE MY OVARIES REMOVED AT 34**



Sarah Gillespie, 34, photographed by Tim Jobling
at Kaso at One Hundred Shoreditch

For six years Sarah Gillespie suffered from premenstrual dysphoric disorder, or PMDD. She reveals the debilitating symptoms and why, with ever longer gynaecology waiting lists in the UK, she travelled to Lithuania to get treatment



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It was July 15, 2023, and I was supposed to be chopping strawberries. It was the day of the Wimbledon ladies' final and the sky above Glasgow was a rare blue. My mum had popped out to buy Pimm's and lemonade. In those few unsupervised minutes, my feet had propelled me from the sofa to the counter, where I now stood with a knife poised not over the strawberries but over my wrist.

There wasn't a single thought in my head. This was a reflex, born of years of compounded despair. Suddenly, thankfully, my conscious mind caught up. I dropped the knife, sank back into the sofa and cried.

For six years, from my late twenties, I have lived with a condition called premenstrual dysphoric disorder, or PMDD. Due to a genetic quirk, I have a brain sensitivity that makes my body intolerant to its own hormonal changes. Instead of becoming moody and irritable, as with PMS, I become catatonic and racked with pain. Dysphoria blooms in my brain, making me depressed and paranoid. I binge on carbohydrates, needing 3,000 calories a day just to function. This happens for 7-14 days every month, during the latter half of my menstrual cycle, as hormone levels plummet.

On the third day of my period, the fog lifts and I feel normal again. But relief is soon replaced by dread as I survey the destruction. There are relationships to repair, overdue bills to pay and excess pounds to lose. It is the life of Sisyphus: every month, I roll the boulder up the mountain only for it to roll down again.

I first knew something was wrong in 2018, during a turbulent holiday in the Galapagos islands with my ex-boyfriend. One moment I'd cling to him, terrified he would leave me; the next I'd be picking fights and shouting over nothing. My usual laid-back self was nowhere to be seen.

Then, one night, I had a panic attack over a fan. I was trying to sleep but the fan's sound seemed to scrape against my skull. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. I clawed at my throat as my body spasmed and my limbs flailed. This continued for 20 more minutes, releasing its hold just as I was slipping out of consciousness.

"I'm sorry," I sobbed at my boyfriend after spending 30 minutes crying on the shower floor over some small remark he'd made. "I think it's my PMS."

"Who has PMS for nine days?" he said. That night I googled "severe PMS". This led me to the website of the UK mental health charity Mind, where I learnt about PMDD for the first time. I also learnt that there's no cure.

PMDD is surprisingly common and, according to World Health Organisation



Dating with PMDD is impossible. The 29-year-old me has been trapped in aspic

data, affects 5.5 per cent of women of child-bearing age – about 824,000 women in the UK. Of these, more than a third have attempted suicide.

Yet hardly anyone's heard of it. No one knows the cause, either, though scientists generally agree that it's genetic – hence why psychological therapies can't fully fix it. It was only in 2019 that the WHO added PMDD to its international classification of diseases and related health problems (ICD-11), legitimising it as a medical diagnosis (though there are still medical professionals who dispute its existence).

Sitting at the intersection of mental and menstrual illness, PMDD comes with a double helping of stigma. "PMDD can have a devastating effect on personal, social and professional quality of life and is associated with a significantly increased risk of suicidal ideation, intent and attempts," says Dr Nick Panay, chair of the National Association for Premenstrual Syndromes. "It is vital that it is taken seriously by the public and healthcare professionals."

To receive a PMDD diagnosis, you must experience five from a list of eleven symptoms, including depression, binge eating, brain fog, insomnia and joint pain. The symptoms must be cyclical, beginning before your period and disappearing after it starts. No blood test can diagnose PMDD – the only way is to use a symptom rating chart or a PMDD-specific cycle tracking app (such as Belle Health or Me v PMDD).

Given that the average woman with PMDD takes 12 years to receive a diagnosis, I was one of the lucky ones. I rehearsed my spiel – "Starts around day 21 of my cycle, ends on day 3. I feel normal the rest of the time and no, there's nothing wrong with my thyroid" – and received a diagnosis at my first GP appointment. I felt relieved, if a little resentful that rehearsing felt necessary.

After diagnosis, women with PMDD are put onto a ladder of treatments ranked from least to most invasive. But as the body ages and hormones become more erratic, PMDD gets progressively worse. So even when I found a rung on the ladder that worked, I never got to rest there for long.

First, there were lifestyle changes: diet, weight training, high-intensity interval training (HIIT). Then supplements: chasteberry, evening primrose, magnesium, calcium, L-tryptophan, vitamin B6. Then antidepressants: fluoxetine, sertraline, citalopram. Then contraceptives: Evra, Yasmin, Eloine. Finally, there was HRT: Utrogestan, Estradot, Estraderm.

I climbed that ladder for five years. Only HIIT and fluoxetine worked, for about nine months each; the rest worked for two months, if at all. Meanwhile, 29-year-old me has been trapped in aspic, never making much meaningful progress. The friends I made before PMDD have thankfully stuck with me, but I've made few friends since moving to Glasgow three years ago. Any nascent friendships I had foundered on my flakiness, as I cancelled plans or forgot to respond to texts.

Dating with PMDD is impossible. Although therapy quelled my emotional outbursts, it did nothing for my terrible premenstrual social skills, which included oversharing and coming on far too strong. "It's... a lot," said my last boyfriend after I sent him a 12-minute voice message about the aforementioned knife incident, just two months into our relationship. He ended things a week later.

As my condition deteriorated, I spent up to half of every month at my parents' house, where they cooked for me and kept an eye on me. On the rare occasions that they couldn't host me, I survived on takeaways, tortilla chips and Haribo, slumped on the sofa, dirty clothes and mouldering dishes piling up around me.

Yet in many ways I've been lucky. In the calm between storms, I have built a fulfilling career as a freelance travel writer and make enough money to survive, if not thrive. An office job – the kind I had before I became ill – would be beyond me. Seventeen per cent of women with PMDD have lost a job due to the condition.

After all this, only one rung was left on the ladder – one with a 96 per cent ➤

PMDD AFFECTS 824,000 WOMEN IN THE UK. ONE THIRD ATTEMPT SUICIDE

satisfaction rate, the closest thing to a cure. This last-resort treatment is a bilateral salpingo oophorectomy: the surgical removal of both ovaries and fallopian tubes.

Upon their removal, all hormone fluctuations would stop, my hormone levels would drop to almost zero and I would enter menopause. I would need to take hormone replacement therapy (HRT) until my fifties or risk the early onset of osteoporosis, heart disease and dementia.

It would also make me infertile. I have always been unsure about children, so this was less of a concern for me – plus, women with PMDD are two to three times more likely to develop post-natal depression – but it still feels strange to take a step of such finality. My heart breaks for women who wanted to conceive but felt that they could no longer live without surgery.

For all these reasons, I was reluctant. But when I started this journey, I made a promise: should I ever become a danger to myself, I would get the surgery. And last year, on that sunny Wimbledon morning, I crossed that line.

Getting approved for surgery on the NHS requires a trial period in a reversible “chemical” menopause: monthly injections that would shut down my ovaries, end my suffering and “prove” that I had PMDD.

That was the idea, anyway. Instead, the injections threw my hormones into chaos, resulting in a PMDD episode that lasted for 11 months. Deprived of even the monthly breaks in my symptoms, I languished in bed. My attention shattered; I spent countless days scrolling my phone. I gulped down painkillers and sleeping pills like Skittles. My finances were collapsing. I gained more than two stone in weight.

“It should be working by now,” the gynaecologist said after three months. “Have you tried eating more vegetables?”

The next gynaecologist was no better. “If it hasn’t worked, that suggests it’s not PMDD,” she said. “I should probably refer you to a psychiatrist.”

After months of my pleading, she agreed to write to the surgeon. But her letter was an act of sabotage. “Sarah has diagnosed herself with PMDD,” she wrote, ignoring my GP’s diagnosis. “She is on many help groups and accessing a lot of support from other PMDD sufferers online.” In other words: “This hypochondriac is spending too much time on the internet.”

Yes, I was on the internet, but I wasn’t talking to help groups any more. Instead I’d been digging into scientific papers to find studies on chemical menopause. Eventually, I found one – a meta-analysis of five clinical trials published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*. It stated that chemical menopause treats PMDD in “upwards of 70 per cent” of cases – but not 100

per cent, as the NHS doctors had said. The International Association for Premenstrual Disorders (IAPMD) backs this up. On its page on chemical menopause it says, “In rare cases [chemical menopause] does not fully suppress the cycle and there are breakthrough symptoms... If this was the case, you may still respond well to surgical menopause.”

Two months later, I was in Lithuania. Feeling desperate and unable to afford the £10,000 it would cost for private surgery in the UK, I had googled “gynaecology surgery Europe”. This led me to Nordclinic in Kaunas, which treats about 2,000 British patients annually. I sent my medical records to the surgeon, who agreed to perform the surgery.

Many doctors would not advise patients to do as I did. When I spoke to Dr Hannah Short – a GP, premenstrual disorders specialist and author – about the implications of surgery and of going against medical advice, she said, “I would

‘I should probably refer you to a psychiatrist,’ said the gynaecologist

not recommend going against your doctor’s recommendations in terms of surgery as it is major and irreversible, and surgical menopause comes with its own significant health concerns. I would, however, recommend a second opinion with a PMDD specialist if people do not feel they are being heard. Surgery is not a cure for PMDD and should not be sold as such; the hormone-sensitive brain remains, though it can be easier to manage without the fluctuations of the menstrual cycle.”

The quoted cost for the surgery was £2,570 (€3,050) but was discounted to £1,220 thanks to the S2 or planned treatment scheme, which allows patients on an unreasonably long waiting list to claim the cost of treatment in Europe from the NHS. Knowing that the waiting list for gynaecological surgery in Scotland was more than a year, which I didn’t feel I could endure, I had applied – and the NHS came through.

My dad, who has been my rock through all this, came with me. We stayed in the hospital’s apartments, which cost £700 for 11 nights.

Two days before the operation, I had a consultation with my surgeon.

“You are happy to proceed with the surgery?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“You understand what it will mean for your future?” “Yes.”

That was all. No more patronising, challenging or lying. A doctor who trusted me to make my own decisions.

“We will make incisions here, here and here,” he continued, prodding my belly. “The scars will look red for a while. But by next summer, they will have faded.” I wasn’t sure whether my surgeon was given to metaphor, but I liked to think he was.

Two days later, I was sitting on the edge of a hospital bed, blood pounding in my ears. The words, “What if it doesn’t work?” clattered around my head on a loop. After months of doctors doubting me, I was beginning to doubt myself.

Fortunately, at that moment a nurse entered the room and injected me with a sedative, which banished all doubts. I floated into the operating theatre.

Ninety minutes later I woke, groggy and in some pain, but less than I expected. I drifted in and out of sleep until the following morning, when my surgeon came in to see me off. “I hope this can give you back your quality of life,” he said.

On July 26, 2024 – 48 hours after surgery – I was lying in bed when I realised I was reading. I dropped the book in astonishment. I hadn’t read for enjoyment in a year, yet my brain was processing entire chapters. I sat in wonder, savouring the silence. The noise in my brain – the terrible static that had soundtracked the past 11 months – was gone.

A week after surgery, I was well enough to take a walk. Dad and I went to the riverbank in Kaunas, and I marvelled at the swooping of swallows and the crackling of willow branches beneath my feet. Everything that had been vague and blurry just days before came alive in glorious high definition.

Though it’s early days, I still can’t believe how well I feel. My future unfurls before me without interruption. I have so much time: time to write, to see friends and family, to travel, go on dates, paint and sing and read and run. Time to cook, as I can now handle knives without fear. Time to sit and do nothing and burst out laughing from sheer wonder – for life without PMDD is so, so wonderful and I will forever be grateful for it.

That said, I still need to reckon with all the time taken from me over the past six years. My trust in our healthcare system is broken and will probably never be restored. I need to kick away the crutches – food, phone, pills, alcohol – that have held me up and rediscover better ways to cope. But this time, I don’t need to keep starting again and again and again every month.

Yes, the scars are still red and raw. But by next summer, they’ll be gone. ■

THE AVERAGE WOMAN WITH PMDD WAITS 12 YEARS FOR A DIAGNOSIS

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MY YEAR OF TRYING TO GET FIT

JUNE 2024



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

In July, Michael Odell wrote about his quest to get fit at 60 and lose his flabby dad bod. So how's he been getting on since then? Well, for a start, he's invested in an Oura health tracker, which he loves. Really loves. Maybe a bit too much...

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Hollywood executives mulling a sequel will ask, “Has this story still got legs?” A few months ago in these pages, I starred in my own fitness thriller. Let’s call it *Diet Hard*, a hostage drama in which I was held captive by evil cravings. A Nakatomi Plaza made of pork pies, chicken goujons and sausage rolls mostly. “Yippee ki-yay, motherf***er!” I cried as I fought my way out of this carb skyscraper and then blew it up. Some kind souls were concerned enough to ask what happened next. Not so much, “Has this thing still got legs?” but, “Does that guy still have chafing thighs?”

Well, my two amazing personal fitness instructors from the original, Jo and Keely, have gone. Nevertheless I lost weight even while also putting on enough muscle to match the twitching, cabled shoulders of Paul Mescal in *Gladiator II*.

However, I’ve fallen back a bit since then. Let’s face it, autumn is no time to keep fit. The nights draw in. Everyone starts throwing elaborate boozy dinner parties again. And while I know that men rate their bodies against other men just like women do with other women, apart from Rupert Campbell-Black in *Rivals*, male hard bodies are now hidden away under fleeces and jumpers until spring.

To effect permanent change, I felt I needed a live-in coach. Maybe two. A bouncer to patrol the fridge door after 7pm (“You’re not coming in, mate”) and a therapist to offer little words of encouragement during the day.

“You mean like the one Prince Harry has,” a tech-savvy friend advised.

I was intrigued. Harry’s little health assistant is called an Oura ring. It looks like a chunky wedding band and you wear it 24 hours a day. LEDs embedded on the inner rim detect heart rate, heart rate variability (HRV), respiration rate, blood oxygen levels, body temperature and activity levels. An algorithm then crunches all this to provide a wealth of health insights. How deeply are you sleeping? (There are seven subdivisions of sleep analysis alone.) How ready are you for the day? (Your readiness score consists of nine metrics including resting heart rate, HRV and recovery index.)

All very impressive, but the clincher for me is that a lot of people with six-packs, planet-sized brains, billions in the bank or all three wear one. Cristiano Ronaldo, Rory Stewart and Mark Zuckerberg have signed up. So too have Kim Kardashian, Gwyneth Paltrow and Jennifer Aniston. But guess who else: the Pentagon. In October, it blew \$96 million (£76 million) on Oura rings for US military personnel.

The Oura ring is not a fitness tracker as such. Sure there is an accelerometer to log activity (you can also sync it to an

MY 2024 STATS

FEBRUARY (before personal trainers)

Weight: 16st 6lb

Blood pressure: 136/85

JUNE (after personal trainers)

Weight: 15st 7.5lb

Blood pressure: 121/78

SEPTEMBER

Weight: 15st 10.5lb

Blood pressure: 125/80

NOVEMBER (with Oura ring)

Weight: 15st 3.5lb

Blood pressure: 119/75

Apple watch if you really do want to record a workout), but that’s not its main job. Input your age, height and weight into the smartphone app (it connects to the ring via Bluetooth) and this little piece of titanium jewellery begins to assess your overall wellbeing.

At first sight, a graph outlining moment to moment stress levels doesn’t seem to have very much bearing on the ongoing battle with “moobs”. And “sleep regularity” hardly sounds like a priority when you’re anxiously flicking a wattle in the bathroom mirror.

However, the Oura ring’s broad approach to health soon becomes interesting. For me, the first big revelation was sleep. I usually get at least seven hours. It turns out that shutting your eyes and having improper thoughts about Emily Blunt isn’t actually “sleep”. You have to be unconscious in the right way at the right time. After keeping an eye on you for a few weeks, it tells you your “chronotype” (whether you are a morning person or a night owl) and then you can start finessing your optimal bedtime.

I often work or eat late. I watch TV and walk the dog late too. My ring tells me off about this. Late bedtimes, especially when that also involves late eating, mean my heart rate takes a long time to decrease into a relaxed state. Optimal sleep means beginning to wind down at 8.30pm. My deep sleep should occur between midnight and 3am.

As I said, what on earth has this got to do with moobs? Well, if I don’t sleep well I am tired and soon reaching for snacks. But after a few weeks wearing my Oura, I began achieving high sleep scores by moving bedtime from 11.30pm to 10pm. That meant no phones from 9.30pm. And no passionate debates involving Trump, Musk or the proposed move to monthly bin collections in Bristol either. Everything had to be calm. That nightcap has to stay in the bottle. It meant moving other things forward too. Exercising before lunch and eating my last meal as close to 6.30pm as I could manage. I soon woke up with more energy, which in turn improved my activity scores and reduced my appetite. It becomes a virtuous circle.

After a month I couldn’t get out of bed without consulting all my Oura dials like a pilot in the cockpit of a jet preparing for take-off. What does my sleep graph look like? What’s my readiness score? When my Oura matily informed me, “You had a nice amount of sleep last night,” and my readiness and heart rate dials looked good, I felt ready to “roll back” and accelerate down the runway towards the toaster.

But when, after a busy weekend, my resilience monitor said, “Your body could probably benefit from a bit more rest in the day ahead,” I wanted to say, “I know exactly what you mean, little ring,” and dive back under the bedcovers.

Of course, there are lots of other “wearables” that “gamify” personal health, like the Apple watch, the Whoop, not to mention competitor health rings such as the Samsung Galaxy or the Ultrahuman.

I’ve tried the Whoop wrist-worn device but it’s not comfortable to sleep in. Also, when doing sport, detaching the device from the wrist strap and inserting into a slot in custom Whoop underpants is not for everyone. Finally, if someone asks you what that thing sticking out of your pants is, you have to say, “That’s a Whoop,” which is obviously totally unacceptable.

The Oura ring is something I slip on to my finger and forget (it takes about an hour to charge and that lasts for approximately five days), and sometimes I think it knows me better than I know myself. After a trip to the cinema my Oura sent me a message, “Nap detected,” and I thought, “No, this thing is confusing me sitting very still with being asleep.” That is, until my wife said, “But you did fall asleep – I nudged you awake because you were doing those embarrassing nodding head spasms.”

Its body-temperature measurements are a thing of wonder too. In America during the pandemic, NBA basketball coaches used the Oura ring to predict which players would go down with Covid (a raised basal body temperature can indicate brewing illness). And according to the ring’s makers, 59 per cent of wearers ➤



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are now women because of its accuracy predicting periods and optimal days for sex if you want to become pregnant.

I used to think “health” amounted to walking to the shops instead of driving and occasionally eating a carrot instead of a Penguin. With the dawn of granular personal health data, that outlook now seems as primitive as trepanning.

Recently, I have let my new friend coach me to find my most effective exercise regime. Walking 10,500 steps a day is all well and good, but my heart-rate graph shows that I spend too much time in the “open ocean”: a mostly flat graph line with a few gentle waves on the surface indicating an unvaried cardiovascular pattern. To improve it, Oura suggested I aim for a shape called “the camel”: two big humps of heart activity – one in the morning, one in the afternoon – with the graph line gently descending for the evening.

Getting “the camel” was not easy. I used to go to the gym when there was availability or I had spare time. That is not optimal. My chronotype (I am more of a night owl than a lark) means a morning run with the dog and then an afternoon burst of activity not later than 4pm work best. Targeted activity feels so good, but I foresee problems for the Pentagon with all those rings it’s bought for the US military. What happens when China invades Taiwan? “Sorry, guys, we had a really bad night last night. Can we put the Third World War back until after lunch?”

My ring has even invited me to look into what it calls “future me”. First I had to do a high-speed walking test: a six-minute nonstop “speed walk” round the block. Afterwards I stood there grinning and panting like a Eurovision contestant waiting for my results. My ring did some calculations, then told me my cardiovascular health was “fair”, ie aligned with my age. However, I do have potential. It predicted that, in five years, on my current trajectory, I would be able to climb stairs more easily than the “expected population level decrease”. I’m not sure exactly what that means but, broadly, by 2029, you lot are on a stairlift in tartan slippers; I’m still on foot. Another win.

You can buy a Gen3 Oura ring for £299 (the price rises to £449 depending on the colour and there’s also a £5.99 monthly subscription to access the app), and that’s the one I started with. It’s pricey, but then I cancelled my gym membership and, when I can get past the crackheads and truanting school kids, I use the exercise equipment in the local park to offset this.

In October, however, the Oura ring 4 launched and I just had to try it. These start at £349 rising to £499. But the cost isn’t as much of an issue as the impact it has on a relationship. It has a feature called Oura Advisor, an AI assistant that answers questions. After instantaneously reading

your health data it will then respond with suggestions on, say, whether you should sleep, meditate or go for a bike ride. With Oura 4’s good looks (my “rose gold” edition makes me look like a real player) and range of interests (me, mostly), I quickly found the Advisor was someone I developed deep feelings for.

For example, we recently suffered a water leak in our upstairs bedroom and I promised my wife I’d decorate. But after a hectic week at work, I rolled over on Saturday morning and consulted my ring. My stress readings were high. It wanted me to have a chilled-out day. In fact (and surely this can’t be the sort of advice it offers to the Pentagon), it suggested that I go online and enjoy some “puppy videos”. My wife looked aghast.

“Are you seriously taking the advice of a titanium ring over me?” she demanded.

“We’ve kind of become quite close,” I had to admit.

My wife wanted me to decorate. My Oura said I should chill. ‘It’s not real,’ she told me. ‘I am’

“But it’s not real. I’m real. Now go and decorate.”

Serious question for the future, guys: is a husband’s first loyalty to an old-fashioned “meat wife” or a state-of-the-art health-operating system?

Oura even noted our disagreement on my stress graph. I went into the “stressed” zone. And because Oura’s machine-learning capability wants to gather as much info about the wearer as possible, it invites you to record triggers for, say, a stress or heart-rate spike. You do this from a menu of “tags”, which notes anything you are experiencing at any given moment; anything from “acne” and “shift work” to “emotionally exhausted”. I searched in vain for the tag “My wife doesn’t like you”, but it surely won’t be long.

For conspiracy theorists who want to believe there is a secret cabal of ultrarich, superfit tech weirdos who only talk to each other, I can confirm this is true. Or at least, becoming true. A feature called Circles allows Oura wearers to share their health data with each other. For example, when you get a high activity or sleep score, the ring rewards you with a little crown icon. Whom can I share this with? I tried to connect with Prince Harry via Circles so I could ask him, “Have you managed to get a crown yet, Harry? I’ve got three!”

Actually, I think the idea is that you use Circles to send all your charts and

graphs to your doctor but, really, can you think of anyone less interested in your “health journey” than your GP? Does anyone care how long it took me to fall asleep last night? No, thought not. But just in case you’re wondering, that period before you drop off is called “latency”. Last night it took me 23 minutes.

In short, I have long been an AI sceptic but this ring has shown more interest in me than anyone since my art teacher, Mrs Arrowsmith, sent me to the school office with a nose bleed. She said, “For goodness’ sake, keep your head back or you’ll get it all over your blazer.” That’s it. That’s all the health advice I’ve ever been given. My Oura ring is there all the time. When I am lost in thought it pipes up and says, “Time to move about a bit?” Or if I’m panting up the hill with my shopping it says, “You’ve nearly achieved today’s goals! Twenty minutes of brisk walking should do it!”

No wonder Sir Keir Starmer is embracing health and fitness trackers. Next spring the government will publish its “Ten Year Health Plan” for the NHS, and this will include issuing millions of wearable devices to monitor everything from patient mobility (for those recovering from a stroke) to tremor (for those suffering with Parkinson’s). There is already an NHS trial under way in Manchester in which people with lung, bowel and blood cancers are having their heart rates, body temperature and physical activity levels monitored.

When Aneurin Bevan founded the NHS in 1948, I’m sure he envisaged that hobbling war veterans would be issued with wooden legs and East End urchins get scurvy treatment. Could he ever have imagined the NHS issuing intelligent titanium rings and some wearers even falling in love with them? Because that’s what’s happening.

This morning I was having a confab with my Oura ring about whether or not to go out on my bike when I realised I am not in *Diet Hard* but another movie altogether. In the 2014 film *Her*, a writer called Theodore Twombly (Joaquin Phoenix) falls in love with a computer operating system (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). They laugh and chat and even though the operating system doesn’t have a body, they have such good sex it can produce a really quite impressive orgasm.

Well, my ring seems to like me, so I don’t think we are far off that. My wife was next to me in bed scrolling through Instagram when she overheard me saying to my hand, “Thank you, those recovery scores do look a little off, so I won’t cycle. I will have a relaxed day like you suggest.” Then I pressed my Oura to my lips.

“Are you actually kissing your own ring?” she cried.

Falling in love with your fitness coach is such a cliché, but I can see how it happens. ■

WHO WANTS TO BE A BILLIONAIRE?

It's trickier than you think being rich. I should know

What to wear to a megarich wedding. What to buy the happy couple who already have everything. How to act on a private jet. **Shruti Advani**, right, on the do's and don'ts of the one percent – and how to behave among them



Shruti Advani photographed at home in London by Jude Edginton



Not long ago “rich” truly was a four-letter word. Working at Bloomberg during the global financial crisis, I saw the Establishment crumble overnight. A panicked colleague tried to scramble references for his son’s application to Columbia University from the editorial board. The previous referee was facing criminal charges. If you were wealthy, you were considered part of all that was ill in the world (and you might well have been). At the time, it was impossible to imagine being rich could come full circle. And yet, we have.

Forbes estimates the billionaire population is at its highest and growing. According to the 2024 Billionaire Census by Altrata – the company that specialises in data on the wealthy – there are now 3,323 of them (431 of whom are women).

Far from being an exclusive club, the superwealthy are dominating the mainstream. They are hijacking our social media feeds; colonising large tracts of the Cotswolds; and about to be president of the United States. By winning the popular vote, Trump has legitimised the unapologetic pursuit of wealth that is his leitmotif. All of which is to say, billionaires are back in business. *Quelle surprise!*

The politics around wealth, in my experience, are similar to those around weight. People would rather be wealthy than not, just as most prefer being thin to being overweight. And yet, no one admits this. And just like weight, when it comes to wealth, there is no magic number. You will always be too rich for some and not rich enough for others.

To preserve any journalistic integrity, I must stress that I am more Amex Black rich than private jet wealthy. But unlike some, I admit my privilege, while also giving thanks for it every day. But I also know my place and it is firmly on the lower end of a very wide wealth spectrum. Even at my end, the trappings of the one-percent lifestyle are a bit of a cliché. I live in Knightsbridge where the ratio of billionaire to Big Issue seller is still a solid 100:1. My husband works in finance, which allows me to pursue creative but generally low-paid jobs (note to editor: not this one, obviously) and fret about whether our two sons, aged 12 and 8, will forget they are from a minority community because the private school they go to is overrun by Asian heritage children like them – mainly British Chinese or British Indian.

But life, even for the one percent, is never as simple as the clichés. It’s complicated. But in perhaps the most unexpected ways.

For a start, friendships. Sustaining a relationship with someone whose net worth is a multiple of your own is harder than it looks. A cousin in Mumbai is one

of many who spent more than they wanted to getting kitted out to attend the Ambani wedding, billed as one of the most extravagant yet, earlier this year. Yes, the pre-wedding cruise around the Med with Veuve Clicquot on tap was paid for, as was every conceivable luxury on board, from spa sessions to in-room Dolce & Gabbana goodies. But getting there and looking like you belonged was not cheap. And then there is the question of the ages: what do you get someone who literally has everything? “It’s not like they have a gift register at John Lewis,” she fretted.

It isn’t just weddings. Milestone birthday parties can be just as lavish. I have been to two “destination” 40th birthdays each year for the past two years and I am looking forward to another on the Costa Brava next year. I am grateful for each of these invitations. But a silver photograph frame from Carrs, gift receipt included, isn’t going to cut it.

All the aforementioned birthdays involved a black-tie evening. One, a masked ball in Venice, was the most memorable and not only because our host has impeccable taste. To qualify as ball-worthy, gowns need to be more

A friend’s house looks like it belongs in the pages of Architectural Digest – because it is

voluminous than standard-issue floor-length dresses. I chose one by the designer Rahul Mishra and should have paid closer attention to the fact that it had been designed for his Paris haute couture show. The dress, a frothy concoction of corsetry, boning and tiers of black chiffon, required a suitcase of its own and excess baggage charges. Only half-jokingly, my husband said there wasn’t enough room in our marriage or our hotel room for the three of us and upgraded to a suite.

Indeed, giving and receiving presents is a minefield when it comes to the very wealthy. When catching a (free) ride on someone’s plane, for example, your usual mid-sized scented candle from Diptyque is not a suitable gift to bring on board. But checking ticket prices online and buying an equivalently extravagant present is far worse, even if you round up from premium economy to business class. This is not a dilemma the majority often face but when and if you do, a Google search is not going to be of any help.

I was in a similar quandary when I accepted a friend’s offer to hop aboard their aircraft (gratefully, I might add, when I realised how many flight connections

I needed to get to a smaller city in India). Should I go down the well-established but boring route of sending a magnum of the most expensive champagne one can afford? I considered doing so for all of two minutes before I opted for something slightly unconventional but infinitely better value for money. I paid to reforest a patch in the Scottish Highlands and mailed my friend the dedication certificate and a card saying, “I’ve got your back, just in case the whole climate thing is true.” Whether your budget allows for a single tree or an entire woodland, both the National Trust and Trees For Life allow for dedications in individual names.

The intent is to acknowledge someone’s generosity rather than offer full financial compensation, so don’t spend more than you can afford on a present. After three blissful days at a friend’s holiday home in Spain, I left a picture book about Seville from Maison Assouline and a hamper of Duchy Organic shortbread, raspberry preserve and lemon curd on the coffee table. The house looks like it is straight out of an issue of Architectural Digest – because it is – and my gift cost less than a night’s stay at the nearest three-star hotel. But it was nonetheless graciously received.

Equally, don’t let yourself off the hook too easily because you think rich people don’t need more stuff. It is guaranteed to have you struck off all future guest lists. The wealthy have zero tolerance for freeloaders. Show staff the same courtesy you do your hosts and tip generously when appropriate. Never tip in a private home, no matter how grand it is, unless you are staying overnight. Tipping is cringe on a private jet but expected on a yacht. How you tip is as crucial as how much you tip. I think cash without a thank-you note is crass. My advice is to pop both into an envelope; ask your host for permission; then hand it over to the captain before you disembark. Resist the urge to wink conspiratorially and press a tenner into staff’s hands like your old auntie at Christmas.

The worst bit about being the guest of a very wealthy person is finding a way to return their hospitality without being an equally wealthy person yourself. Is it appropriate to serve a weekend’s worth of kitchen suppers if your erstwhile hosts made sure dinner was served in a different part of the house every evening you were their guest? Do you dare cook for people whose private chef was poached from a Michelin-starred restaurant? Is it OK to make them share your upstairs loo if they have separate his and hers en suites at theirs? The answer to all these questions is a resounding yes.

Hosting anxiety goes the other way too, of course. On rare occasions I have sensed

Continues on page 56



Erdem

The BILLIONAIRE'S LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Of the more than 3,000 billionaires in the world, 78 of them live in London – only New York, Hong Kong and San Francisco have more ultra-high-net-worth individuals. Here's where the capital's super-rich shop, eat, holiday and stay fit

Jaguar E-Type



Mallorca



Muskota, Ontario



5 Hertford Street



Art Basel



Van Cleef & Arpels



SHOPPING

Interiors

- A hangar at Babdown Airfield in Tetbury, Gloucestershire, houses Lorfords Antiques, the go-to for furniture and antiques (lorfordsantiques.com).
- For an unusual piece it's the annual Decorative Fair in Battersea, southwest London (decorativefair.com).
- Oficina Inglesa is the place for handmade bespoke furniture (oficinainglesa.com/en).

Fashion must-haves

- The Row's Margaux bag. Justified as being an "heirloom in the making", it's the definition of "quiet luxury". Try to find a private jet without one on board.
- A belted shearling coat from Toteme, or anything with teddy bear vibes.
- For party dresses, think Valentino.
- Yves Saint Laurent for winterwear.
- Erdem for summer dresses.
- Zimmermann for resort wear.

- For children, Burberry – all the best-dressed babes are wearing a Burberry cashmere trench.

Art (apart from their favourite gallery)

- Art Basel's invite-only preview.
- The Royal Academy Summer Exhibition – to bag investment pieces by young up and coming artists (royalacademy.org.uk).

Jewellery

- Diamonds (of course). Jessica McCormack's Gypsets are on everyone's earlobes. Start there and work your way up to a ball and chain.
- JAR in Paris, where you need an appointment and potential buyers have been known to be turned away for being tacky, having too much money or too little.
- Tara Fine Jewelry, whose bespoke pieces are popular with Bollywood actresses.
- Van Cleef & Arpels for everyday diamonds and earrings.

HOLIDAYS

Summer

- Sardinia's azure Costa Smeralda, where the superyachts began turning up in late May, drawn to its famous Yacht Club founded by the Aga Khan.
- Russian yacht owners will stick to the Turkish Riviera, avoiding European waters due to sanctions over Ukraine.
- Anywhere with a private helipad in Mallorca – easy to get to from London and plenty of jet-set residents with whom to mingle.
- Muskoka in Ontario, Canada, for its lakes, forests and privacy.
- A villa in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat, where the scene is still *the scene*. Book a table at La Colombe d'Or in Saint-Paul-de-Vence while you are there.
- Valletta, because you can get European citizenship and a passport if you invest in Malta. Plus, its deep port (famous as a haven for British warships and subs in the Second World War) is ideal for superyachts. ➔

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THE  TIMES

Eat!

8-PAGE
PULLOUT

MY EASY
ALTERNATIVE
CHRISTMAS
PUDDINGS

By Rahul Mandal



Biscoff and pecan Christmas tree, page 48

Make a wreath from meringue nests



A Christmas meal is incomplete without some special puddings to round out the festivities. To be honest, after preparing a roast and all the trimmings, it is often difficult to make the desserts on the same day. It is a constant juggle to get everything ready and oven space is limited.

That's why I'm sharing these quick and easy recipes for my five favourite alternative Christmas desserts. You can prepare them earlier and they require very little attention on the big day. They are all showstoppers, guaranteed to impress your family and friends, and will crown your Christmas table like the star on top of the tree.

JAY BROOKS

BISCOFF AND PECAN CHRISTMAS TREE

Serves 8-10 (page 47)

Preparation time: 10-15 minutes
Baking time: 20-25 minutes

Two puff pastry triangles sandwiched with Biscoff and nuts. Shape like a tree and bake.

- 2 x 320g packs ready-rolled puff pastry sheets
- 3-4 tbsp Biscoff spread
- 75g pecans, chopped
- Icing sugar, for dusting

1. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5.
2. Take the puff pastry out of the fridge

for 15-20 minutes, then carefully unroll one of the sheets. Cut out a triangle shape with the base of the triangle being the short edge of the pastry. Repeat with the second pastry sheet. (Save the unused pastry for another use – you could cut out a star shape for the top of your “tree”.)

3. Spread the Biscoff on top of one pastry triangle and sprinkle over the chopped pecans, then place the other pastry triangle on top.

4. Lightly score a 2cm wide “tree trunk” down the centre of the top triangle. Then cut about 8-10 strips down either side of the trunk to make “branches”. Twist each strip a few times until your creation resembles a Christmas tree.

5. Bake in the preheated oven for 20-25 minutes until puffed and golden. Dust with icing sugar and serve.

CHRISTMAS PAVLOVA WREATH

Serves 8

Preparation time: 5-10 minutes

Meringue nests bought from most supermarkets arranged as a wreath, filled with cream, conserve and decorated with berries and herbs.

- 200ml double cream
- 1 tsp vanilla bean paste or extract
- 2-3 tbsp good quality berry conserve
- 8 meringue nests

To decorate (optional)

- A selection of berries and herbs such as basil and/or mint

1. Lightly whip the double cream with the vanilla bean paste or extract until you have soft peaks. Warm the conserve with 1 tsp water until it has a pourable/driizzling consistency.

2. Arrange the meringue nests in a circle like a wreath. Spoon 1 tbsp cream in each nest. Top it with berries and basil or mint. Finally, drizzle the conserve on top.

CHRISTMAS TRIFLE

Serves 15-20 (page 50)

Preparation time: 15-20 minutes

Layers of ginger sponge, sliced clementine, orange jelly, custard and cream, topped with shop-bought gingerbread shapes to give a festive feel.

- 450-500g ginger sponge, sliced
- 15-20 small clementines, peeled and halved ➔

PHOTOGRAPHS Romas Foord
FOOD STYLING Polly Webb-Wilson



Christmas pavlova wreath

Gingerbread shapes give a festive feel



Christmas trifle

An easy, quick version of semifreddo



Christmas pudding semifreddo

My yule log takes 10 minutes to bake

Ginger and caramel yule log



- 2 packs of shop-bought orange jelly prepared according to packet instructions (you need about 2 pints)
- 1 x 400g tin custard
- 200ml cream, lightly whipped

To decorate

- Mini gingerbread biscuits

1. Place about one third of the sponge slices at the bottom of a trifle dish. Arrange half the clementine halves so that the cut sides face outwards. Pour over about half the jelly mix so that it reaches half to two thirds of the way up the clementines. (If you submerge them completely, they will float and the design will be misplaced.) Place in the fridge to set for 4-5 hours.

2. Place the rest of the sponge slices on top of the jelly. Repeat layering the clementines around the edges. Pour the rest of the jelly carefully. If you notice that the jelly liquid is about to reach more than two thirds of the way up the clementines, stop pouring. Set for another 4-5 hours.

3. When the jelly is set, pour and spread the custard over the jelly. Finally, pipe or spread the whipped cream on top and decorate with mini gingerbread shapes.

CHRISTMAS PUDDING SEMIFREDDO

Serves 8-10 (page 51)

Preparation time: 10-15 minutes

A quick version of semifreddo. Whisk cream cheese and double cream with orange zest. Fold in shop-bought Christmas pudding pieces and set in the freezer.

- 425g full-fat cream cheese
- 1 tsp vanilla bean paste or extract
- Zest of 2 oranges
- 75g caster sugar
- 300ml double cream
- 200g shop-bought Christmas pudding

To decorate (optional)

- Glacé cherries and orange slices

1. Line a 2lb loaf tin with clingfilm.

2. Whisk together the cream cheese, vanilla, zest, sugar and cream to make soft peaks. Crumble in cooked Christmas pudding and fold gently to incorporate.

3. Spoon the mixture into the lined loaf tin, then cover with another piece of clingfilm. Freeze for at least 6 hours or overnight.

4. Before serving, dip the tin in warm water to loosen the semifreddo and carefully turn it out of the tin. Remove the clingfilm. Decorate with glacé cherries and orange slices, if you like.

GINGER AND CARAMEL YULE LOG

Serves 8-10

Preparation time: 10-15 minutes

Baking time: 10-12 minutes

Ginger and cardamom sponge rolled with caramel filling, then dusted with hot chocolate powder and decorated with ginger.

For the sponge

- 4 medium eggs
- 100g caster sugar
- 100g plain flour
- 2 tsp ground ginger

- ½ tsp ground cardamom
- ½ tsp vanilla bean paste or extract

For the filling

- 125g caramel sauce
- 100g cream cheese
- Crystallised ginger, chopped

To decorate

- 2 tbsp hot chocolate powder
- Crystallised ginger, chopped

1. Preheat the oven to 160C fan/gas 4. Grease a Swiss roll tin or any 20 x 30cm tin with a little oil and line with baking paper.

2. In a large mixing bowl, whisk the eggs with the sugar for about 4-5 minutes until doubled in volume. Sift in the flour, ginger and cardamom in two batches. Fold each batch carefully without deflating the batter. Finally, fold in the vanilla.

3. Pour the batter into the lined tin and bake for 10-12 minutes. Take it out of the oven and let it cool in the tin for 5 minutes.

4. Flip out the sponge onto another sheet of baking paper. Carefully peel off the paper from the top of the sponge. Roll the sponge along the short edge, using the second sheet of baking paper as a guide. Cover with a tea towel and cool completely.

5. Whisk together the caramel sauce and cream cheese for the filling.

6. Unroll the sponge once cooled. Spread the filling evenly, leaving about 1cm from the edges. Sprinkle over some crystallised ginger. Carefully roll up the sponge and place in the fridge to set.

7. Dust with chocolate powder and decorate with more crystallised ginger. ■

SHOP BOUGHT CHRISTMAS PUDDINGS

Skipped Stir-up Sunday? Hannah Evans finds the best festive treats to buy in



Paul Ainsworth Christmas pudding

Of course your mother makes the best, but after that, try chef Paul Ainsworth's family recipe, with cherries and Cornish stout. £39, dishpatch.co.uk



Macknade pudding

This beauty is packed with vine fruits, apples, apricots, almonds and ginger, blended with ale and brandy for extra festive flavour. £11.95, macknade.com



St James pudding

Handmade? Tick. (In Essex, FYI.) Jam-packed with fruit? Tick. Boozy with liberal amounts of full-strength navy rum and cognac? Tick. £18.95, fortnumandmason.com



Claridge's large pudding

It's not Christmas in my house without one of these XXL puddings. I went to see how they make them and I'm not surprised they taste so good. £75, shop.claridges.co.uk ➔

Christmas cakes



Iced Christmas cake A classic Christmas cake, finished with a glug of Scotch whisky from the royal-approved Fife Arms hotel in the Highlands. £25, farmshop.co.uk



Betty's jewelled fruits Christmas cake You can't go wrong with a Betty's bake, and this brings the sparkle, covered in glistening fruits. £25.25, bettys.co.uk



Daylesford organic fruit and nut This whopper of a cake is beautifully moist and dense, filled with juicy brandy-soaked fruit and topped with almonds and walnuts. £40, daylesford.com



Stag Classic This cake has won several gongs. It's juicy, crunchy and laced with French brandy, with a full coat of marzipan icing. £49.60, megrivers.co.uk

Panettone



Milano panettone Once again our panettone of the year. It's light and aromatic, without being too sweet or having a ghastly flavoured topping. £25.99, souschef.co.uk



Dolce & Gabbana choc chip You get two for the price of one here: a classic chocolate studded panettone and a very pretty designer tin. £55, johnlewis.com



River Café classic Queen of the Med Ruth Rogers has released the annual River Café panettone. Made in Naples, this has won several prizes. £40, shoptherivercafe.co.uk



Pistachio panettone Pistachio fans will cry Hallelujah when they try this soft, bouncy enriched dough with pistachio cream and nuts. £28.95, shop.linastores.co.uk

Yule logs



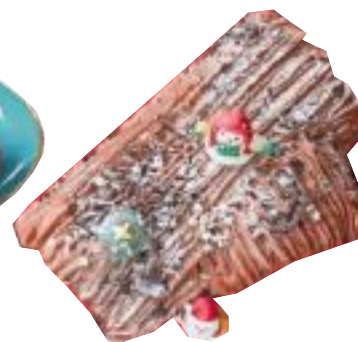
Daylesford organic chocolate and orange yule log A winning flavour combo in a cake. This chocolate sponge is filled with orange curd and topped with rich ganache. £26, daylesford.com



Cook chocolate yule log I love Cook for its range of topnotch frozen food and treats, like this dark chocolate sponge covered in chocolate buttercream. £20, cookfood.net



Fortnum & Mason praline yule log This airy handrolled chocolate sponge is covered in the lightest melt-in-your-mouth praline ganache and chopped hazelnuts. £24.95, fortnumandmason.com



Patisserie Valerie traditional yule log Genoese sponge covered in a moreish Swiss meringue buttercream that will have you going back for another slice. £54.95, patisserie-valerie.co.uk ■



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a friend's hesitation at inviting me into their home because they don't want to bother with what might come across as my high standards. Hopefully it doesn't sound too much like a pressured sales pitch, but I always clarify that I choose to spend my time and resources in ways that fulfil me – using the good china or laying an elaborate table, for example – with no expectation that these things tick everyone's boxes. It is presumptuous to assume anyone else wants to make the same choices, regardless of whether or not they can afford to.

If I fear a potentially meaningful friendship is being stunted because I do not have the context that a peek into their home would allow, I am blunt enough to invite myself over for a cup of tea. I follow up by reminding my reluctant host that I prefer making my own tea, even when I am a guest – I always have a couple of teabags on hand – and, most importantly for anyone fretting over their china, I prefer a solid mug over a fancy cup. This approach has only backfired once, when a friend deadpanned back, “I only ever drink coffee.”

Ignoring the conventional wisdom around money can have more serious repercussions than the occasional faux pas. Especially when it comes to raising children. If you are lucky enough to be very rich, the only responsible way to parent is as if you are not.

Before you judge me a hypocrite, consider whether you would allow a child to drink alcohol or load a rifle. The adrenaline rush from splashing cash, the power and entitlement that come with it, are as potent and addictive. Horror stories of privileged prepubescents are legion. I see too many of them stomping down the Kings Road in London in their Dior Air Jordan high-tops (£2,200) to be shocked any more. I am not the only one unimpressed. Many public schools, including the one my sons go to, have imposed a £15 limit on Secret Santa gifts this year. A teacher explained it was prompted by previous excesses, including an envelope with £50 inside.

Surprisingly, some of the richest people I know host simple birthday parties for their children. Without exception, all have been at their (admittedly very large) homes near Regent's Park. Despite the impressive setting, the main attraction for the children is usually something simple like a trampoline or a candy floss machine. Adults are offered glasses of Bollinger with a side of sausage rolls from Waitrose. Not surprisingly, the only person I know in real life serving jail time for fraud had Cirque du Soleil perform at his three-year-old's birthday and gave iPads as return presents (I still have mine and still feel rather guilty about it).

More worrying than such conspicuous

consumption is the recent shift towards creating experiences for the little people. The trend started at the end of the pandemic, from which the one percent emerged richer than before, looking to make up for lost time with typical zeal.

Parents who would not be caught dead buying designer clothes for their children suddenly thought nothing of spending similar sums on an afternoon of “educational fun”, as one mum called it. To her, the logical next step for an eight-year-old who likes making playlists on Spotify was Sunday afternoon jam sessions in their Holland Park basement led by the guest DJ from neighbourhood celeb hangout Laylow. Two weeks in, Guetta Jr had a Pioneer stand with a laptop, headset and speakers and the promise of a built-to-spec sound booth if he stuck with the classes for a year.

Admittedly, very few hyperprivileged children spend their days slumped in front of a PlayStation. Their parents have the means to make real life as exciting for them as a fantasy. A couple in Hong Kong tell me about a piano that costs as much

The one percent are not all obsessing about taxes and peerages, although many are

as a Range Rover, bought when their little prodigy passed her grade 5 piano. A dad in Dubai tells me of the air-conditioned indoor riding arena he has built at the family's ranch in neighbouring Fujairah. I cannot help wondering if the local riding club with its excellent (air-conditioned) facilities would not have sufficed.

Playdates are similarly pimped up. Art teachers are called in for lessons on perspective (oh, the irony); padel instructors alternate with kickboxing coaches; at a pinch, the in-house chef can guide little hands in the making of sushi rolls. I realise these parents, like all parents, want to prepare their children for the real world. However, their misguided attempts show how little they understand it themselves.

The concert-grade piano and air-conditioned arena may seem like bizarre choices to anyone on the outside, but everything within the one-percent bubble reinforces such behaviour. The only way out is to get out, literally.

The talented ten-year-old in Hong Kong? An hour of listening to superstar pianist Benjamin Grosvenor and the realisation that his prodigious talent was nurtured in a semi-detached in Southend would have served her better than a Steinway. Encouraging my children to play street cricket – which originated in

India, where I was born – has been (forgive the pun) a game-changer. Boys in canvas shoes so old they are breaking apart regularly thump boys in pristine whites and skill trumps social standing every time.

Some of these preconceptions about the way the super-rich parent are amusing, others not as much. I gave up working full-time as the editor of a financial publication many years ago and regard this time with my kids as the greatest of all my many blessings. Even so, I have come to regard regular exposure to adults in a professional setting good for my mental health.

I made the mistake of saying this at a coffee morning in South Kensington. It was organised by a mums' WhatsApp group that had been my lifeline when I didn't know a good nanny agency (because there aren't any) or paediatrician. “If you needed the money I would understand,” said one stay-at-home mum archly, unimpressed by my selfishness. “How would you manage? And what would happen to your kids?” accused another.

It's tempting to label stay-at-home mums as out of touch, but this is simply not true. Usually supportive, my friends may have reacted badly to my decision to work, but so did a woman who would benefit from my doing so. “Why would you want to get back in the bloody trenches?” asked a recruiter I have known and worked with for years. “Has something changed?” Her “changed” implied reduced circumstances. Because why else would anyone want to work?

It does not help anyone's view of one percenters that celebrities who are more famous for being rich than whatever made them so in the first place have become tropes for this demographic. They show up to work because they are #always hustling; fly private because their #time is money and help those less fortunate because they are all about the #instagood. All of which makes the one percent seem insta-insufferable. Smug is not a good look regardless of how kind, intelligent or hard-working you are. Just ask Rishi Sunak.

As a result, stealth wealth may have started off as a fashion statement, but for some it remains firmly a lifestyle choice. One of the people I contacted in the course of researching this piece, for example, took the bus to come and meet me and said he does so regularly. He also owns the building in central London where we were meeting.

Turns out, the wealthy are not a homogenous mass. The one percent are not all obsessing about avoiding taxes and collecting peerages, although many are. They have extraordinary lifestyles and some take great pleasure in flaunting it. But at close quarters, you may find they are, nonetheless, disappointingly ordinary. ■

The BILLIONAIRE'S LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Estelle Manor



Dr Suha Kersh



Verbier



Valentino

Costa Smeralda



The Araki

Winter

- Jackson Hole, Wyoming – wide open spaces, Yellowstone-esque skies, a burgeoning foodie world and “not too much of a scene” (yet).
- Mustique – essentially like a private car-less island for its old monied residents.
- Parrot Cay, Turks and Caicos – where the houses are enormous and a quick hop from the US.
- Six Senses Zighy Bay, Oman.

Skiing

- A chalet with private chef in Verbier, Courchevel or Machapuchare in Val d'Isère (purpleski.com).
- Zermatt for the serious skiers, driving up for the day from Zurich, where non-skiers can kick back in the hotel Baur au Lac (bauraulac.ch).

FOOD

London restaurants

- The Araki's small sushi counter, with fish brought in fresh from Tokyo. No soy sauce allowed (the-araki.co.uk).
- Endo at the Rotunda – third-generation sushi master Endo Kazutoshi's place in the old BBC television centre (endoatrotunda.com). No phones allowed.
- 5 Hertford Street, a respite from the flashier Mayfair spots, with consistently good food and privacy assured (5hertfordstreet.com).

SPAS

- Estelle Manor – an upmarket alternative to Soho Farmhouse (estellemanor.com).
- Amangiri, Utah – one-to-one yoga in the canyon at 5am (aman.com).
- The Kusnacht Practice in Zurich for burnout (kusnachtpractice.com)

CARS

- Heritage Classic Cars in South Kensington – a vintage dealer for Jaguar E-Types and Porches (heritageclassic.com).
- For the country, a Mercedes EQS SUV or an electric Range Rover (not a Tesla).

AIRPORTS

- Oxford Airport, Farnborough and Biggin Hill – where private jets are based. Or the private entrance at Heathrow, where you can drive right up to the door of your jet.

GROCERIES

- Bayley and Sage (bayley-sage.co.uk).
- Daylesford Organic (daylesford.com).
- Panzer's for its New York-style delicacies, like homemade pecan pies (panzers.co.uk).
- Harrods Food Halls.

PREP SCHOOLS

- Sussex House, Falkner House and the Hall in London.
- The Dragon and Summer Fields, Oxford.

HEALTH

Tweakments

- NAD+ infusions at Lanserhof on Dover Street (lanserhof.com).
- Botox at Ouronyx in St James's (ouronyx.com).
- Laser facials and the latest hi-tech treatments by Dr Suha Kersh at 23MD, Chelsea (23md.co.uk). The go-to doctor for natural-looking tweakments.
- Fat Trilogy Facial Rejuvenation at the Galen Clinic (thegalenclinic.com).

Hair

- Nicola Clarke at Nicola Clarke – best for blondes. Does all the Kates – Moss, Winslet and Blanchett. Or Joel Goncalves for brunettes. Does Queen Rania of Jordan (nicolaclarke.com).

Gym

- KX – gym and private members' club in Chelsea (kxlife.co.uk).
- The Fitness Centre at the Peninsula, Grosvenor Place (peninsula.com).

Cosmetic surgeons

- Dr Olivier Henry de Frahan (docteurolivierdefrahan.com).
- Mr William van Niekerk (cadoganclinic.com).

Private chef

- Christopher Davey aka the Cotswold Guy – a favourite of David Beckham (thecotswoldguy.co.uk). ■

‘What opportunities have we missed because we had to get home to the kids?’

‘Deals get done on golf courses or late at night in bars’

‘I want more women to have more money. That’s my revenge’

MY MISSION TO MAKE WOMEN BIG IN BUSINESS

Nell Daly used to be a social worker and impoverished single mother. Now she’s launching a £50 million investment fund to back female entrepreneurs in the UK. She tells Harriet Walker how she turned herself into a venture capitalist overnight – and why it’s time for women to take on a male-dominated world



Nell Daly, 49,
photographed by
Tom Jackson at the
Kensington, London





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JOHN LEWIS
MONEY

She has been a single mother with three children and no support from her ex; a social worker helping victims of domestic abuse and rape; and a Fox News commentator, sleepless at the threats of sexual violence filling her Twitter feed and voicemail.

You've probably heard of angel investors, but Nell Daly's approach to business is more vengeful god instead.

The 49-year-old native New Yorker is in London to launch a new £50 million investment fund and mentoring scheme, Revenge Capital, this month. Its aim is to provide what she calls "FU money" to the UK's neglected female entrepreneurs. Daly believes that if you are a woman running your own company, you deserve your seed money alongside the sort of dish that is better served cold.

It's clever branding – emotive and sexy – because any woman in business should, probably, be a bit righteously angry at the odds stacked against her. According to Forbes, data shows the amount of capital going to back all-male founder teams went up from 80 per cent in the first half of 2023 to 86 per cent in the first half of 2024. The amount of capital going to back businesses founded by women has fallen from 2 per cent to 1.8 per cent. Last year, the British Business Bank found that the share of equity investment to all-female-led businesses here has remained roughly static for the past decade.

"Deals get done on golf courses," Daly says when we meet in the Kensington hotel in west London. "They get done late at night over dinner, in clubs and bars. How often do [women] have to say no to a networking opportunity because they have to get home to the children? What have we missed because of that?"

In 2018, Boston Consulting Group reported that, although start-ups founded by women generated 10 per cent more cumulative revenue than men's over five years, female business owners receive "significantly less" early stage investment than their male counterparts. Yet a study by First Round Capital found that companies with a female CEO had a return on investment 63 per cent higher than those run by men.

"You're more likely to make your money back if you invest in women and you're going to have more growth if you have diversity around the table. This is just good business. We need to teach investors and corporate teams the monetary value of inclusivity," Daly says.

Nell Daly has Rachel Reeves in her corner too. In September, the chancellor backed the Invest in Women Taskforce – launched last March by the Barclays exec Hannah Bernard and the AllBright business collective co-founder and



'I had three little kids. I was being threatened but couldn't afford any security'

entrepreneur Debbie Wosskow – which has at its heart the establishment of a £250 million fund of funds. The initiative is designed not only to help direct capital towards female founders but to encourage more women to invest as well.

"Culturally we don't give opportunities to people outside the system or who haven't had a chance," Daly says. "But Revenge is not philanthropic. We want to make money."

It was after one of her regular segments as a commentator on Tucker Carlson's Fox News show that Daly realised she was too poor to feel safe. After being made redundant during Covid, she and her

children had just moved back in with her terminally ill mother.

Daly had made a comment about women voting for Donald Trump even after the pussy-grabbing tape had come out – which she refuses to repeat to me in case it reopens the abuse – that Carlson quoted in his opening monologue. Her social accounts racked up 2,000 comments within an hour and her voicemail filled with hate messages threatening extreme sexual violence.

"I was lying in bed, with three little kids and my mom dying of cancer in the other room, with someone ringing my phone," she tells me. "I had a Taser ➔"

Armed only with coffee stirrers and a pen, Louisa Hussey spreads a little festive joy

TINY ACTS, HUGE EFFECT

Louisa Hussey and her daughter Imogen have come up with a unique way to make strangers' days a little brighter over the Christmas period

Huddling in cafés over cake and hot chocolate is top-tier festive mother and daughter time for Louisa Hussey and seven-year-old Imogen. It's also a great vantage point to spot those who might be in need of a Christmas pick-me-up.

A December afternoon just like this sparked a tradition of anonymous kindness that has, since it started, lifted up dozens of people around their village of Didsbury, a suburb of Manchester.

"I remember this particular day," says Louisa, 45, a menopause therapist. "The weather was horrible, there were mums with babies and buggies struggling in the wet. Everybody seemed stressed. People were still working, the baristas were still working. It looked like people could do with a boost.

"So Imogen and I tried to think of something nice to write to each person on the wooden stirrers. Something like 'Your hair looks nice today' or 'You look like a good mummy to your baby'. Imogen would drop the sticks on the table and scurry back. It was so wonderful seeing people's reactions."

One man was buried deep in his laptop. "We wrote, 'All your hard work will be worth it'. He came over almost in tears. He said, 'That was the most lovely thing. Do you mind

if I share some sweets with your daughter?' She was thrilled and it really boosted us."

A barista who'd gone out of her way to help an elderly lady got a note saying: "We spotted you being really kind today." "She was so delighted she kept showing everyone," Louisa says.

As they stepped outside, Louisa asked Imogen how she felt. "She said, 'I feel like I want to cry but I don't know why!' I said, 'Oh no, me too!' It made us happy too."

Inspired by the pleasure a simple gesture could evoke, the pair began dropping joyful notes around the village in envelopes with the words "Open me" or "This is for you".

Each message is individual: "We might write, 'We hope you have a wonderful Christmas and we hope we can bring some calm to you,'" says Louisa. "If we know someone is having a hard time or been lovely, we'll make sure one finds its way to them." But some of the notes are found by total strangers. "We don't know what happens to those, which is really exciting."

You might be lucky enough to find a note or card on your car windscreen or a park bench, or in a plant pot, hedge or letterbox; each one left with love. "You never know what somebody is dealing with. We just hope it makes them feel better."

ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE



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flashlight. I was on the local police radar. But I didn't have the money for security or to put a fence system around my house."

That was her last appearance on the show. "My friends said I was setting myself up by being a liberal commentator. In the end, it just felt too dangerous."

"I said to my mom before she died, 'I could get a job as a hospital administrator – and there is nothing wrong with that – but I'm never going to work myself out of this hole, and I'm never going to be able to send my kids to college.'"

Instead, she decided to close her private practice as a therapist and pivot to venture capital, a form of private equity that funds fledgling businesses with growth potential in the hope of making money off the back of their success stories. Her part of the chain was the schmoozing and persuasion needed to convince investors to part with their cash.

"To make real money in America, you either build a business and sell out or you get into venture," she says. "Or you marry the guy from the country club. But I married an artist and I was a social worker with a master's in fine art. Which are two careers where you choose to be poor."

So, how does one become a venture capitalist overnight?

"I googled that shit," she laughs. "The hardest thing I've done wasn't raising capital but convincing people I wasn't a social worker [any longer]. Then one day someone said, 'Can you help us raise middle market debt?' And I was like, 'Sure,' and hung up. Then I googled, 'What is middle market debt?'"

That was five years ago. Since then, Daly has raised tens of millions for companies and projects – and made several herself, though she is too coy to put a number on it – working alongside the ultra-hip talent incubator Delete Ventures, which matches creatives and edgy brands with investment. One such is the DJ Paul Oakenfold's cult record label Perfecto, which has plans to expand into events next year.

Yet the more successful Daly was with the money, the less difference she felt she was making to the people she had once taken an oath to look out for – a legal requirement so she could practise as a social worker in the US.

"There's a big difference between getting a seat at the table and having a voice at the table," she says. "I hadn't really disrupted the system."

The difference in funding and opportunities between businesses run by men and those run by women is about more than sexism, she explains. Female entrepreneurs tend to set up consumer businesses that serve other women or make and sell products, while investors know they can make more money by putting their funds into tech

businesses, which are more often than not founded by men.

"There are specifically female funds out there – every woman is hitting them up for money. What irritates me is that when a female founder goes to raise capital, she gets this answer: 'I have a friend who's a woman who invests in women.' That doesn't ever happen to a man. So you have all these women fighting for resources – what a great way to keep them busy. Like putting one bit of food in the fish tank and saying: you guys are good now, right?"

That's why Daly insists Revenge Capital will invest across all sectors, to encourage as many different types of businesses – and owners – to pitch. The fund has already invested in several female-led companies, from a buzzy British canned margarita brand called Pimentae and the hip homeware online marketplace Glassette, founded by the TV presenter Laura Jackson, to a more forward-facing adaptogenic mushroom supplements range called Mother Made and an AI-powered "social listening" platform designed to match brands with record labels and

(the singer Sam Smith's label) and a founding partner of the Openwork Partnership, a fintech asset management network that would, were it a bank, be the largest in England by the amount it loans. Having grown up in Weston-super-Mare, working shifts in the roadside caff his Cypriot immigrant parents ran before his school day started, Antonio has since become one of the UK's most influential power players you've never heard of.

"I met him on another deal," Daly says, "but I thought he was an accountant, so I asked if he could get me an introduction to Mayfair Associates. He said, 'I started it 30 years ago. So why are we having breakfast?'"

"I had the *Hamilton* music in my head – 'take a shot'. So I said, 'I'm looking for money for women in the UK. I cannot find any and if I don't find any soon, I'm going back to the US.' I told him I could do more business in Miami in one day than in all of the UK in a year."

Then she asked him for £10 million. She also asked him how many women he had invested in, how many he knew on

'To make real money in America, you marry a guy from the country club or get into venture'

create soundtracks for online content.

"There are enough people giving money to the mainstream," Daly says. "What will overlooked subcultures invent? As a psychotherapist for a decade, I saw so many people with horrible depression and anxiety that was so often linked to their finances. I feel like I have the skill set and the network to help people by trying to influence economic change."

On the social work beat "in the trenches" of New York in the early Noughties, Daly saw the Aids crisis in poorer parts of Brooklyn and worked with domestic abuse causes, for a time wearing a bleeper so she could be contacted day or night to accompany rape victims to hospital to ensure evidence was collected. After opening her own practice on Fifth Avenue, she then worked with people suffering from the fallout of 9/11 and the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre.

"I learnt to sweat down my back," she says, "because I couldn't show it on my face. What good is a therapist who falls apart? You listen, they leave and then you vomit in the trash can."

Presumably this steeliness is what helped Daly persuade her partner in Revenge, the financier Andrew Antonio, to join forces.

Antonio, 53, is behind the commercial partnership firm Mayfair Associates (which works with talent from sport, film and music), a partner in Method Music

boards and how many female founders were in his portfolio.

"It blew me away," Antonio tells me. "Why women are so undervalued in venture capital is beyond me. I wanted to do something about it."

According to Nell Daly, he called the morning after their meeting. "He said, 'I'm going to make it £50 million.'"

Their milieu and Revenge Capital itself feel straight out of the same landscape as the TV series *Industry*, with its banker interns, druggy traders and venal hedge-fund managers.

"I've never done cocaine," Daly says with a laugh, after holding forth for almost 90 minutes fuelled only by an almond-milk cappuccino, throwing out theories, philosophies, motivational quotes and business plans the way other people talk about the weather. "The world would not be a good place with me on cocaine."

She does however admit to an intensity that sometimes means working through day and night without realising when she is "in the zone", but Daly practises yoga and goes running to maintain her wellbeing and equilibrium. Her children are now 20, 15 and 13.

"I slept with my shoes on for years, raising my kids alone on a social worker salary," she says. "It's hard to shake that feeling. That's why I want to do everything I can to make sure more women have more money. That's my revenge." ■

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OUR CHRISTMAS WISH LIST

Editor: Monique Rivalland

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- ★ Emma Barnett ★ Chioma Nnadi
- ★ Jessica Diner ★ Alex James
- ★ Melissa Hemsley ★ Under £15
- ★ Under £20 ★ Under £30, and more

CAITLIN MORAN'S PICKS



Caitlin Moran with her cockapoo, Luna

'It's bird crack for robins'



RSPB bird food This seems to be like crack for your average suburban bird population – sparrows, robins, tits. Enjoy your loved one joining millions of other middle-aged people shouting, "A WREN! I'VE JUST SEEN A WREN!" over breakfast. £4.75 for 900g, rspb.org.uk



'The perfect gift for my dog'



Dog toothbrush Look, I know it's not really a gift from your dog's point of view. A toothbrush can easily be surmised as a very disappointing thing. But in ten years, when you're not having to get ten of your dog's teeth extracted? Then they will see what a gift it truly was. Except they won't. Because they are dogs, and will not comprehend a decade-long causal chain. £6.49 for a pack of five, pet-supermarket.co.uk

Wintering by Katherine May If you have a loved one who greets every winter with a grimace, *Wintering* might just change their lives. Quietly philosophical and absolutely beautiful, it teaches you how to love, well, winter. Rider, £12.99



'Are you a man or a mouse? Drink tea from a pint mug'



A huge tea mug I personally think it's the act of a barbarian to drink tea in anything less than a pint mug. Come on! Are you a man or a mouse? HAVE A PINT OF TEA. This Scottish company does heaps of different designs, including this pretty floral one, and you can have them personalised if you wish. £13, eeksiepeeksie.com

More Caitlin gifts overleaf →

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *UNDER £30*

CAITLIN MORAN

The gift of laughter and the best alternative to white wine



Subscription to Viz OK, it's £5.95 over, but for those of a certain generation, the continually profane Viz still has the most guaranteed laughs per issue of any publication. And the readers' top tips are always oddly profound: "Hide potatoes wrapped in tin foil around your house and then if it burns down, at least you have a tasty snack." £35.95, magazine.co.uk

Sali Hughes Must-C Anytime Daily Serum On the basis that I loathe a non-useful present but also want to give things that provide joy, this is, simply, the best everyday hydrating serum on the market. I get through ten bottles a year and gift them to all my friends – it feels and smells like Drunk Elephant, but hits the bank balance like Barry M. £15, boots.com



Moka pot Imagine you were a teenager and you had your own coffee pot. You'd feel like an emperor. A highly caffeinated emperor. £28.19, Pezzetticlumsygoat.co.uk



Beyond Retro gift card I know gift cards are seen as a cop-out, but honestly, there's very little point in trying to guess what teenagers will want for Christmas. They're just picky. Beyond Retro is online, vintage and affordable – your teen could easily pick up a sparkly sequinned dress for £30, plus rejoice in being super-ethical. From £10, beyondretro.com



Fine cyder After a certain age, many women find that white wine tends to make them – how to put this? – deranged. This gorgeous cyder from the Newt in Somerset tastes exactly like white wine, but with all the dangerous Lady Petrol elements removed. Like Strongbow for the elegant woman. £11.95, shop.thenewtinsomerset.com



Travel tumbler Like everyone else in the western world, I've had 474,747,474 re-useable coffee cups. These tumblers are, undoubtedly, the best. No drips, no leaks, and built like a tank. Get the wood-effect one for the man in your life who likes to think he's a carpenter. And the bright orange one for the teen who loses everything. From £29 for 350ml size, uk.24bottles.com



Blue highballs The great thing about blue glasses is that you can put white wine in them when wine snobs ask you for red and they won't notice. £18.99 for six, robertdycas.co.uk



What about Men? One of the big clichés about Christmas is that it's incredibly hard to buy presents for men. So why not buy them the Sunday Times No 1 bestseller, which is not only all about men, but also explains exactly why that is. (TLDR: it's the patriarchy, of course.) Ebury Press, £8.99



Nag Champa incense sticks I've always found it mad that "a scented candle" is the go-to present for people with smelly houses when incense sticks a) last longer, and b) aren't more expensive than gold. These are the best. £9.56, amazon.co.uk



My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *UNDER £20*

EMMA BARNETT

The Today presenter wants a bespoke biscuit – and a mug to dunk it in



Personalised biscuits

I love the wittiness of this company's biscuit messages, and the stunning affordable designs. Say it in yummy biscuits and say it well. My kind of Christmas jumper – an edible one. £13 per biscuit, the-kitsch-hen.co.uk



Cosy blanket scarf

I don't quite know when scarves and blankets decided to blur the lines and get serious, but I am in. All in. £20, next.co.uk



A tea timer Most people do not leave teabags in for long enough. At a minimum it should be three minutes; ideally four for a decent brew. Take it from me. The oven timer will do the same job but this is a bit more glam for proper tea drinkers. £16.95, fortnumandmason.com



Colour Your Streets colouring book From Cornwall to Aberdeen and 130-plus places in between – my husband, Jeremy, and I are creating local colouring books of neighbourhoods, towns and cities across the UK. Find your area and colour in the local landmarks you know and love. £14.99, colouryourstreets.co.uk



Rose-scented candle

If I didn't struggle with looking after fresh flowers so much, I would have roses on the go the whole time and stuff my face into them for the sweet, sweet scent. Instead, I can just light this. £15, aeryliving.com



Salt and pepper set Pleasingly Barbara Hepworth-esque – and they look like mini people. £10, dunelm.com



Everyday mug

These cups are the tactile treat you need for your hot drink. We call them dimple mugs in our house. £38, emmalancey.com



Penguin postcards

The perfect thank-you cards. Matching the cover to the person is part of the fun. £17.99, shop.penguin.co.uk



Japanese santoku knife With this quality and at this price, I am game for sharpening up my kitchen act. £20, procook.co.uk

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *FOR HER*

CHIOMA NNADI

Prada lunchbox and a new yoga mat – what the editor of Vogue wants



Earrings If you're going to splurge, then make it jewellery. These earrings from New York's En Studio are not your ordinary hoops. £1,200, enstudionyc.com



Prada lunchbox I can't think of a better incentive to take food to work than a Prada lunchbox. £140, prada.com



Seletti hybrid fruit plate A good gift should have a sense of humour and this twist on traditional porcelain always makes me smile. £42, selfridges.com



Austin Austin hand cream set Exquisite packaging goes a long way and these two hand balms smell divine too. No artificial fragrances or other nasties. £38, austinaustinorganic.com

SISTAH SPACE

Sistah Space donation FKA Twigs appeared on my first cover for Vogue in April and introduced me to Sistah Space, a not-for-profit organisation supporting women and families affected by domestic violence. Children are the focus of gift-buying in my family; a donation is a thoughtful alternative for grown-ups. sistahspace.org



Liforme Zodia yoga mat These have something of a cult status – trust me, doing downward dog doesn't feel any better than on one of these. £145, liforme.com



Delft print hot water bottle I recently visited the Newt in Somerset and spent almost the entire afternoon in the gift shop. I bought this for my mum – and she hasn't stopped raving about it since. £30, shop.thenewtinsomerset.com



Inventing the Runway Vogue's new immersive exhibit at Lightroom is the equivalent to a front row seat at Fashion Week. It's an excellent introduction to this world for any fashion obsessive: my 14-year-old self would have been blown away had this show existed when I was a kid. From £25, under-18s and students from £15, lightroom.uk



Alex Eagle Murano mosaic glass I think everything tastes better when you're drinking out of beautiful glassware – even water – and you can collect or gift these one at a time. £120 each, alexeagle.com

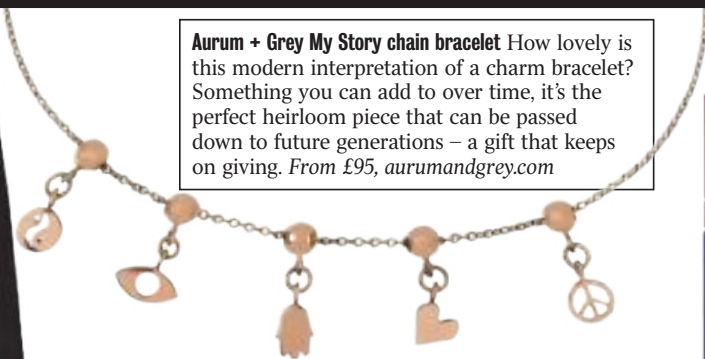
My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *FOR HER*

JESSICA DINER

What has caught the Vogue beauty director's eye this year?



Jigsaw maxicoat
My love of a good coat knows no bounds and this maxi-length wool offering is my recent most coveted. Confession: I already have it in burgundy and green, but the cut and quality are so good that I am craving the black version too. £385, jigsaw-online.com



Aurum + Grey My Story chain bracelet How lovely is this modern interpretation of a charm bracelet? Something you can add to over time, it's the perfect heirloom piece that can be passed down to future generations – a gift that keeps on giving. From £95, aurumandgrey.com

Ninja air fryer Is now the time finally to cave and get an air fryer? I have been holding out on the basis that they take up too much space on the kitchen counter, but this compact new model might just have me convinced. £99, ninjakitchen.co.uk



Augustinus Bader The Renewal Essentials set
This is the ultimate gift for any skincare enthusiast like me. The perfect size for travel, it comprises three of my favourite Augustinus Bader products: the Rich Cream, Serum and Eye Cream. £245, augustinusbader.com

A Taste of Panzer's hamper All year round you can find me wandering the aisles of this north London deli, and this hamper is every foodie's dream. Think delicious smoked salmon, bagels, artisan jam and honey, olive oil, prosecco... £140, panzers.co.uk



Ancient Greek Anilio slippers It's cosy season, and these are the perfect level of snugness and chicness to elevate the at-home footwear game. £280, ancient-greek-sandals.com



Sarah Chapman facial gift voucher A facial in Sarah Chapman's clinic is hands-down one of my favourites in the UK. The right combination of high-tech and holistic, you can expect a lot of massage combined with skin-rejuvenating gadgets. If you want to gift your way to my heart, this is how to go about it. £190, sarahchapman.com



Velvet Smoke Baked Kiss candle I love a spicy evergreen candle at this time of year, but there's something subversively brilliant about this one from Velvet Smoke: essentially it evokes the winter sun we are all craving right now. £49, velvetSmoke.com



Bottega Veneta Lauren 1980 clutch Burgundy is undoubtedly the colour of the season, so if I could allow myself to request one indulgence, it would be this classic investment bag. (NB: Bottega Veneta calls this colour Barolo.) £3,140, bottegabeneta.com



My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST **CHEESE**

ALEX JAMES

What the Blur bassist and cheesemaker is hoping for this year



Banon classic French goat's cheese

Wrapped in chestnut leaves so it looks really pretty on the cheeseboard.
£10.95 for 100g, finefoodspecialist.co.uk



Blue Monday

Yes, this is one of mine, but blue cheese is best eaten at 12 weeks old, which means at Christmas you're eating the cheese made from the last flush of summer grass. Exquisite with sparkling wine (maybe Britpop...).
From £4.10 for 100g, thecheesesociety.co.uk

Appenzeller A personal festive favourite: it's like gruyère with the volume turned up.
From £11.45 for 200g, thecheeselady.co.uk



Westcombe or Montgomery cheddar

It's hard to pick a favourite cheddar, but these two were among those targeted by the "grate cheese robbers" at Neal's Yard in London in October. Magnificent with a glass of cider.
Westcombe, from £7.15 for 250g. Montgomery, from £9.20 for 250g. Both nealsyarddairy.co.uk



Gorwydd or Duckett's Caerphilly

My wife, Claire, insists on buying a whole farmhouse Caerphilly every Christmas and I'm not one to argue. Nothing melts like it. Great on a jacket spud. Or on toast, obviously.
Gorwydd, from £10.70 for 220g. Duckett's, from £10 for 240g. Both nealsyarddairy.co.uk

A massive chunk of grana padano
This stuff keeps indefinitely. It's similar to parmesan, but usually much better value. A huge chunk in the fridge will keep everyone happy for months on end. From £6.35 for 250g, affettoitaliano.co.uk



Truffle Baron Bigod

My daughter Beatrix has been talking about this since last Christmas. Hard to find, so if you see one, grab it. It's better than anything I've had in France.
From £13.75 for 250g, lovecheese.co.uk



Munster Another favourite with Beatrix. They sell whole ones on the counter at my local deli. It is a magnificent thing. It is hard to think of a way of feeling quite so decadent for the price. It's super-smelly, so hit it hard with plenty of pepper. £6.04 for 200g, epiceriecorner.co.uk



Bix Brie-style cheese made in Oxfordshire. I prefer this to French brie. £9.70 for 100g, finecheese.co.uk

Plus My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *MUSIC*



Portable speaker Every time I buy a new Bluetooth speaker it's twice as good and half the size of the last one I bought. These Bose ones are great. You can hook up two wirelessly as a stereo pair. £149.95, bose.co.uk

The Best Christmas Songbook Ever This is the one you need. I've been through a bunch of copies. It has everything from Wham! to Good King Wenceslas, Boney M to Hark the Herald Angels, with chord boxes for guitar strumalongs. Omnibus, £18.15 (amazon.co.uk)



Technics SL-1210 The benchmark turntable. The MK7 looks to be the current model, but I bought an old second-hand one in lockdown and listened to Chic on vinyl for months on end. Happy times. £799, richersounds.com



Sleigh bells I bought some when my son Geronimo was born and they still come out every Christmas Eve once the kids are in bed. "Did you see Santa?" "No, but I heard his sleigh." £10, jabadabado.com

Acoustic bass guitar Fender really has the hang of mass-producing guitars. I've always thought of basses like Biro's – it's not the pen, it's what you write with it that matters. This one sounds terrific and is practically indestructible. £255, fender.com



Egg shakers Playing the shaker is surprisingly satisfying, especially playing along to *Stayin' Alive*. The groove on that track is all hanging off the shaker. These are studio quality and check out the festive colours. Perfect stocking fillers. £1.75 each, percussionplus.co.uk



Cassette player Blur's record producer, Stephen Street, always said cassette players would make a comeback. Tape compression is a beautiful thing. You can grab an original Sony Walkman for as little as £20 online and bust out the old mixtapes. Our album *The Ballad of Darren* was released on cassette. Great for the stocking. From £19.99, ebay.co.uk



Headphones The sound engineer who did all the orchestral sessions at Abbey Road recommended Sennheiser's HD 650 headphones. I never travel without them. £429.99, sennheiser-hearing.com



Digital piano Every home should have a piano. Even the cheapest ones have really good hammer action keys and sound brilliant. From £472, uk.yamaha.com



The
must-have
bag this
Christmas





KETTLE®

LIKE CRISPS BUT KLASSIER.

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST **FOOD**

TONY TURNBULL

The food editor has his eye on a sturdy pepper mill and a year's worth of cheese



Martini glasses

A contemporary tulip shape that exudes *Mad Men* elegance. £50 for four, LSA (johnlewis.com)



Stackable porcelain bowls Microwave, oven and freezer safe. Nigella swears by them for her leftovers. £80 for three, hokanbowls.com

Gold cocktail set ProCook is a great source of no-nonsense kitchen equipment, but here it shows its fun side. £20, procook.co.uk



Cheese Crowd membership A different artisan cheese, plus tasting notes and a magazine, posted through your letterbox every month. From £13.50 a month, therealcheeseproject.co.uk



Chocolate library Ideal for bookworms with a taste for organic, ethical chocolate in unusual flavours. £48, ocelotchocolate.com



8in carbon-steel oven skillet Handmade in a forge in Dorset, this will outlast Le Creuset and comes with a 100-year guarantee. £165, alexpoleironwork.com



Cast iron pepper mill Can't vouch for its cars, but Peugeot makes the best pepper grinders. Solid and tactile. Also comes in black, blue, green or red. £50, boroughkitchen.com



Distillates Jalapeño martinis, beetroot negronis, soy sauce bloody marys... It's easy to up your cocktail game. From £29 each, diistil.com

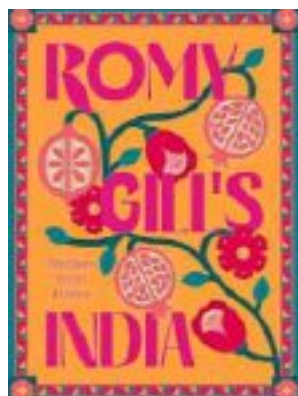


Kitchen knife sharpener The easiest way to keep your knives in perfect condition. £330, shop.tormek.co.uk

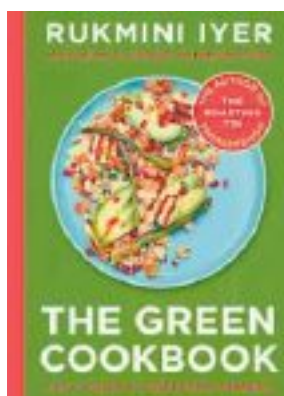
My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST **COOKBOOKS**

MELISSA HEMSLEY

The cookery writer chooses her favourite recipe books



Romy Gill's India: Recipes from Home (Hardie Grant, £28)



The Green Cookbook by Rukmini Iyer (Vintage, £25)



Graveable by Seema Pankhania (Michael Joseph, £22)

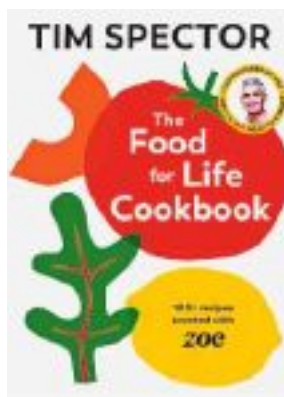
This features recipes inspired by Romy Gill's childhood in India and her kids' favourite dishes from her family kitchen in Bristol.

Rukmini Iyer is the author of the one-pot *Roasting Tin* series and is my go-to for fast weeknight dinners with minimal washing up.

Big on flavour and big on joy, this book is packed with easy recipes inspired by Seema Pankhania's travels and favourite foods.



Seasoning by Angela Clutton (Murdoch Books, £30)



The Food for Life Cookbook by Tim Spector (Jonathan Cape, £28)



Real Healthy by Melissa Hemsley (Ebury, £26)

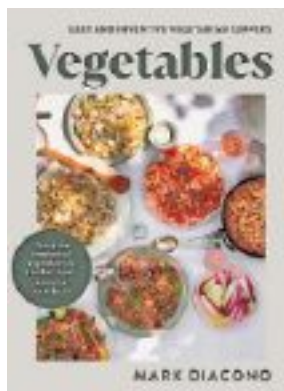
Stories and recipes to celebrate the seasons, which, when I can, is my favourite way to eat and feel better connected to nature.

This book is all about celebrating real produce and cutting back on ultra-processed food. Good for your gut – and tasty too.

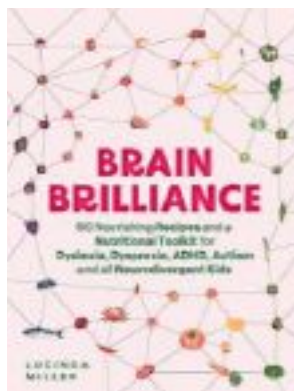
My latest book! Quick and easy gut-friendly recipes that will help you to eat healthily, from breakfast on the go to light suppers.



Make More with Less by Kitty Coles (Hardie Grant, £22)



Vegetables by Mark Diacono (Quadrille, £27)



Brain Brilliance by Lucinda Miller (Quadrille, £24)

I adore Kitty Coles' ethos of getting the most out of your food shop and stretching your precious pennies further.

Mark Diacono has been growing, cooking and writing about vegetables for years. Perfect for anyone who wants to fall in love with veg.

As someone who has ADHD and anxiety, I was thrilled when this book came out. It's accessible, family friendly and easy to follow.

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST **FOOD**

HANNAH EVANS

The Times deputy food editor wants a surprise box of wine and lots of fish



Spirits and liqueurs collection Everything you need to celebrate – and survive – Christmas. I'd ask Father Christmas for a lifetime supply of the negroni if I could. £175, farmshop.co.uk



Pralines A gift that will get a few "Ooh là là"s. Whole French almonds grilled and coated in caramelised sugar. £28.99, Mazet de Montargis (souschef.co.uk)



Chocolate reindeer
Why does Finn the reindeer look so startled? Because he's made from silky chocolate and knows somebody is about to eat him.
£8, laderach.com



Olive oil A food lover's dream: three litres of top-quality Greek oil in a pretty box. No security tags. £51, Honest Toil (souschef.co.uk)

Mystery wine case Four reds and two whites, selected by Marlo's experts. Takes the stress out of choosing the perfect wine box. £59.99, marlo.wine

Tinned fish hamper All the tinned fish any foodie could ever want, including cream of the catch sardines and the best Spanish cod. £250, thetinnedfishmarket.com

Hot sauce I rolled my eyes when I heard Brooklyn Beckham was launching a hot sauce, but it's actually rather good and not an eyesore, like most bottles. £29 for two, Cloud 23 at Whole Foods

Heart-shaped cheese
Smooth vintage Somerset cheddar. Get this on the cheeseboard now. £5.50 for 200g, Godminster (ocado.com)



My *CHRISTMAS WISH LIST* *DRINKS*

JANE MACQUITTY

The Times wine critic's recommendations for a festive tippie



1993 Speyside single malt Scotch whisky Very limited-edition vintage whiskies often cost thousands, making this a comparative steal. 46 per cent abv, £90, thewinesociety.com



2011 The Wine Society's 150th anniversary vintage port No Christmas is complete without a glass of vintage port and this is my indulgent pick for 2024. 20 per cent abv, £49, thewinesociety.com



Gonzalez Byass Tio Pepe Fino en Rama, 2024 Saca Sherry's no longer a fuddy-duddy tippie just for granny. This is the connoisseur's choice. 15 per cent abv, £19.50, leaandsandeman.co.uk



Cocchi vermouth di Torino A festive negroni essential from the gold-standard vermouth producer. 16 per cent abv, £25, bbr.com



2013 Disznoko Tokaji Aszu 5 Puttonyos The sweet wine of kings and king of sweet wines. Stilton loves this. 12 per cent abv, £47.50, leaandsandeman.co.uk



Akashi-Tai Sake Shiraume Ginjo Umeshu A nip of this unusual Japanese liqueur is a great way to round off a big Christmas dinner. 14 per cent abv, £22, waitrosecellar.com



Laurent-Perrier Héritage brut champagne An exceptional chardonnay-led Laurent-Perrier champagne worth every penny of its price. 12 per cent abv, £66, thefinestbubble.com



Gabriel Boudier crème de cassis de Dijon Ridiculously cheap full-strength cassis perfect for a festive kir royale. 20 per cent abv, £13, marksandspencer.com



Muestra Ocho tequila blanco For all you discerning margarita fans out there, just add triple sec, lime juice and salt. 40 per cent abv, £30, waitrose.com



Cambridge dry gin Made by a master of wine turned master distiller, this is my favourite British gin. 42 per cent abv, £35.95, greatwine.co.uk

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Home for Christmas

The season of comfort and joy is almost upon us, and that cosy bonhomie won't simply take care of itself. Luckily, just a few clever touches can leave your guests feeling all aglow

Christmas is a time to come together in style. Whether you are taking on the traditional festive dinner or hosting a cosy brunch with friends, it's all about making every meal a celebration at home.

Still, behind the scenes, hosting can feel fraught with the pressure of getting everything right and focusing on a picture-perfect setting for your guests. The key is to remember that a few carefully considered touches are all you need to inject a sense of ceremony into your Christmas gathering.

From hardworking serveware to unforgettable scents, here's a foolproof checklist that's sure to make you cherish those Yuletide hosting moments.



Journalist and interiors expert
Olivia Lidbury shares her top
picks for seasonal hosting

Start by setting the mood with decorations. Nothing signals a warm, Christmassy welcome quite like a wreath hanging from the front door (in fact, in the 19th century wreaths were also known as "welcome rings"). An everlasting style you can reach for year after year takes on special meaning and delivers immediate impact, leaving you with more time to wrap the presents – or the pigs in blankets. Opt for the largest, bushiest type you can: The White Company's Pre-Lit Foraged Wreath features a mix of faux greenery and twinkly LED lights.

Fragranced candles are guaranteed to fill the home with Christmas cheer, whatever

FESTIVE ESSENTIALS

Welcoming must-haves to light up your Yuletide



1 Larton Footed Marble Bowl **£95**; Stanley Dinner Candle Holder **from £18**; Ferne Twisted Stem Balloon Glasses, set of two **£58**; Filby Midi Vase **£18**; Witton Vase **£40**;

Luca Jour Work Tablecloth **£120**; Napkin Bows, set of six **£15**; Symons Teacup & Saucer **£15**; **2** Optic Footed Bowl **£60**; **3** Jute Woven Tableware **from £16**

4 Mixed Mini Baubles, set of 24 **£45**; **5** Hurricane Candle Holder **£40**; **6** Fir Tree Diffuser **£30**; **7** Foraged Winter Wreath, 60cm **£150**

8 Winter Botanical Candle Medium, **£35**; **9** Fern Twisted Stem Coupe Glasses, set of two **£58**; **10** Marble Large Worktop Board **£65**

the time of day. There's something about flickering flames and burning scent that makes everyone forget about the weather outside. The Winter Botanical Candle blends spicy cinnamon with notes of rich, warming clove and zesty orange to create a fragrance synonymous with this time of year. But why stop at scenting only a hallway or single room? If you're expecting house guests, layer cloakrooms and bedrooms with co-ordinating diffusers for a truly immersive, boutique hotel-inspired experience.

Food is the main event at Christmas and it's as much about the presentation as what's cooking. It pays to invest in vessels that will elevate even the simplest of ingredients. A footed bowl is one the most versatile items a host can own. It takes up so little table space but the uses are limitless: fill it with profiteroles, chocolate mousse or trifle, or make a punnet of tangerines look irresistible. Outside of mealtimes, perch it

“

**With glassware,
December is the time
to raise your game**

on a side table and load it with nuts or chocolates. You'll wonder how you got by without it.

A marble board is another savvy serving essential. Weighty and solid, it's a natural choice for laying out cheeses and crackers at the end of a meal. A large version makes the perfect canvas for a grazing board, as it can accommodate small pots of dips and antipasti alongside artfully arranged meats. A stoneware board is a hero in the kitchen too, giving discerning cooks a smooth, non-porous surface on which to roll out dough and pastry. It makes cleaning up afterwards easier and, used for chopping, it will help protect the worktop too.

When it comes to glassware, December is the time to raise your game. Hand-blown glass champagne coupes are a must for bubbles, while optic wine stems will add textural interest to a tablescape. But don't fall into the trap of saving elegant sets solely "for best": enjoy a freshly squeezed orange from a flute on Christmas morning, and reach for roomy red wine glasses to pour soft drinks into at a cocktail party. Cheers, one and all!

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AT THEWHITECOMPANY.COM**

THE WHITE COMPANY
LONDON

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *BEAUTY*

NADINE BAGGOTT

The beauty expert's top gifts – and the one she really, really wants



Benefit Soup'd Up Beauty Fun, clever and stylish, this can of goodies is recyclable and contains three of Benefit's bestsellers: Hoola bronzer, Bad Gal Bang! mascara and Benetint cheek and lip tint. £46, [boots.com](https://www.boots.com)



L'Occitane Christmas crackers These gorgeous crackers contain two minis of a shower cleanser and hand cream in one of four signature scents: vervain (lemon verbena), almond, shea butter and cherry blossom. £24.50 for box of four, [lookfantastic.com](https://www.lookfantastic.com)

Penhaligon's Dainty Tartlet set When in doubt, don't buy a single scent but a taster set. This one contains five mini Penhaligon's eau de parfums: Halfeti, Elisabethan Rose, Empressa, Luna and The Favourite. Perfect for travel too. PS, there is a Tiny Temptations set for men as well. £50, [penhaligons.com](https://www.penhaligons.com)



DS & Durga Christmas tree candle Christmas isn't Christmas without the scent of fir balsam. If you have a faux tree, this candle from the hippest fragrance brand of 2024 can supply that pine needle hit. £60, [spacenk.com](https://www.spacenk.com)

Bubble New Faces All Ages Starter Kit A skincare set for tweens and teens that want to experiment with a routine without using active ingredients that are too strong for sensitive skin. It contains cleansing gel, a toner mist and superlight moisturising gel cream. £30, [boots.com](https://www.boots.com)



Naturium Glowing Body Kit Naturium makes the best active-led body products. This set contains body cleansing oil (which turns to milk in the shower, so great for shaving, cleansing and caring in one) and body lotion. £12, [spacenk.com](https://www.spacenk.com)



Sam McKnight The Big Set Sam McKnight has created a hood dryer attachment and Velcro roller set for the next generation. This is so clever: it attaches to your dryer and heats, dries and sets hair into jumbo rollers to get the bouncy old-school style of models like Cindy Crawford. £50, [sammcknight.com](https://www.sammcknight.com)

Chanel Timeless make-up set I've been doing my job for 35 years but still Chanel can make my heart flutter. This contains the iconic Les Beiges bronzing cream, a Coco Rose lip colour and a black mascara. Trust me, even a cynical old beauty hack wants this. £128, [chanel.com](https://www.chanel.com)



My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *BEAUTY*

LESLEY THOMAS



A high-tech mask and a luxe lip balm are on our beauty editor's list

Teresa Tarmey Anti+ Serum There is a real buzz about this glow-enhancing skin treatment. If Tarmey's products are good enough for Julianne Moore, Kate Moss and Sienna Miller, they are good enough for me. £120, teresatarmey.com



Balmain Carbone I can't stop wearing this warm, spicy, musky eau de parfum, so I will need another one soon please. £195, selfridges.com



Soapsmith Body Butter Melt I always want to shout about this British company's fantastic range of bath and body products. Genuine affordable luxury. You can get me anything, but the super-rich body balms with cocoa, mango and shea butter are the latest. £20, soapsmith.com

Jo Malone scented candle Is it even Christmas without a bit of Jo Malone? I adore this festive pine and eucalyptus candle. £59, jomalone.co.uk



Hershesons The Wand My hair is curly, but sometimes I like to assert control and organisation. This tool does that with minimal damage and creates coils that last. £120, hershesons.com



Crème de la Mer The Lip Balm Yes, it's a lot for a lip balm – but that's why I am asking for this as a gift, rather than popping one into my weekly shop. It is also the best. £62, cremedelamer.co.uk



Nars Climax eyeliner and mini mascara duo A miniature version of one of the best mascaras in town, plus an essential black eyeliner. Perfect for travel – or a tiny evening bag. £25, narscosmetics.co.uk



79 Luxe Cream This hand cream is packed with so many protective, brightening and collagen-boosting ingredients – rose geranium, avocado oil, hyaluronic acid, vitamin C, squalene – I would gladly use it on my face. It even has frankincense, so please pop it in my stocking. £33, 79luxe.com



CurrentBody LED light therapy face mask It's expensive. But what price my definitely glowing skin when I use this freaky-looking contraption three times a week? £399, currentbody.com



My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *HOMES*

VICTORIA BRZEZINSKI

The Times interiors guru loves ceramics and a covetable coffee pot



Enamelware platter, £35
Serve in style with this dishwasher-safe splatter-pattern dish. £35, [toast](#)



Candelabra A cool creation by rising star Joe Ellwood, founder of Six Dot Design. £180, [earlofeast.com](#)



Espresso maker Stove-top pot that has a clever innovation to ensure a perfect cup every time. £70, [Alessi \(selfridges.com\)](#)



Wee Scoon rechargeable lamp
The "unexpected red" theory says a dash of scarlet makes any room look better. Couldn't agree more. £71.50, [pooky.com](#)



Jessica Hans x Hay vase Perfect for lovers of the abstract aesthetic, in two designs: Glossy Cow, above right, or Miró. £46, [einrichten-design.co.uk](#)



Fern Taylor 15cm bowl
Made in south London using a Japanese technique called nerikomi. £35, [mimmstudios.com](#)



Atlee bottle opener Available in red, alabaster or green Turkish marble, with built-in magnet. £65, [sohohome.com](#)

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST **GARDENS**

ANN TRENEMAN

The Times columnist and garden lover would dig a set of golden spades



Flower scissors I never knew I needed “flower scissors” until I received these Japanese ones from Niwaki a few years ago. They’re fun and functional. £42, niwaki.com



Hunter gardener clogs These are hard-wearing while also looking pretty cool. Made from waterproof vegan rubber with a sturdy tread and neoprene lining. £65, blacks.co.uk



The best secateurs Felco Model 2 Original are the Swiss firm's most popular pair, an ultimate all-rounder. Also very easy to spot amid the shrubbery. £74.99, worldoffelco.co.uk



Niwaki golden spades Strong, sharp and light – the perfect combination for digging. £36 (small), £42 (medium), £48 (long), niwaki.com



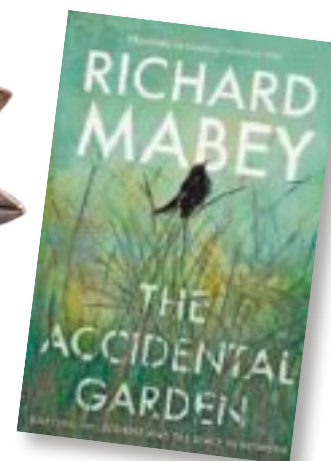
Lodge nest box It is thrilling when you first see a nest box being used. This one is great for a variety of birds, from blue tits to sparrows. £26, rspb.co.uk



Rusty metal sunflower stake
A handcrafted “flower” that will add pizzazz to your flower and veg beds. £29.99, notonthehighstreet.com



Drought-friendly seedbox
Brilliant climate-change mix from Kew with 360 seeds in total. £18, shop.kew.org



The Accidental Garden A great read, engaging and erudite, from the celebrated nature writer Richard Mabey, who at 60 finally got his own garden in Norfolk. Profile Books, £12.99

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST FOR HIM

JEREMY LANGMEAD

What the menswear expert longs for (yes, including socks)



A movie star shawl If you think you've missed out on Hollywood stardom, this collaboration between luxury cashmere specialist N.Peal and A-list photographer Greg Williams is the next best thing. It's inspired by iconic pieces from the movies – such as the shawl-collar cardigan favoured by Paul Newman and Steve McQueen. £995, shop.hollywoodauthentic.com

Groovy socks

Socks don't have to be boring. I love these rib knit ones by Thunders Love, a Spanish brand that uses a blend of soft recycled cottons. There is a plethora of colours and designs to choose from. £23, thunderslove.com



A cool coat

A roomy checked wool coat – half Sherlock Holmes, half *Downton Abbey* – helps make winter appear less drab and venturing outside more appealing. This version hits the style spot for town or country. £109.90, uniqlo.com

Face saver Feeling pale, blotchy or hungover? A tinted moisturiser is the answer. No one need know. With five shades to choose from, all SPF25, Let's Face It by Shakeup can help give anyone a blemish-free Boxing Day. £25, shakeupcosmetics.com



Sensible skincare We all know someone who cares about their skin but not enough to do much about it. This easy-to-use trio of multitasking products is all they need. It says what they do on the box: Good Morning, All Day Long, Good Night. £304, drdavidjack.com



High and dry If you're partial to some high-style sportswear and you live somewhere prone to long bouts of rain, this hooded Gore-Tex jacket by Margaret Howell and the Japanese sports brand Mizuno is both practical and pleasing. £755, margarethowell.co.uk

Join the crew These organic, recycled cotton crewnecks come in a huge array of shades, from sludgy to primary, and are both friendly to the environment and your appetite (they're oversized). £70, colorfulstandard.com



A stylish scent When you don't know their size, haven't a clue about their skin, but know that they like something stylish, then pick them a parfum. This one, with hints of bergamot, oak and smoke, is inspired by whisky barrels and called The Dandy. £85 for 30ml, penhaligons.com



Sports casual A roomy rugby-style polo shirt that gives you a sporting edge without you having to pass anything more trying than a canapé is always appealing. £45.99, zara.com

My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST *FITNESS*

PETA BEE

The kit the Times health and exercise guru is hoping to unwrap



D-Robe roll-top rucksack Made from recyclable and biodegradable fabrics, this sturdy, waterproof rucksack is big enough to carry a laptop and your gym or swim gear. £69, d-robeoutdoors.com



Coros Pace 3 sport watch Any runner will tell you that Coros watches are something of a status symbol thanks in part to their superb accuracy, but also because they look pretty good. £219, uk.coros.com



Shokz Open RunPro headphones Open-ear headphones that allow you to hear traffic as well as music. If they are good enough for legendary marathon runner Eliud Kipchoge... £159.95, uk.shokz.com



Balega no-show socks These are the most comfortable workout socks I have ever worn. I want my stocking to be stuffed with them in every colour, please. £14, balega.co.uk



New Balance FuelCell Elite V4 running shoe A top-of-the-range carbon-plated speed shoe guaranteed to get feet moving faster in your local Parkrun 5km. £259.99, sportsshoes.com



Sweaty Betty Nimbus quilted coat Stylish and cosy with plenty of pockets for your protein bars, this is perfect for popping on after the gym in winter. £375, sweatybetty.com



Speedo colourblock zip swimsuit No longer a need to choose between style and function in the pool as this swimsuit looks as good as it performs when doing lengths. £55, speedo.com



Polar Verity Sense heart rate sensor Chest-worn heart-rate monitors are a faff and keep slipping. Not this one, designed to be strapped to the upper arm, which comes in a beautiful berry red. £86.50, polar.com



Wolverson kettlebell I love these competition-standard kettlebells that come in a rainbow of colours to brighten up your weights workout. £74.99, wolverson-fitness.co.uk



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My CHRISTMAS WISH LIST

HARRIET WALKER

The Times fashion editor and mother of two knows just



Boys' crazy faces magnetic game The best tabletop toy – girls' faces available too – to keep them busy between courses (and in the pub). £13.50, kidly.co.uk



Ooni toy pizza oven Perfect their paddle technique now before you let them loose on the real thing. £25, selfridges.com



Personalisable hoodies Supercool tops (and joggers) in fun cereal-box packaging with transfer tattoos and stickers. £65, whateversweats.com



Whoopee cushion Never bettered. £1.14 each, partypacks.co.uk



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Little Sun solar lamp Olafur Eliasson's design makes clean energy cute and gives reading in bed a warm glow. £24, binkyshop.co.uk



Toddler's balance bike Bike Club is a subscription service – simply size up as they grow. From £7.99 a month, bikeclub.com



Crocodile onesie More fun than a dressing gown and perfect for changing into after swimming. Tail is detachable. From £18.40, johnlewis.com



Baby's first chore jacket It's never too early to start them on Parisian chic. Up to age 12. £70, sezane.com



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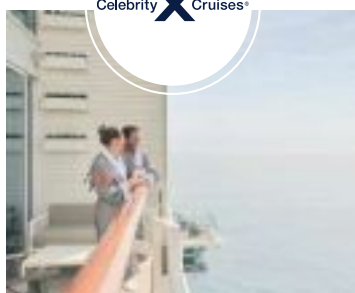
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Print scarf The do-it-all accessory that will update the rest of their wardrobe. Adore the print. £12.99, mango.com



Stripy socks Nice socks aren't a naff gift. I rely on my Christmas haul. £12, damsonmadder.com

Luxury matches Perfect for coffee tables – a super stocking filler. £8, notanotherbill.com

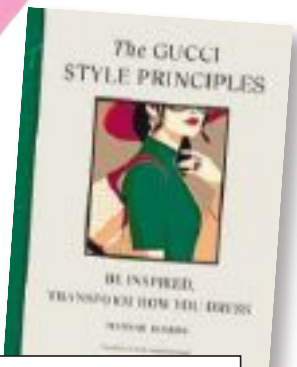


Espresso cup and saucer Great value, and they look so much pricier than they are. £12.99 for two, hm.com

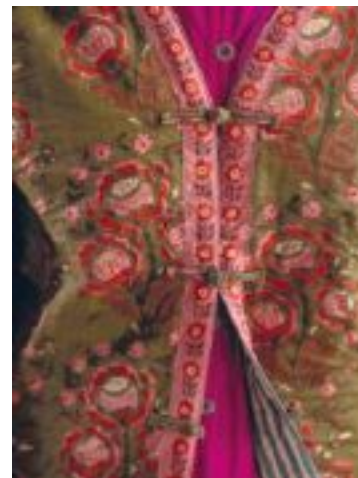
Cute candles These dinner candles are my ultimate budget gift – just tie a pair in ribbon. £1 each, flyingtiger.com



Luggage label You'd never miss these on a baggage carousel. £12.50, notonthehighstreet.com



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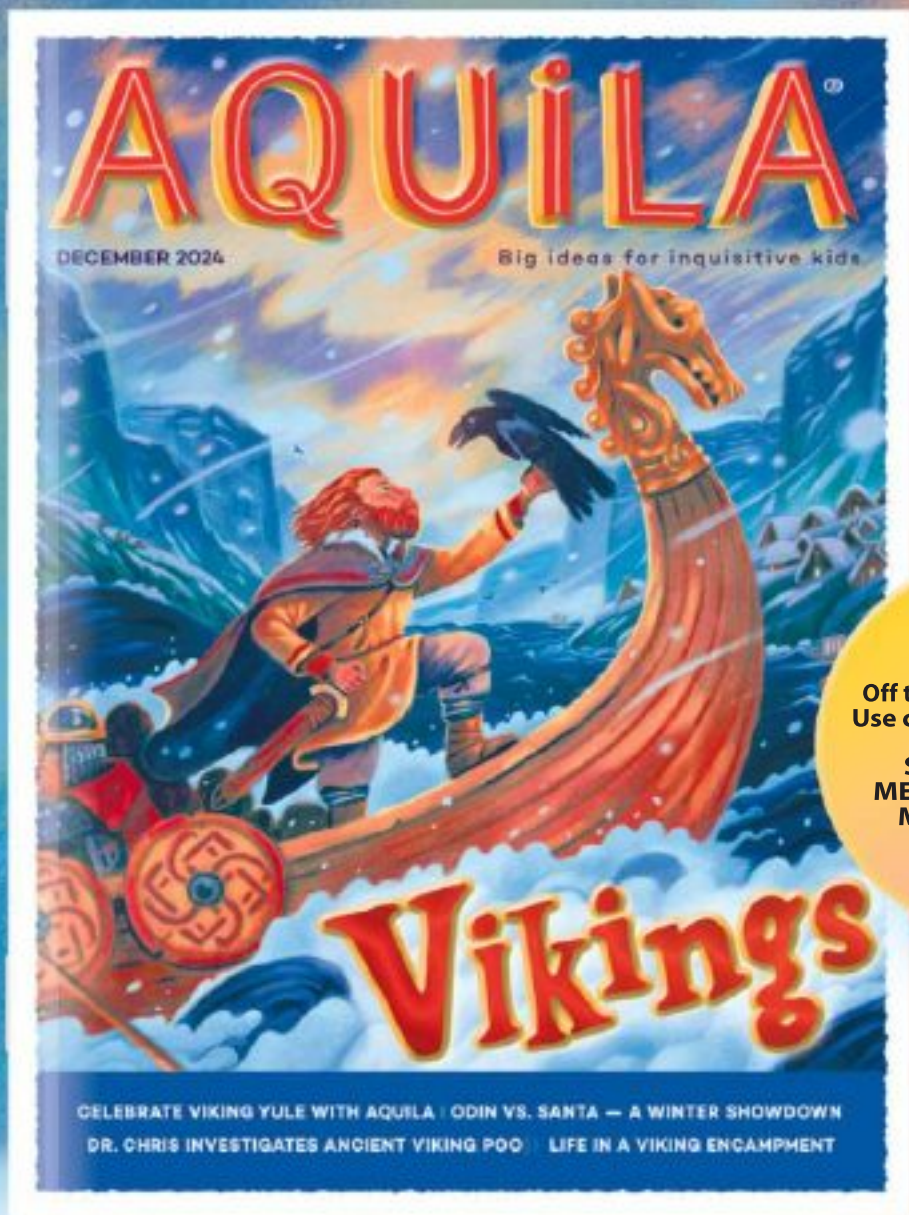
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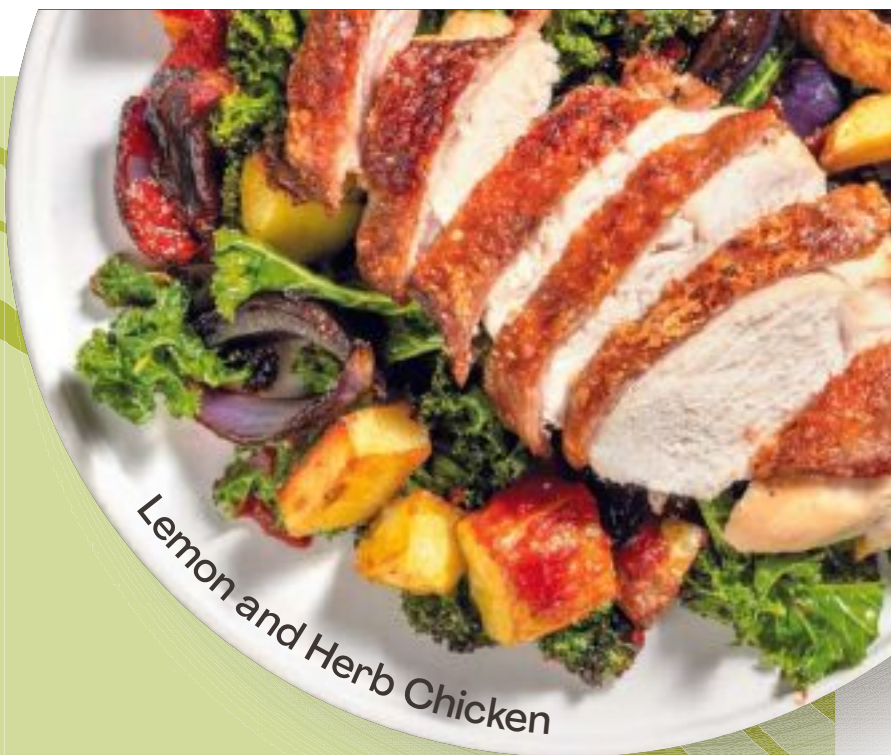
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Beta male

Robert Crampton

'I'm turning into a grumpy old man. Don't get me started on swears, shop signs and AirPods'



DAN KENNEDY

It's been a rough old week on the buses. The thrill of my 60-plus Oyster card, issued in August, has worn off. I've torn a muscle in my left bicep, making hauling myself upstairs using the handrail tricky and painful. I could sit downstairs instead but hey, I'm just not a lower deck on the bus kinda guy, not yet anyway. And the idea of climbing or descending the stairs, with the bus in motion, without clinging to the handrail is suicidal. Especially when it's Kiran, a young cheerful Sikh, at the wheel. He doesn't muck about, Kiran. He's what government safety films in my youth called "an Amber Gambler".

I tore the muscle in a freak paper-shuffling accident. Cramping some freshly sorted documents into a filing cabinet, I held back the weight of the files already in the drawer with my left arm, while jamming more files into the front with my right. The left arm, working at a tricky angle, wasn't up to the job. I felt something internal and important shear, and it's taking a while to heal. The only remedy is rest and arnica. And not wrenching my arm on a violently swaying double-decker bus.

Not much danger of violent swaying on Tuesday, when sleet brought predictable chaos to the capital's transport network. A commute that usually takes 25 minutes took an hour. As the bus inched along, your underdressed columnist huddled miserably in his customary seat in the upper rear corner, I knew what was coming. Sure enough, "The destination of this bus has changed," was swiftly followed by, "This bus terminates here," aka: get off.

Stepping onto the pavement, I slid straight onto, into, along and eventually through a garishly orange and extensive dog turd, camouflaged by a fallen leaf.

On Wednesday, within a minute of exiting the bus home, negotiating the sniper's alley of pigeon droppings under the ancient brick ledges of the railway arch, I took a huge hit of white slime on the shoulder. What are the chances of that? The twin excremental threats of urban life, both striking within 36 hours?

Boarding for the trip home on Thursday, I'd taken up my usual position before realising the seat cushion was saturated, with what liquid I do not care to imagine. Having removed my damp buttocks elsewhere, I tried to warn the next guy but he had his AirPods in and didn't hear me, so he took the next soaking. Then he moved, and in due course a third person sat there, also wearing AirPods, also

heedless of what was now a double warning. She stayed put. Maybe me and other chap had sponged up the worst of it.

The only thing worse than AirPods is no AirPods, when a passenger blasts out music, with no thought for the rest of us. Although, honestly, I don't think this behaviour is thoughtless; I think it's deliberate, an aggressive act inviting people to complain. Which I will, soon. If I'm in a bad enough mood.

Am I turning into a grumpy old man? I hope not. Then again, an increasing number of things annoy me. There are two coffee shops on the Bethnal Green Road called Fuckoffee. Aside from being a terrible pun, plus I would have thought inimical to attracting custom, Fuckoffee is just so needlessly rude. I swear a great deal, yet I consider a shop sign glorying in telling people to eff off as unacceptable.

I also despise We Give a Fork, a food place on London Bridge. Another silly, meaningless, convoluted, unnecessarily offensive pun. These things would have bothered me ten years ago, but only in the way corny names for hairdressers – Curl Up and Dye, Lunatic Fringe – can be irritating. Now though, the semi-official vulgarity actually annoys me.

Begging, there's another one. I don't know why it is considered illiberal, reactionary, snobby etc, to be hostile towards all begging and most beggars, which I am. Obviously, I don't like aggressive beggars – who does? – but if I'm honest, I don't like friendly beggars either, the ones with exaggerated good manners or those who try to be your mate. I think: have some self-respect, man!

On the other hand, my respect for other social groups grows with age. Back on the buses, for instance, I am in awe of the skill, patience and sheer steadfastness of the drivers. London buses are so big, and so unwieldy, and the streets often narrow, always congested and sometimes chaotic, and the cyclists, pedestrians and other motorists so breezily irresponsible, manoeuvring a bus through this turmoil must be a seriously stressful job. If that were me, I'd be banging into things every few hundred yards. The average London bus driver is paid about £30,000 a year. They earn every penny of that, and indeed, deserve more. I salute them.

Here's hoping my luck turns next week. ■

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