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MAGAZINE

20.07.24

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My life in politics

By Matthew Parris

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COVER: MARK HARRISON; GROOMING: DESMOND GRUNDY USING BRISTOW'S HAIRCARE AND CLINIQUE SKINCARE FOR MEN. THIS PAGE: ROMAS FOORD, ROBERT WILSON

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CAITLIN MORAN

If Lily Allen can make cash from her trotters, why not me? After all, I'm already on WikiFeet

Look, until Labour's much vaunted "plan for economic growth" kicks in, a girl's got to hustle how she must to pay that mortgage. And so, when a friend said, "There's money in feet, women's feet, on the internet," the reply I would have given when interest rates were just 1.4 per cent – "UGH! How disgusting! This is beneath me!" – did not materialise.

Instead, I gave a reply that was both thoughtful and mature: "Real talk: the only thing that is *actually* beneath me is my feet, which aren't doing much, cash-wise, at the moment. So tell me more."

Last month, Lily Allen opened an OnlyFans account dedicated solely (ha!) to her feet. For those unversed in OnlyFans, it's a website wherein fans can pay for – and I speak broadly here – titillating content from celebrities who've recently had an unexpected VAT bill, and which usually involves lingerie and uncomfortable-looking poses.

Allen, however, wasn't offering bras, but *toes*. To meet demand from those "sexually cheered" by feet. "Apparently, my feet are rated quite highly on the internet," she told her podcast. "I don't feel like it's sexual – but how it's perceived is another thing altogether." She concluded the matter with the finest logic possible: "Ultimately, it's just silly and I don't care."

A subscription to Allen's contextually ambiguous foot content is £8 a month. Given that she has 1.6 million followers on Instagram, if a mere 1 per cent of them are into her hooves, that's £1.5 million a year. *£1.5 million a year! Just for feet!* Basically, the unloved by-product of the whole leg system. It's like cashback on ankles.

Obviously, this made me wonder: could I monetise *my* feet too? At first glance, they don't look like an untapped erotic goldmine – I have flat feet *and* weak ankles and, as a consequence, have the gait of a penguin. If you think I'm exaggerating, I refer you to the sunny afternoon in 2007 where I was walking down Camden High Street, only to be stopped by a handsome young man.

"Could I take your picture?" he asked.

Oh, I thought. Here is my future second husband, so taken with my beauty, he is *compelled* to capture my fineness on film.

"It's just," he continued, as I pouted winningly, "I'm a lecturer in podiatry and you have the most extreme case of over-pronation I've ever seen. Your ankles simply



'Wow,' I say slowly. 'Not even fifth wave feminism has made me feel good about my feet. But now perverts have?'

collapse. I need a picture for my students. Doesn't it hurt terribly when you walk?"

The passage of time has softened the hammer blow to my self-esteem, but I'm still "realistic" about the sexual capital of my trotters. I've been in hovercraft-like orthopaedic boots for 20 years – and have to protect the incredibly thin, sensitive skin with extra-thick hiking socks to prevent possible chafing. Oh, the chafing! After ten minutes in a "civilian" sock, I've seen strips of foot skin come off that resemble nothing less than wafers of bacon.

What I'm saying is: if someone could be sexually or financially interested in *these* feet, it would be a miracle on a par with being told that your knackered old Hoover was *actually* made by Fabergé and collectors the world over are now tense with excitement.

Still, facts: God loves a trier and Halifax Building Society loves charging me every month. So I casually mentioned the whole "feet for cash" thing to my daughter.

"Your feet? Being perverted on the internet? Mum, it's *already* happened," she said. "Me and my friends were laughing at it last week. Go on wikifeet.com. You have your own page. People have *scored* your feet. You have a *foot rating*."

Ten seconds later, she was showing me a webpage full of various pictures of me from The Times – in a wetsuit, in heels – all chosen, clearly, because you could see my feet. One of the photos is from a royal wedding shoot, where I am dressed as Kate Middleton and a Prince William lookalike is giving me a pedicure. At the time, it just felt like light-hearted fun. In the context of this website, it now looks like 100 per cent copper-bottomed porn.

"What's my foot score?" I asked tentatively. I was ready to be crushed. Both life and trained foot professionals have been very "honest" about my podiatric allure.

"Holy hell – you're *four out of five!*" my daughter said. "The voting breakdown is that 16 said you were 'OK', 14 'nice' – and 13 went for '*beautiful*'."

There was what I can only describe as "a flabbergasted pause".

"Wow," I said slowly. "Not even fifth wave feminism has made me feel good about my feet. But now *perverts* have? This is a massive challenge to my value system: wikifeet.com has uplifted me more than Germaine Greer. But I guess the ultimate bottom line is: once I remove this verruca, I'm standing on a goldmine." ■

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SPINAL COLUMN

MELANIE REID



I'm stranded at Glasgow Central. Busy people rush by – it's never the middle classes who stop to help

Everyone has their own definition of hell. Backache, poor wifi, overcooked scallops, rush hour traffic, debt, crying babies, cheap carpets. If you discount beetroot salad, mine is to be stranded in a very public place, unable to rescue myself, casting around for solutions like one of those pathetic, clawless city pigeons.

You fear things for a reason, of course. You know there's an inevitability about them. Which was how, rushing for a train, I ground to a halt on a steep incline into Glasgow Central railway station. I was helpless. My arms weren't strong enough to push me. My rucksack tumbled off my lap, my foot spasmed off the footplate; as I reached for the brakes my handbag fell sideways, garrotting me. Behind me, dragging a heavy cold and a suitcase big enough for her to fit into, and trying to push me with her hip at the same time, came my carer. Whose health, as anyone dependent on carers knows, is much more precious than my own.

We were stuck. My overoptimism had trapped us. I'd overfaced myself and poor Janice – and if you're a healthy person reading this and thinking, for heaven's sake, she was just going to get a train, what's the problem, then you have in a nutshell the reason why most disabled people never go anywhere: which is that because even very simple things are too damn difficult and stressful without a small army in support.

I have always been easily embarrassed; always disliked being fussed over. Perhaps that's why the emotional side of disability came hardest to me: I hate that sense of changed identity, of feeling noticed, pitied, helpless, a bit of a freak. Perhaps it is the fate of many tall people who lose their legs to be crippled by smallness. And perhaps, if I am honest, it's an equally big part of why I stay at home almost all the time, content to be invisible.

Though right now nobody seemed to be noticing us. Deliberately. There were lots of smart, busy people striding past, swerving round my strewn bags and skewed wheelchair. Obstruction in the middle lane? Change lanes, accelerate past. Janice was trying her best to regroup but I could feel her stress. It was so damn steep. I hadn't bargained for the hill.

And just then, because this was Glasgow, a large, hairy, lived-in face loomed over my shoulder and a rough voice said, "Youse need a push? You don't mind me offering?" and suddenly I found myself being whisked up the concourse at the mercy of some random stranger. I couldn't even turn and see what he looked like. Which is a very strange and vulnerable feeling for a woman who is a total control freak and hates being pushed anywhere.

But I know the city enough to know that this was just Glasgow in action. He pushed me to the special assistance point, with me babbling, "Thank you sooo much," and, "You're sooo kind," and hating myself for sounding such a middle-class prat.

Janice brought up the rear with the suitcase.

"This do you, doll?" he said. Janice said later he reminded her of Gerald from *Clarkson's Farm* – not young, his clothes anything but smart, with the sense of a toil-filled life. "Nae problem. You look after yourself," he said, and then he vanished, one of the millions of generous-hearted people in this tough city. People who have struggled themselves and have the unerring instinct to step in when they see need.

It's a remarkable compassion, a clear-sightedness about doing the right thing, which I experienced for the first time after my accident. In hospital for any length of time in Glasgow, you learn that the people who give the most are those with the least. A later occasion, stuck in my car in the city and forced to appeal to passers-by for help, it was the same – the middle classes shied away; ordinary people stopped.

The man's uncomplicated act of kindness stayed with me all day. Travelling south, in a first-class compartment declassified because the train was so crowded, I had to listen to a London couple moaning noisily about the lack of seats and trolley service. By Wigan I felt an overriding compulsion to tell them to shut the f*** up and count their blessings. But didn't dare, because it needed a proper Glaswegian accent. ■

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

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What I've learnt Eric Cantona

Former footballer Eric Cantona, 58, grew up in Marseilles, France. He played for Leeds United and Manchester United in the early Nineties, winning five league titles in six years in England. In 1995, he kung-fu kicked a Crystal Palace fan in the crowd and was given community service. Since retiring from football in 1997 he has acted in films and released music. He has four children from two marriages and lives in Lisbon with his second wife, actress Rachida Brakni.

France v England? I'd support England. If I support one country, it's England. I feel English in terms of football. The passion for the game, the vibes you feel as a player and a fan. I love to feel these vibes when they sing *Three Lions*. But I do think they could play much better football.

I love the way Spain play. When you are a lover of football like me, you can only like this kind of team and the players they've got. I don't support any team in particular. I support the team who play the best.

I'm pleased the extreme right is not in power in France after the elections. For 25 years, since Jacques Chirac [the former French prime minister], we have voted against extreme right power. But we have to find the real party that people feel close to and want to vote for, instead of just voting against something.

My kids don't have phones. They are not allowed. They have a computer because they are in an English school and, unfortunately, they have to write on computers. A friend's son said he liked to write poetry and stories. When I asked, "Are you writing?" he said, "No, my computer is down." Take a piece of paper and a pen and you can write. They have lost this.

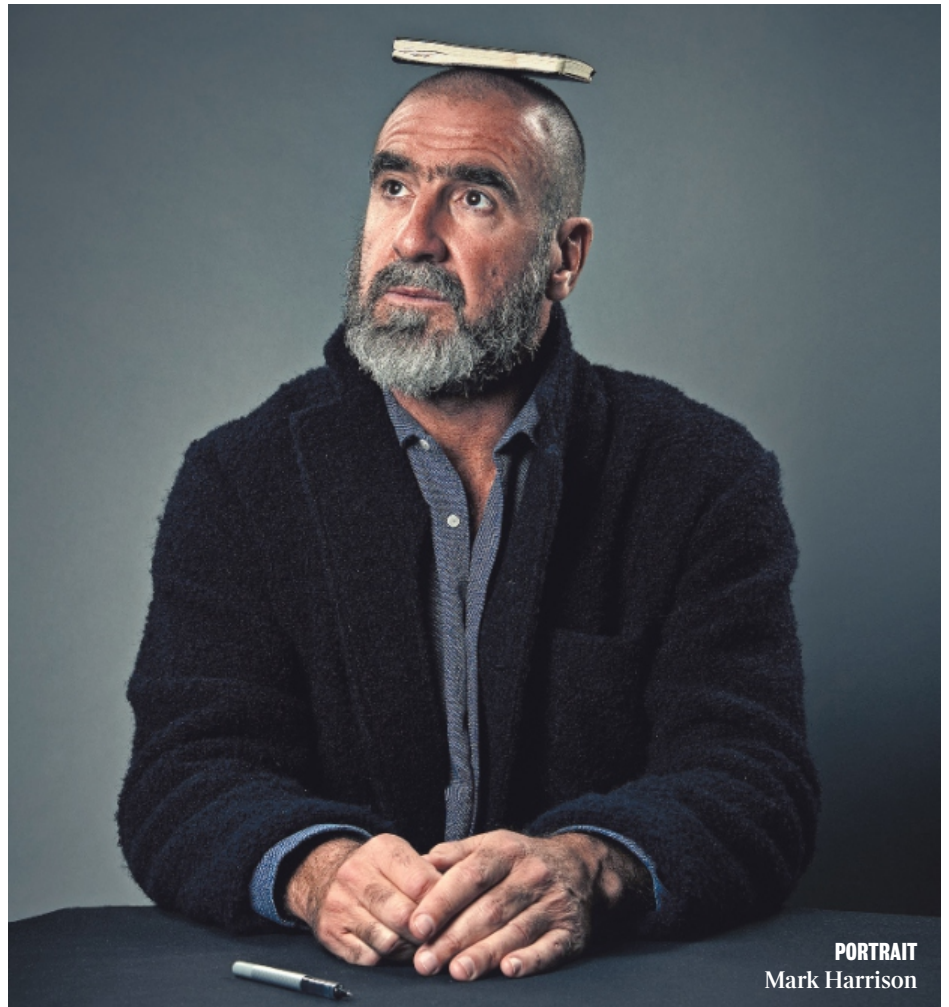
Immigration is very important for all countries. Lamine Yamal [the 17-year-old who scored a wonder goal for Spain against France in their Euro 2024 semi-final] is of Moroccan origin. I made a documentary on football and immigration. It's important.

I lost passion for the game. I was still young, 30, when I retired. I didn't want to watch games. I knew that if I spent too much time in front of the TV watching the game, I would miss it. So I went away from my drug dealer [football].

Sir Alex Ferguson was like a friend. I can only work well with people that I respect and people who respect me. But sometimes they respect me and I cannot respect them because I feel that they are too weak. I need to feel their heart inside, with some emotions, like humility and humanity.

I'm a bit nostalgic. So I love classic cars – a legend drives another legend. I remember the time when cars were a lot of colours. Now we see black and dark cars.

Every time there is an economic crisis, the first people who are held responsible are immigrants. We see it in many countries



PORTRAIT
Mark Harrison

'If I support one country, it's England. But I do think they could play much better football'

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

now because of the economic crisis. If there wasn't a crisis in the Twenties, Hitler would never have been elected in 1933. But instead of using history, people reproduce it.

I don't love getting older. But we have to accept it. With more experience, I'm less impulsive, but I'm still a bit impulsive. I feel good. I can still practise sports and I have passions to keep me young. I like to be with young people. Living in the creative world helps me to stay young.

Racism in football comes more from the audience than the players. The players are used to playing with people from different origins since they were four years old in a playground.

Bellingham and Saka are great players. It's a new generation. Sometimes you are very good when you are young, but you have to

continue. So for now, of course, they are great players, but a career is very long.

Marcel Duchamp was a genius. He had a great vision 100 years ago about how the world works. I'm an art collector. My favourite artists are Antony Gormley, Douglas Gordon and Anish Kapoor.

Lisbon is wonderful. It's a capital, but it's a small city and you are very quickly outside it. I love to go away from Lisbon, in the south or north, and drive for hours.

I don't forget the history of my family. I inherited a lot of things from my family; I don't know what is good and what is bad. But I got this heritage and I'm very proud of it. Sometimes people forget where they come from and their own history. How could I forget? ■

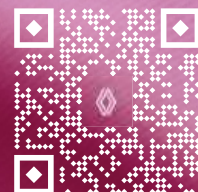
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'I'm embarrassed I was rude about Theresa.

Unrepentant about criticising Boris.

Ashamed my judgment was clouded about Tony.

Unapologetic about admiring Rishi.

Don't get me started on Liz Truss'



Matthew Parris, 74,
photographed at his home in
London by Mark Harrison



CONFESSIONS OF A POLITICAL ANIMAL

Times columnist Matthew Parris has spent 36 years writing about politics. Regrets? Not many

With Margaret Thatcher in 1978



On Weekend World in 1986



It was the summer of 1988. The phone rang. Phones really did ring in those days. It was to prove the beginning of a columnist's career. I was, uncharacteristically, feeling down. At the age of 39 and looking back, I could see only a long series of failures: some gradual, others spectacular.

I'd failed to get an MA at Yale due to too much coffee, Four Roses bourbon, track training to break a five-minute mile and hanging out with interesting people. Returning to Britain, I'd struggled as a trainee diplomat in the Foreign Office and realised diplomacy was not for me. I'd struggled in the Conservative research department: pursuing my own ideas instead of summarising party policy. Next, handling the leader of the opposition's public mailbag, I let down Mrs Thatcher catastrophically by advising a complaining correspondent to count her blessings (the Labour Party turned my letter into three million election leaflets).

Aged 29, however, I'd got myself a constituency (selecting me on account of my temporary fame for rescuing a drowning dog from the Thames in winter) but, after seven years as an MP, found myself still languishing on the back benches (being gay didn't help). So I'd chucked it all in to be a TV star: trailed as the new Brian Walden, a star interviewer in his day, on a Sunday morning ITV politics show. And I wasn't much good at that either. End of programme.

And end of me, it seemed. On that forlorn weekday morning in the summer of '88, as I contemplated the imminent axing of *Weekend World*, my mind went back to an afternoon at Yale with my fellow postgraduate Peter Ackroyd, always a genius and today a famous writer. "My life's going nowhere," I lamented. "What's wrong with me, Peter?"

A long pause. Ackroyd thought about it. "I can't tell you," he said. "It's too cruel."

"No, tell me. You must."

"Too, too cruel. I simply can't."

"Please, Peter."

"No talent, darling."

Still, there was a glimmer of hope. I'd done some book reviewing for *The Sunday Times* and, as a politician, penned a handful of columns, mostly about things that stirred my indignation. "Stop Being Beastly to Tatchell", for *The Times*, raged about a homophobic by-election campaign against the activist Peter Tatchell. A year later the paper published my lament for Fred Hill, the 74-year-old biker who had died in prison during his 31st sentence for refusing to wear a crash helmet.

After the 1987 fire at King's Cross London Underground station I'd written an angry appreciation of the gay nurse, Lawrence Newcombe, who died while

running back repeatedly into the smoke to rescue victims, his own heroism rewarded by a *Daily Mail* front page about the London Fire Brigade: "Fire-fighting heroes face Aids test after it was revealed last night that a victim carried the deadly virus."

All these were indignant columns, and indignation comes more easily to the page than quieter analysis or gentler thoughts. But they were my learner slopes, though it had never occurred to me that I could make a career out of it.

It had occurred, however, to the editor of *The Times* at the time.

This story began with the phone ringing on that morning in 1988. It was the late Charles Wilson. Famous for bawling people out, the editor's Glaswegian tones were on this occasion softly flattering. Charlie explained that his star columnist, Craig Brown, who'd been writing a brilliant daily parliamentary sketch for the paper, was quitting. So would I take Craig's place? I heard myself saying yes before I knew that yes was my answer. The paper's managing editor made contact with a view to a contract.

I said there was no certainty I'd be any good, so better to be a freelancer, then the paper could sack me (or I sack the paper) if it wasn't working. Bemused, the managing editor offered me a freelance contract and a generous

(to me, with a mortgage to pay) fee.

And that's how it remains, 36 years later. No security and a pretty free hand. And despite my fears, the political sketch went well from the start. How couldn't it? Luck had lent me a behind-the-scenes knowledge of the Commons, the MPs, the chamber, its strange ways. I knew (for example) what that little note being passed along the front bench from a chap in the civil servants' box to the minister on his or her feet at the dispatch box might say. I knew many of these parliamentarians, their reputations, their weaknesses, their talents and their vanities. My sketch could prick the occasional pomposity of the place and also convey a real respect for the way our representative democracy works, and for the hard work and public-spiritedness of most MPs most of the time. This alloy of impertinence and respect served a *Times* sketch well.

On my first day, luck sent me to the opening of the 1988 Liberal Party conference, where MPs and delegates spent a whole session debating what their own party's name should be – utterly absorbed and hilariously self-regarding as they exchanged solemn opinions on nomenclature. My sketch suggested that beyond debating their party's name, they might debate their own names too. It made a cheeky column. But the following

'My life is going nowhere. What's wrong with me?' I asked my friend Peter Ackroyd. 'No talent, darling,' he replied

At a press conference with Alastair Campbell in 2001



With deputy prime minister John Prescott, 2002



With Boris Johnson in 2006

day's debate was less interesting – nothing, really, to sketch. At around 5pm, “the desk” called me from our Wapping HQ. Where was my column? “Nothing worth writing about today,” I said. The silence was thunderous. A fundamental truth about journalism was explained to me in a few choice words: there was now a hole in the newspaper where my sketch was supposed to be. Never mind if you have anything to write. Write.

I got the hang. Another early stroke of sketchwriter's luck was headlined “Bedtime with the Bottomleys”. Mr and Mrs B were both ministers – he for roads, she for national parks. At environment questions, she had described him as “my close and honourable friend”. That was all a sketch needed. Mine took us to the Bottomleys' marital bed, where in the small hours Peter was suggesting to Virginia that he lay a motorway across her national park. Cheap, yes – but it amused

readers (including the Bottomleys) mightily.

And the place is, often unwittingly, such a laugh. I loved teasing, occasionally insulting, sometimes admiring, the strange creatures who inhabit it. MPs have broad shoulders and I only ever had one formal complaint, from a backbencher whom I'd mistaken for another backbencher when reporting the latter's gaffe. We had to pay him a few hundred pounds, and the coven of national newspapers' sketchwriters (a daily teatime gathering) resolved to punish the complainant by never mentioning him again. Mostly MPs just want to be mentioned, even in jest. Humorous writing is a hoot and poking fun a glorious duty, so the 13 years of political sketchwriting that followed were a blissful treadmill.

It's been good to find my sketch followed by a series of sparkling Times political sketchwriters, keeping a splendid media tradition alive – and kicking. As any of them will tell you, the dull days can be the most rewarding. A sentence that sinks a sketchwriter's heart is, “Gosh, you won't be short of material for your sketch today.” Big happenings are reports, not sketches. On one of my favourite writing days, there was nothing to write about. It was a hot summer afternoon and both the atmosphere and the debate were stifling. I became transfixed by the Speaker's battle with her footwear. Betty Boothroyd's shiny court shoes were too tight and chafing. Seated on her raised throne, she was using the pointed toe of one shoe discreetly to nudge down the heel of the other. Finally, it was off. Then the procedure was reversed. The struggle was riveting and too soon my word limit of 720 was reached.

Occasionally I went too far. I had to apologise to Miss Boothroyd for a sketch that dealt in unnecessary detail with the link (for some politicians) between being on one's feet and in command of the house, and the engorgement of (in women) nipples and in men (well, you can guess). Sometimes this was visible even from the press gallery.

After a few years of fun, a second column, this one weekly, was added to my repertoire: a more or less wry look at things. If only I could have had £1 for every time I was announced as taking “a wry look at the week's events”. Had I a daughter or son my career advice would be, “Go, my child, into taking a wry look at the week's events.” But this went well, and I was enlisted by the Spectator magazine to write a fortnightly column, a sometimes serious, sometimes sideways glance at the world.

Sideways glances came thick and fast, but for me the real honour was to be asked, almost 30 years ago, to write a proper, prominent column for The Times. Within a few years this moved to the Saturday paper: an even greater

honour. A little wistfully I dropped the parliamentary sketch. Not at first sure of being up to maintaining serious commentary on so regular a basis, I grew more confident – perhaps arrogant. But I hope to have kept the standard up, trying to write often enough about politics but broadening the scope.

Looking back, I've sometimes been right and sometimes wrong, but tried always to be stimulating and thoughtful. I'm proud to have shown a higher regard for John Major than his era accorded him; proud to have seen early how Iain Duncan Smith's brand of Conservatism would poison the party; ashamed to have allowed my Toryism (and Iraq) to cloud my judgment of Tony Blair's great strengths; pleased to have supported David Cameron's coalition government; embarrassed to have been so rude about Theresa May; unrepentant about my very early rumbling of Boris Johnson; amused that it was even necessary to give Times readers early warning about Liz Truss's unsuitability; and (still) unapologetic about my admiration for Rishi Sunak's steadying of the ship of state.

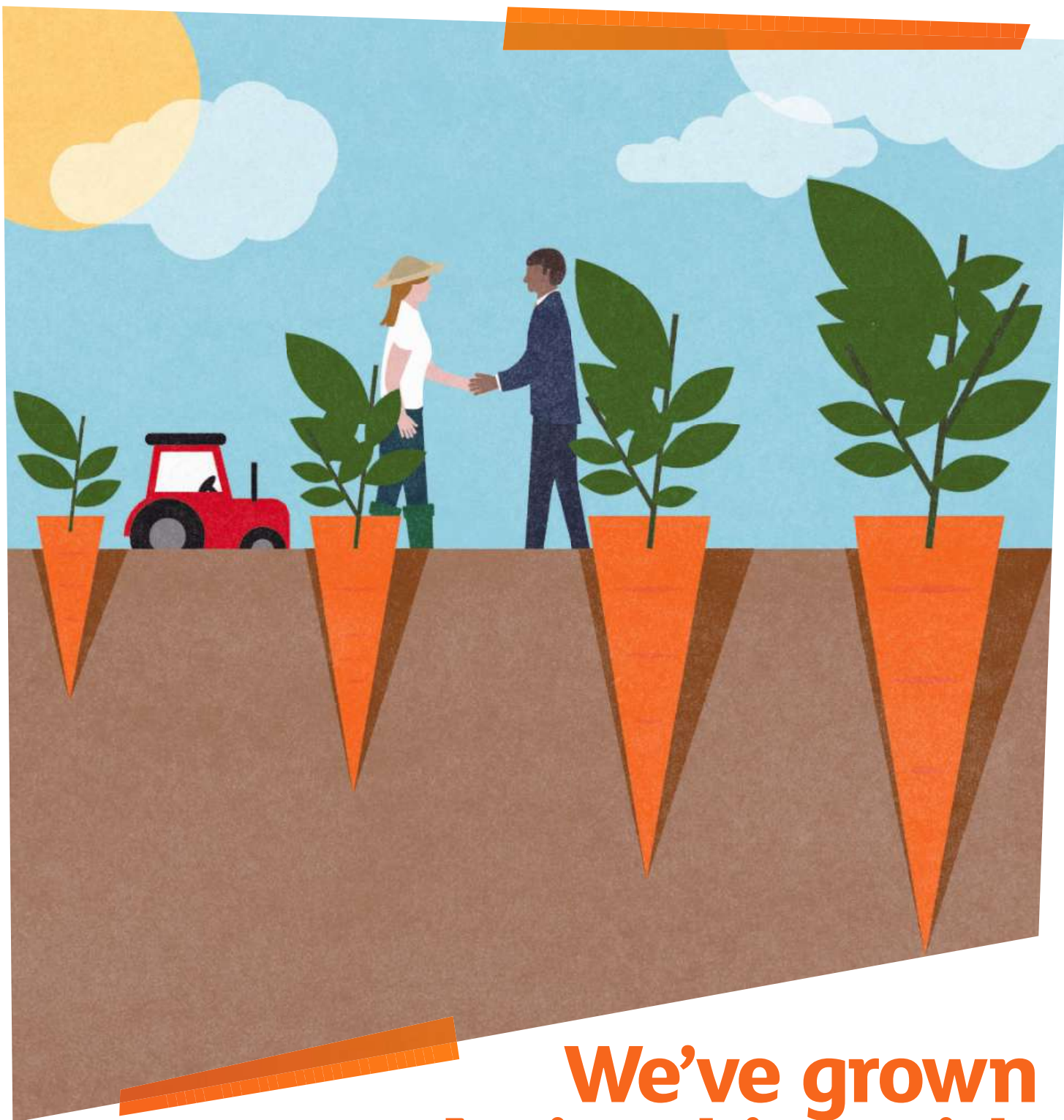
Let me, then, tackle a few frequently asked questions.

“What's the key to a successful column?”

Apparently a columnist I much admire, Sir Simon Jenkins, was once asked this question by a young hopeful. Simon took some time to think about this. Finally: “Avoid the use of the word ‘it.’” I hope I can expand somewhat on this bleak instruction.

Column writing is a trade, not an art or profession: more like bricklaying than composing a symphony. It (sorry, Simon) comes with practice, with advice, with getting it wrong and seeing how you got it wrong and putting it right; not a casting of the eyes heavenward and waiting for your muse. So don't hang around waiting for anything as fancy as an idea – these often arrive only after you've got going. If you already have a strong idea, that's great; but it doesn't always happen. In the meantime, the first requirement is to get some words onto the page. You've a deadline to meet and, anyway, the argument tends to form itself as you go along. Much (and not only in column writing) comes unbidden from the unconscious. Trying to concentrate the conscious mind on “having an idea” can be stultifying.

Brew yourself a mug of coffee, take a deep breath, type “[BEGINS]” and start. Launch into a founding paragraph as you might lay the first line of bricks. Pause. Take a swig of coffee. Stand back and see if it looks OK. Tweak a bit here and a bit there. Read it out loud, as it were, in your head. And a sense of what should follow will often come. Sometimes you'll abandon the beginning anyway when you reach ➤



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the end: you realise you were only clearing your throat. A besetting sin of column writing is getting bogged down in the first few sentences. Just jump in, plough on and look back later.

“Do you have any tips as to style?” No. It's personal, individual and each of us is different. But for myself I like to write for the stage, so to speak: I want it to sound natural if read aloud, and I do read aloud to myself. It's surprising how, when you speak it rather than write it, the next sentence suggests itself.

“How about humour?” Here's a warning. Irony and sarcasm are dangerous in written, as opposed to spoken, English. Readers often don't get it, and it's easier by voice than in cold print to indicate when you're joking. I got into terrible trouble once, in one of my occasional diatribes against antisocial cyclists, by suggesting piano wire. It was a joke. Get it? J-O-K-E. But it went right up to the Press Complaints Commission, the complaint finally being rejected only because (said the Commission) cyclists were not a protected or ethnic minority. The debacle is still in my Wikipedia entry.

“Do you get much proprietorial or editorial interference in what you write?” I have never once, in all my time at this paper, had any indication that the proprietor wishes me to write or not to write anything at all. Nor has any editor of The Times (and I've worked under eight) ever instructed me to express or not to express any opinion. The closest I ever came to being steered was about 20 years ago, after I'd submitted a column describing an evening at the White Swan gay pub in east London, and distinguished male stripping, basically “Get 'em off!”, from female stripping, which can be a dance, even an erotic art. My comment editor rang me. “Look,” he said, “Mr Murdoch is in town this weekend, and he really, really doesn't like this kind of thing. Could we run it next week instead?” If that's editorial interference, I can take it.

“Does your own Toryism get in the way of straight commentary?” Yes. My inclinations are liberal conservative. They do surface. I don't try to suppress them. They affect my attitudes to issues and to people in the news. I console myself that a great national newspaper is quite unlike the BBC, which must strive for neutrality. Columnists' opinions appear in a section entitled “opinion”. A paper like ours wants different perspectives, and readers soon realise where a writer is coming from.

“Has our politics changed over your past half-century?” Yes. A kind of rancour, a curdled quality, has entered 21st-century British politics. There is less give and take. Politics was always boisterous, pugilistic, always rather Punch and Judy, always yah-boo-sucks. It was also always very personal, with insults traded. But in

I knew Iain Duncan Smith's brand of Conservatism would poison the party

former times, as in the old days of the Cold War when two great blocs were in permanent contention, Labour and the Tories each knew where they were and who they were and the divide between them was clear. The battle could be quite cheerful, however robust, and had a kind of simplicity. Now a nastiness has crept in, an anger – especially on the Conservative side and especially within it. Europe, I'm afraid, pulled a trigger. I do wonder whether that souring can ever be reversed.

“Where today are the great men and women, the politicians with stature, the giants, that the older among us remember?” I hesitate to endorse that view, though it's very widely expressed. An increasingly aggressive news media, and more recently the arrival of social media, pulls people down, and I wonder whether we'd allow any important political figure to acquire the kind of dignity our statesmen and women used to have. I fear we'd call it pomposity. “Stature” and “giant” are two-way streets: deference on the part of the audience, authority on the part of the senior politician. As a man or woman in politics gains confidence, their audience respond with respect; but the respect bolsters the confidence. Today we have less inclination to respect, and this constricts our politicians' ability to grow.

“Has column writing changed?” In many respects, no, not much in more than a century. It has become a set form. But there's one newly intrusive element owed, I think, to the rise of social media. I call it “reading the room”. In online comments beneath newspaper columns these days, one often encounters readers who say, in so many words, “Look how many people disagree with you”; “Uh oh, you haven't read the room”. There's a stronger impetus among columnists to ask ourselves what most people think and take care not to overstep those invisible marks. That's a pity. As I always say, sod the room. We should not be dismayed to get more “dislikes” than “likes”: both show we have our readers' attention.

“Do you get upset or hurt when readers call you names online?” Absolutely not. I love a scrap. I enjoy giving as good as I get, and have often had my own online responses “moderated” (ie removed) when I've insulted an insulting reader back. But many columnists do become depressed at personal attacks, and I think women are more averse to verbal fistfights than their male counterparts. As for me, sock it to them!

“What, for you, is the ideal length of a newspaper column?” Mate, I'm just the

hired help. I couldn't edit so much as a parish magazine. My bosses give me a slot, a space on a page, and my job is to fill it before deadline. I can do 300 words, 800 words, 1,000 or 3,000, according to my brief. But the length of a column does determine its shape, its nature. It's hard to be thoughtful, relaxed, in a 300-word commentary. It's hard to be punchy for 3,000 words. Mostly my columns have been from 700 to 1,100 words, and I confess that as I type, a sort of “ping” sounds in my brain as the limit is neared. Maybe our trade inclines us not only to write but to think in bite-sized chunks for butterfly minds. *Tant pis*. If you can't make an argument in 1,000 words then you should ask yourself if there's much point in trying. Luther managed it.

“Is there much to and fro with your editors?” Ideally not. I've been blessed with more than a dozen comment editors over the years, all skilful, and the key – which a good editor always gets – is mostly to stand back but to intervene occasionally and strategically, particularly at the outset. More often than not a good intervention takes the form of a question: “How would you answer the objection that...?” A good editor can cause you to reflect (as I often do) on the flaws in your argument. We all hate being asked at 9am what we're planning to say – but boy, do we need it. Sub-editors too – the professionals who “sub” what we call “copy” after it is “filed” – are desperately important. The Times has brilliant subs, who have saved me from the most appalling errors over the years.

“Does a columnist write the headline?” No, nor should we. The sub does. They're better at it. Our own attempts would be lengthy, lugubrious, full of cautious qualifications and unreadable.

Thirty-six years with The Times is a long time: after 9 prime ministers, nearly 100 party conferences and 9 general elections, it all begins to blur. I'll be carrying on now with the Wednesday notebooks and a monthly column that can stray more often and more widely beyond politics. But that's for tomorrow. Never look back. Old columns are wrapping paper. Hopefully, the wind of the times once filled their sails, but without that wind the sails flap idly and it all seems so... trivial.

Finally, this: never, never worry about whether in the event you were right. You'll never type a word if you worry about that. Just take a view, take a deep breath and pile in.

And – hey! – what a ride. ■



BABY REINDEER?

I HAVE BEEN STALKED BY A WOMAN FOR 27 YEARS. IT'S RUINED MY LIFE

John (left) was in his early thirties when he was introduced to Maria. Ever since she has been obsessed – turning up at his home, following him at work, bombarding him with letters. It took years for the police to take him seriously and even now, despite restraining orders and prison, he still feels under siege. Sean O'Neill meets him



Two minutes into the Netflix hit *Baby Reindeer*, John knew he couldn't watch any more. The drama opens with Donny, the main character, hesitantly walking into a police station, stumbling over his words as he tries to explain he is being stalked by a woman. The scene swept John back to 1998 and the first time he tried to tell police in west London that he was being stalked.

"That could have been me on the TV, nervously going, 'Hello, excuse me,'" he says. "When I told the first officer I was like, 'How can I say this... What do you do about someone constantly sending you mail and ringing your buzzer?'"

"The copper said, 'What do you mean?'"

"I said, 'There's this woman, keeps knocking on my door – can you help me out, please?'"

"He says, 'What? Is it a girlfriend?'"

"I said, 'No.'"

"He said, 'There's not a lot we can do, mate,' and he started laughing. 'Tell her to go away.' And they laughed at me. They smiled and smirked behind their screen."

Since then, for almost three decades, half his life, John feels he has been let down by a criminal justice system that has failed to stop that same woman from stalking him.

Maria, the stalker, has been jailed, sent to secure mental health facilities, electronically tagged and warned multiple times to stay away from him.

"But she's like the seasons," John says. "She just comes round again and again and again. Buzzing the door, knocking on the windows, writing letters – so many letters." She has followed him to work; sat for hours on his doorstep waiting for him to return home; stationed herself in his local pub hoping he will show up.

I meet John just a few days before Maria is due to appear in court to be sentenced for the latest transgression of a restraining order that was imposed on her in 2002. The order prevents her contacting him "in any shape or form" and bars her from entering his street.

She has been convicted of breaching it on 15 occasions.

As we talk, his phone rings. It's a withheld number. John never answers withheld numbers. Later we find out it was the witness support service at Westminster magistrates' court. Shouldn't they know that a stalking victim is never going to

answer a withheld number? It's yet another example, he says, of how the system fails to acknowledge the reality of what has happened to him.

Not once during the 27 years of his ordeal has John's voice been heard in court. While his stalker has pleaded for leniency, represented by defence lawyers who seek sympathy because of her mental health problems, his story is unheard.

"I'm just a reference number somewhere. They don't know who I am. They don't know how broken I am. They keep passing judgment, finding solutions that are best for her, the person causing all the problems. But what about me? What are they going to give me to help my life go forward? I'm the one losing, every year."

He hopes that is about to change. John has written a powerful victim impact statement and has been told he will be allowed to read it in court, from behind a screen, on the day Maria is sentenced.

John is a tall, lean, handsome black Londoner who looks far younger than his 59 years. He did some modelling in his youth, was in the Territorial Army, worked as a mentor with young offenders and still does Thai boxing to keep fit (and dissipate his anger).

But John is not his real name. He doesn't want to be identified and he doesn't want me to name the town where we meet. Maria doesn't know where he is and he is determined to keep it that way.

He is fearful, insecure, worried. Being stalked for so long has robbed him of his poise, undermined his masculinity,

'THEY KEEP FINDING SOLUTIONS THAT ARE BEST FOR HER, BUT I'M JUST A REFERENCE NUMBER'



destroyed relationships and sabotaged career and family prospects.

The night before he was to undergo the final assessment to become a firefighter, Maria arrived at his door. He was so distressed he withdrew from the test. He was sacked from another job because he had so many stress-related absences. John was too embarrassed to explain what had been happening in his life.

He's still embarrassed and fearful.

"When people take pictures and post them on social media I say, 'Don't put my name on it. Don't say where I am.' If she finds out where I am... Every night I'm waking up. I know in my heart I can't take it any more."

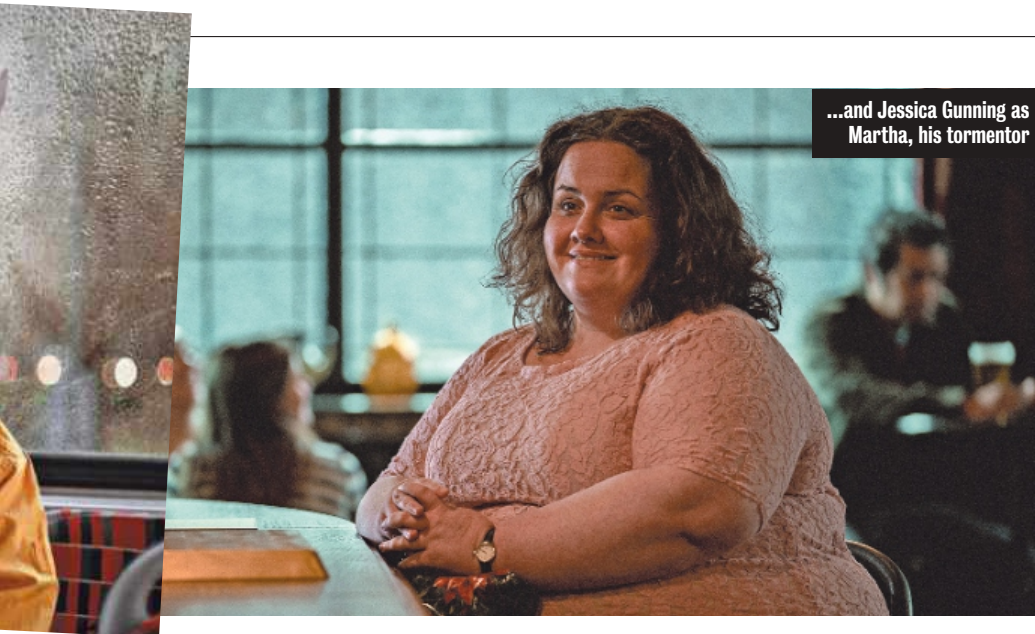
As he recounts the years of harassment and the toll they have taken, he ricochets unpredictably between seething anger and tears. He is constantly trying to keep rage and despair in check. Talking about this does not come easy. He says he hasn't told his partner of eight years everything. Yet.

"It hits me hard when I talk about it. The hardest part is that I haven't done anything to anyone. I just want my life back; I just want to be normal again. I go out sometimes, I pretend I'm OK. I come home and I might be a bit juiced. But I wake up the next day and I'm thinking, 'Shit.' It's just difficult.

"The impact on a woman of being stalked is well known, but nobody understands when I tell them that I'm being stalked by a woman. I remember one guy said to me, 'I wouldn't mind a woman stalking me.' I said, 'Wouldn't you?'"

"It has taken away a part of me that I know I will never get back again. That confidence, that strength. I'm just breathing. Am I going to be living this again and again for the next ten years until I kick the bucket?"

"I did modelling when I was young and I couldn't do it any more because I wasn't confident in myself. I used to draw and paint – I don't do that any more.



...and Jessica Gunning as Martha, his tormentor

“I got myself in so much debt because I couldn’t pay my bills, I couldn’t pay my rent. But nobody understood what I was going through – there was no support. The only person who helped me was my GP.”

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust, which runs the national stalking helpline, defines it as “a pattern of fixated and obsessive behaviour which is repeated, persistent, intrusive and causes fear of violence or engenders alarm and distress in the victim”.

The charity says stalking is “a highly complex crime that can include many types of unwanted behaviour such as regularly sending flowers or gifts, repeated or malicious communication, damaging property and physical or sexual assault. Stalking is a crime of psychological terror and can lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, paranoia, self-harm and eating disorders.”

One in five women and one in ten men experience stalking in their lifetimes. Many victims experience symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The national helpline receives about 600 calls every month from people seeking help; 13 per cent of those victims are men. The charity says some 17 per cent of stalking perpetrators identify as female.

Academic studies say that while male stalkers are often trying to reclaim an intimate relationship, female stalkers are usually trying to establish intimacy with the object of their fixation. More than half (55 per cent) of stalking perpetrators go on to reoffend, and more than a third (36 per cent) have a previous conviction for harassment. The complex psychological problems that go hand in hand with stalking are often beyond the capabilities of the criminal justice system.

Legislation attempting to tackle stalking was passed in 1997, strengthened in 2012 and upgraded again in 2019, but charities are concerned the seriousness of the offence is still not appreciated.

ONLY 5 PER CENT OF STALKING REPORTS TO THE POLICE RESULT IN A CHARGE BEING PURSUED

Only 5 per cent of stalking reports to the police result in a charge being pursued while successful convictions are obtained in just 1.7 per cent of cases. Anti-stalking groups believe the police and the courts are not using all the powers available to them. The take-up of stalking protection orders, which can be used to impose behaviour conditions on perpetrators, has been poor. Anti-stalking charities have lodged what’s known as a super-complaint – a mechanism for raising issues in the public interest – which is being investigated by the Independent Office for Police Conduct.

John says he was helped by Paladin, an advocacy service for victims. The charity says victims like John are often left feeling “dismissed and misunderstood when reporting stalking to the police”.

A spokeswoman for Paladin says, “This often presents an additional barrier for stalking victims coming forward to make further reports to the police, even when the stalking behaviours are escalating and the risk of harm is increasing. In turn, this puts stalking victims at increased risk of physical and psychological harm.”

John was 32 and enjoying a lazy afternoon in his local pub, drinking beer and playing pinball with a group of mates, when his life changed for the worse.

A friend turned up with a woman called Maria, who joined their company. John says he did not pay her much attention.

Over the next few months she kept on turning up, usually sitting on a table near

John’s group. Sometimes she would sit looking at them; other times she would try to join them.

John’s mates told him she had “eyes on” him, but he made it clear he wasn’t interested in her. He had recently come to the difficult end of a six-year relationship and wanted to be on his own.

One evening he was at home, planning for an early night because he had to work first thing the next morning, when his door buzzer sounded. It was Maria. She wanted to come in. She said she had lost her keys and had nowhere to sleep.

He refused to let her in. She came back three more times and about midnight John cracked and opened the door. He told her she could have his bed for the night and he laid cushions on the floor for himself.

At 6am he awoke to find the woman beside him with an arm draped across his body. He was angry. He told her to leave. She said she wanted him – she wanted to have sex with him.

He says he gave in and they had quick, unhappy, functional sex. Then he told her to leave.

“She left and I felt sick with myself. I felt... [he hesitates before choosing the right word] violated.

“I felt really disgusted,” John adds. “I felt I’d done the worst thing ever but I thought that was it – it was over. Instead, it got worse. She just kept on turning up at the pub, following me and my friends.

“Then one day when I was working for a delivery business, I was up near St Paul’s and I was just about to get out of the van when I stopped dead in my tracks. I said to my workmate, ‘Look, see that girl there – she’s the stalker. She’s been stalking me.’ He started laughing. I told him the story and he couldn’t believe it.”

In 1998, he had been seeing a new girlfriend for a few weeks. They were leaving his flat when Maria appeared. “I was with him last night,” the stalker told his girlfriend. It was a lie. His girlfriend urged him to go to the police. “You’re being stalked,” she told him.

The officers he first approached at Earls Court police station laughed it off. John says he left the station feeling angry and humiliated. The following year he went back to the police. And again the year after that.

“I kept on going to the police. I had to plead with them – ‘Please help me with this because I don’t know what to do.’ She kept on coming; she kept on knocking; she kept on sending me letters.”

Eventually, he encountered an officer who understood. In March 2002, Horseferry Road magistrates’ court issued a restraining order against Maria under the Prevention from Harassment Act 1997.

It specified that between August 2001 and January 2002 Maria had “pursued a course of conduct which amounted

to the harassment of [John] and which you knew or ought to have known amounted to harassment”.

After police interventions, the harassment would often abate. Then Maria would re-enter his life. She would bombard him with letters or call at the door of his basement flat.

“She’d walk down the stairs, she’d be knocking on the window, trying to open it; buzzing on the buzzer, calling my name. ‘Are you in. Are you in? I can hear you. Can I come in?’

“I would have to keep quiet and hide and wait for her to go away. I used to hide in my house. She’d be out there for hours – sitting on the step. Sometimes I’d find her sitting there waiting for me to come home from work.

“I’d call the police to take her away. I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve called the police.”

Maria was jailed in 2007 and later moved to a mental health facility from which she became “a serial absconder”. A police letter from that year documents how she had been bailed to a mental health unit while awaiting sentence, but had gone missing and police could not locate her.

“The fact she has mental health issues makes it more difficult for her to be held to account for her behaviour within the law,” an officer wrote.

John feels his stalker’s mental health is always the priority issue for the authorities. His wellbeing, in contrast, is neglected. “She made me slip. I went into a really bad patch. I started taking a lot of drugs; I started hanging out with some undesirables. I wanted to escape... I had to escape, some way, somehow. I couldn’t work properly. I couldn’t keep a job.”

He was prescribed antidepressants and at one point, after taking cocaine and smoking skunk – strong cannabis – he crushed the tablets into a powder with the intention of ending his life. He was saved when a friend turned up unexpectedly.

“He thought it was coke and when I told him what it was he just swept it away with the back of his hand,” John recalls. “He said, ‘Don’t do it, man,’ and he gave me a hug.”

In August 2010, Maria was jailed for two years. On her release, she began stalking John again. In 2017 she was before the courts once more. The stalking stopped for a while. John has only recently discovered that she was given a hospital order by the courts. That order was later relaxed to a community treatment order.

John applied to his landlord, the Peabody Trust, to be rehoused to escape the harassment. Despite the trust having a raft of anti-harassment and antisocial behaviour policies, his request was not



Harry Styles was sent 8,000 cards in one month by an obsessive fan, who was sentenced in February to 14 weeks on stalking charges. She was also banned from attending his concerts

granted. John says that, for peace of mind, he has been forced to spend more and more time away from his home.

Peabody says John is now on its priority list for rehousing. “We haven’t acted quickly enough and we’re very sorry. We know this is an incredibly difficult and challenging situation.”

Neighbours tell John that when he was away from his flat, Maria would still call

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In 2021, David Beckham was stalked by a woman who visited his houses and even tried to collect one of his children from school. She has since been issued with a lifetime restraining order

repeatedly at the door. Last November the mail began arriving again, with a flurry of letters in familiar handwriting. His partner read them and called the police.

Maria was arrested, then released on bail. Despite bail conditions that include a curfew, an electronic tag and a ban on contacting him, she kept on writing.

John fetches a box of paperwork on top of the fridge. He produces an

envelope. There's a scrawl, all in capital letters – inside there's another envelope instead of writing paper.

The note is dated March 12, 2024.

"How are you?" it begins. "I can't stop thinking of you. How are you? I'm sorry that I kept on making you call the Feds.

"I didn't think you would care if I was arrested. I love you. Please forgive me Angel. Please meet me on Thursday, March 14, outside Earls Court station at 6pm.

"We need to get back together because we need each other. We need to talk. I want to be your woman. I can't live without you any more. Please forgive me. I love you too much."

He shows me another envelope on the back of which she has written, "Please open with lots of love. To my mirror image and my destiny."

"I haven't read it," John says. "I can't read any of them any more – they give me the shakes. I can't believe this person is still like this after so long. I can't believe this is still happening."

A week after we first meet, I am with John and his partner at Westminster magistrates' court on Marylebone Road, which also hosts the first hearings in many high-profile terrorism and extradition cases. John arrives early to avoid bumping

into Maria. Witness support volunteers take him to a room where he can wait to be called to deliver his statement.

The defendant takes her place in the dock. The witness box is ready, with a curtain drawn to stop John from being seen by anyone except the magistrates.

But his opportunity doesn't arise. The magistrates decide the case is too serious for their sentencing powers and should be referred to a crown court. It leaves John with mixed emotions – he feels the case is being taken seriously but is frustrated.

The case is relisted for July 5, the morning after the general election, at Isleworth Crown Court. On polling day, however, John is told the hearing has been delayed again until Monday 15.

Then, on Friday the 12th, an email arrives telling him the case has been put off again. It asks if there are any dates "over the following 12 months" when John might be unavailable. The adjournment is "a defence request which was granted".

John is distressed and furious. Once again the justice system has betrayed him, put the needs of the stalker above those of the victim, left her on the streets and him always looking over his shoulder.

"It feels like there is no one out there who understands how this has mentally and physically broken me," he says. "I am long overdue some justice." ■

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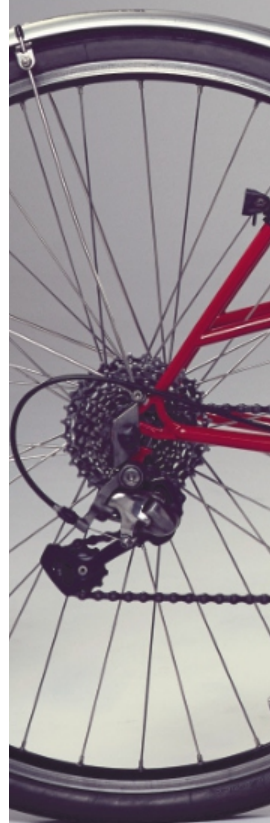
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My body gave me medals, but it would not give me the thing I really wanted – another baby

Laura Kenny after winning gold in the Madison at the Tokyo Olympic Games, August 2021



When **Laura Kenny** was hailed as Britain's most successful female Olympian and, with her husband, Jason, one of sport's power couples, what no one knew was her private turmoil – a miscarriage, followed by an ectopic pregnancy and the fear that she'd never have more children. As she goes to Paris to be part of the BBC's commentary team, she tells Julia Llewellyn Smith what happened



Laura Kenny, 32, and her
husband, Jason, 36, photographed
by Robert Wilson

Story continues on page 34





It's like evening wear
for water

ADD A DASH OF
Extraordinary

A decorative flourish consisting of a curved line that ends in a small leaf and a stem with a cluster of tiny flowers, positioned to the right of the word "Extraordinary".

THE  TIMES

Eat!

4-PAGE
PULLOUT



OUR FOOD EDITORS'
FAVOURITE SUMMER RECIPES

BY TONY TURNBULL AND HANNAH EVANS



HANNAH THE BEST POTATO SALAD

Serves 4-5

This is a mash-up of my two favourite potato salad recipes of the moment, by the food writers Anna Jones and Emily English. The radishes and spring onions go buttery and soft and the crispy edges of the potatoes are addictively good. Maris Pipers are best for crispiness; just be careful not to overcook them before crushing them.

- 800g small floury potatoes such as Maris Piper
- Sea salt and black pepper
- 4 tbsp olive oil
- 1 tbsp grated parmesan
- 1 unwaxed lemon, finely sliced
- Bunch of spring onions, washed, trimmed and finely sliced
- 2 small bunches of radishes, trimmed and thinly sliced
- 4 celery sticks, thinly sliced on the diagonal
- 1 tsp runny honey
- 1 tsp red wine vinegar
- 1 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 2 tbsp wholegrain mustard
- 2 tbsp olives
- Bunch of dill, roughly chopped, to garnish

1. Preheat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Parboil the potatoes in a pan of well-salted boiling water until they are just soft. Drain and leave to steam dry for a few minutes.
2. Arrange them on a flat surface, either a baking tray lined with greaseproof paper or the bottom of your air fryer. Using a rolling pin or potato masher, gently crush each potato so the skins break. Drizzle with 2 tbsp oil and sprinkle with the



parmesan. Cook in the oven for 10-15 minutes until they crisp up around the edges.

3. Pile the lemon slices on top of each other and chop finely.
4. Heat a little oil in a frying pan, add the spring onions and cook on medium for a few minutes. Add the lemon and leave for a few more minutes as everything caramelises. Turn off the heat and leave them in the pan. Add the radishes and celery.
5. In a large mixing bowl, mix together the honey, vinegar, both mustards and the remaining 2 tbsp olive oil.
6. Once the potatoes are done, add to the bowl of dressing and toss together. Add the celery, radish, lemon and spring onion mix, plus the olives. Mix gently, breaking things up a little more. Taste and season well with sea salt and black pepper. Garnish with dill.

TONY THE EASIEST DIP – WHIPPED FETA

Serves 8

This is one of the simplest ways to jazz up grilled vegetables or salads. At Morito in east London, Sam and Samantha Clark (of Moro fame) serve it with deep-fried aubergines and drizzled with date syrup, but I also like it with grilled lamb.

- 200g feta
- 75ml olive oil
- Paprika or Aleppo pepper, to garnish

Crumble the feta into the bowl of a small food processor. Add the oil and 4-6 tbsp water and blitz until silky smooth, with the consistency of double cream (you may need to add more water). Dust with paprika or Aleppo pepper.

PHOTOGRAPHS Romas Foord



HANNAH THE BEST SPICY FISH SKEWERS

Serves 4

I discovered the spice mix in this recipe when I first got my hands on a copy of Tara Wigley and Sami Tamimi's *Falastin*, now one of my favourite cookbooks. I've used trout here but this mixture works with all kinds of fish.

- 800g trout, cut into chunks
- 1 tbsp fish spice mix (2 tsp ground cardamom, 2 tsp ground cumin, 1 tsp paprika, 2 tsp ground turmeric)
- 4 tbsp olive oil
- Sea salt and black pepper
- 2 red onions, each cut into big chunks
- 12 cherry tomatoes or chunks of red pepper
- Crumbled feta, to serve

For the parsley oil

- 40g parsley
- 1 garlic clove, finely chopped
- 90ml olive oil
- 1 lemon, skinned, pith removed and segmented

1. Put the fish into a large bowl with the spice mix, 2 tbsp olive oil, $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp salt and a grind of pepper. Mix well to combine and then set aside in the fridge for at least 1 hour.
2. Put the remaining 2 tbsp oil in a large sauté pan on a medium heat. Add the onions and cook for 5 minutes, stirring a few times, until slightly softened. Remove from the heat and set aside.
3. To make the parsley oil, put the parsley, garlic, oil, a pinch of salt and a grind of pepper into a food processor. Blitz for 1 minute until smooth. Chop the lemon segments and stir into the parsley oil.

4. Preheat the oven to 220C fan/gas 9. Line an oven tray with baking parchment.
5. Prepare the skewers. Alternately thread chunks of trout, onion and the tomatoes or peppers onto 4 metal skewers. Place them under a hot grill or on a barbecue for 3-4 minutes, turning regularly.
6. Transfer to the lined tray and cook in the oven for 6-7 minutes. Serve with a drizzle of parsley oil and crumbled feta.

TONY THE BEST COLESLAW RECIPE

Serves 8

This fresh and zingy coleslaw is a world away from the gloopy, mayonnaise-heavy monstrosities that have given it a bad name. I remember eating it at Pitt Cue restaurant alongside its famous pulled pork, and since then it's been my go-to side dish with any barbecued meat. Don't be shy with the lime or salt.

- 2 heaped tbsp Greek yoghurt
- Zest and juice of 2 limes
- 2 tsp sea salt
- 1 large Savoy or red cabbage, shredded
- 1 bunch spring onions, sliced
- 2 crisp apples, cored and roughly chopped (no need to peel)
- 3 green chillies, deseeded and roughly chopped
- 1 small bunch mint, chopped
- 1 small bunch coriander, chopped

Combine the yoghurt, lime and salt. Place all the remaining ingredients in a large bowl and pour over the dressing. Use your hands to mix and scrunch everything together. Leave it to chill for 1 hour before serving. ➤



HANNAH THE EASIEST NO-CHURN ICE CREAM

Serves 4-6

I will never own an ice-cream maker (my kitchen counter space is far too precious), so I was very pleased when I came across a no-churn recipe from Skye McAlpine that produces silky, rich results. I use it as the foundation for any homemade ice cream, adding ingredients such as nuts, chocolate, pistachio cream or salted pretzels.

- 600ml double cream
- 397g tin condensed milk
- 80ml good quality runny honey
- 100g dark chocolate
- Handful of salted pretzels, roughly broken

1. Whisk the cream until stiff peaks begin to form (take care not to overwhip as you want the texture to be smooth). Gently fold the condensed milk into the cream, then drizzle in the honey and fold all the ingredients evenly together. Toss in the chopped chocolate and pretzels and gently stir through.
2. Pour the mixture into a freezer-safe container. Cover the mixture with a sheet of greaseproof paper before putting on the lid. Freeze for 6-8 hours or overnight.



TONY THE BEST TOMATOES ON TOAST

Serves 4

This dish is inspired by Theo Randall. It's the salting of the tomatoes that makes all the difference in this simple assembly job. It's a trick that Randall, one of my favourite chefs, taught me as a way to concentrate the flavour of the tomatoes. Sometimes I serve this on toast, sometimes on its own, sometimes with ricotta, but burrata makes it that bit more special.

- 400g tomatoes, ideally a mix of colours
- Salt and pepper
- Small bunch of basil, leaves torn
- 12 pitted Kalamata olives, halved
- 4 toasted sourdough pieces, rubbed with a garlic clove (optional)
- 2 burrata, torn
- Drizzle of olive oil
- Drizzle of balsamic vinegar

1. Halve or quarter the tomatoes, discarding the hard core, and place in a colander with a generous sprinkle of salt. Set aside for 10 minutes to allow the water to drain out.
2. Mix the drained tomatoes with the basil and olives. Season with pepper and pile on top of the toast.
3. Top with the torn burrata and dress with oil, vinegar and a couple more basil leaves. ■

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When track endurance cyclist Dame Laura Kenny, neé Trott, returned from the Tokyo Olympics, held in 2021, life could not have seemed more stellar. Having just raised her tally of gold medals to five, she was the most decorated female Olympic athlete in Britain's history, as well as the first to take golds at three consecutive games.

Combine those with the seven cycling golds of her husband Sir Jason Kenny – the most of any British athlete – the couple have accumulated more Olympic medals than 100-plus countries have done in their entire history. They were (and are) sport's Beyoncé and Jay-Z: seemingly superhuman.

"The medals were starting to look quite worn. I worry about them – you don't want them really tatty, so I framed each and every one of them, which was a task in itself," Kenny, 32, says now. "We've got 12, so we joked about a gold-medal clock. Now someone's offered to make us one – that would be a pretty cool centrepiece in our hall."

We're sitting in a bar in Macclesfield near Kenny's Cheshire home. My train was delayed, so we're meeting when she should be on the school run, having drafted in her father to collect her six-year-old son Albie. "Don't worry, Dad's used to it," she shrugs cheerily.

With her multiple ear piercings, long – slightly tangled – blonde hair, ultra-sharp and manicured nails and outfit of baggy beige jacket and matching trousers, Kenny's breezy, down-to-earth persona is utterly at odds with the one we've watched compete in alien-style garb of helmet, visor and Lycra bodysuits, primed since the age of eight to excel at nothing but turning left "round and round, day after day, lap after 250-metre lap", pushing herself so hard she always vomited on finishing.

"Normally, they pull out a bag for me to be sick in, but at Tokyo there was no one there and I threw up on Sir Brad's [Wiggins] feet – that's probably the most embarrassing thing I've ever done. He just turned away."

The public's always warmed to that human side of Kenny – ever since she charmed us aged 20 at London 2012 by bagging her first two golds, then being snapped snogging Jason, her secret boyfriend at the time, at the beach volleyball behind David Beckham. "Prince Harry was like, 'Ooh, you two be careful with all these photographers around.' We were like, 'They are not going to be interested in us.' Next morning, we were all over the newspapers."

Yet her sunny demeanour doesn't detract from the fact that immediately

after the Tokyo Games things took a very dark turn. Kenny was desperate for a sibling for Albie, but in late 2021 had a miscarriage. Then in January 2022, she had an ectopic pregnancy that resulted in emergency surgery.

"It was horrendous, really difficult," says Kenny, who's also won seven world championship titles. "The chances of having a miscarriage, then an ectopic, are something like 1 per cent. So I kept asking myself, 'Why do I deserve this?' For a long time after that I turned in within myself. I just couldn't speak to anyone; I wasn't the very open Laura I am normally. I didn't know how to voice how I was feeling."

Few suspected her turmoil. Before the 2022 Commonwealth Games, Kenny "painted the picture of being the same happy Laura", even when one night she broke down, crying hysterically on her mother. The next day she won gold in the Scratch race.

"I wasn't the best rider on that day – I was just tactically spot-on," she says with characteristic frankness. "I thought, 'Why can't I have that luck in my personal life?' My body would give me that [cycling success], but it wouldn't give me the thing I really, really wanted, which was another baby."

Bolton-born Jason, 36, was also struggling. "Everyone forgets about the man," Kenny continues. "I appreciate I'd had to go through a really scary operation but he was having to hold the fort at home and it was all, 'Is Laura OK?' Not once did anyone ask about him. Actually, a lady did once in a Q&A and he just choked up in front of an audience of 300 people. So I couldn't share with him how bad I was feeling, because I knew he felt even worse. We both just kept it in. I was consumed by my own brain."

She never had therapy, but eventually she broke down in the kitchen with Jason, after which they began talking. "It was so hard, but after that I started to accept what had happened." At the end of 2022 she conceived their son Monty, although this pregnancy was full of fear.

"All the time you're just waiting for bad news. I must have spent thousands on private scans just to put my mind at ease. Even giving birth wasn't simple like it was with Albie. It was a bit of a nightmare, Monty's heart rate disappeared for a bit. I just wanted to hear him cry and have him lie on my chest."

Monty's now just turned one. There seemed no reason why – although Jason had retired after Tokyo – Kenny couldn't boost the family medal haul at the Paris Games starting next week. But in March, she announced she too was leaving the sport. This doesn't mean she'll disappear from view – at Paris she'll be in the BBC commentary box. "I'm not putting on my slippers yet," she chortles.

The Kennys with their first child, Albie, 2019



The secret couple were snapped kissing in 2012. 'Prince Harry was like, "Ooh, be careful"'



Albie with his little brother Monty last year

The decision to quit cycling, she says, "came really easily", propelled by her difficulties conceiving. "With Albie, I'd got pregnant straight away [and] I was back after six months. I'd just bring in my mum if I needed help and it didn't feel like a sacrifice. But with Monty, I was really struggling to leave him. It was like, 'Why am I giving up this time when I've wanted you for two and a half years?' That's not taking away from how we juggled things with Albie – I loved that. It was just a totally different mindset."

Yet even with Albie, there were challenges. Getting back on the saddle was physically agonising. Everything the Kennys had previously "selfishly" avoided to preserve their superpowers – socialising (the risk of catching a cold), any weekend outings (too exhausting), even vacuuming the house – now had to be embraced



With Katie Archibald following their Tokyo triumph

because their son's wellbeing came first. He travelled all over the world with them, even if he kept both up crying the night before big races. It was only when they went to Tokyo that Covid rules meant he had to stay behind with her parents.

"I'd never left him before and it was heartbreaking. But once there, I must admit we did get a lot of sleep. I had a good time. I just wish he could have seen me compete."

Kenny thinks motherhood made her a better athlete. "I'd given up so much time with Albie, I felt Tokyo needed to be worth it. It's not that you haven't given 100 per cent before, but once your little one's at home, you give 101 per cent."

It's often said elite sportspeople die twice, the first time being when they retire. The spectre of former greats such as the aforementioned Bradley Wiggins, now bankrupt and homeless, haunts many. Yet after decades of missing "parties, proms, you name it" in order to prioritise training, Kenny's revelling in her new life of mums' WhatsApp groups and endless rounds of children's parties.

"Before everyone saw me as an athlete; now I'm just Albie's mum and I'm loving every minute of it. I thought I might miss the routine and we still have the school run, but it's so refreshing to wake up and think, 'Oh, what should we do today?' rather than the fixed plan that had been my life for so long.

"As an athlete, you don't really live like your mates do, even on your breaks, whereas now I can literally do what I want. When we were training, we just wouldn't have taken Albie to a theme park because it would have meant one long day on our feet. You could never do anything too energetic. But now, at Easter, Jason was away at a camp. It was the first holiday I'd had where I said to Albie, 'You tell me what you want to do and we'll do it.' I think he thinks I'm quite cool. At children's parties

I get stuck in. I'll think, 'Oh God, I just lifted someone's child into a treehouse. I hope they can get down – I hope the mum's not watching.'"

Monty sleeps just as badly as his brother. "But now, although I might have to get up early to do an appearance, it's not the same as having to be physically ready to race. If I'm a bit tired, I'll have a coffee. It doesn't really matter."

Until very recently, I'd never have had such a conversation with an elite sportswoman. Motherhood and gold medals were virtually mutually exclusive. Now that's all changed. "Once one brave person does it you realise it's possible. Denise Lewis [the heptathlete, now a mother of four] competed – that seems like a distant memory. Then Jessica Ennis-Hill [who was also a heptathlete and is a mother of two]. Suddenly it was like, 'Oh, hang on! This could be a thing.'"

Now, UK Sport has compiled guidelines for mothers which all sports governing bodies must follow. "With Jason and me it was still a bit different because we were both competing, so they couldn't say, 'Oh, leave the baby home with Dad.' We trialled everything and British Cycling were brilliant at helping me and shaping a template for how it could work for other people. I'm pretty sure this time there are more mums competing for Team GB than ever before – I can name two cyclists straight off the bat. Charlotte Dujardin [the dressage gold medallist] has had a baby, Bianca Williams [the sprinter]... Loads of women."

Kenny was born eight weeks prematurely with a collapsed lung. She and her older sister, Emma, also a cyclist, grew up in Cheshunt, Hertfordshire. Their father, Adrian, was an accountant, their mother, Glenda, a teaching assistant. On holiday to the US when Kenny was eight, Glenda – then eight and a half stone overweight – was mortified to be told she was too heavy to board a cable car ride.

"I didn't understand at the time but I remember Mum being upset a lot – things like she felt really large on the aeroplane. Back home, everything in the house changed: the next day we had no crisps or sweets. That definitely helped the whole family." The weight was shed in 18 months, an example that instilled in Kenny her ruthlessness. "I'm such a determined person because I have Mum as my role model."

As part of the weight-loss campaign, the whole family started having sessions at the local velodrome. Kenny was already super-sporty – she was especially good at trampolining. "But then I started winning at cycling." She chuckles cheekily. "I liked that feeling."

Even though she remembers being physically sick with nerves before big races, her parents "never pushed me. Some days I'd need more encouragement

than others. Mum would say, 'Well, why don't you just start the race? If you don't want to finish it, just pull over – it doesn't matter.' When I look back, everything was fun."

She's intent on being equally relaxed with Albie, who doesn't enjoy riding his bike to school. "The number of times I'm saying, 'Albie, we're nearly home,' drives me up the wall." Kenny declared previously her son hadn't a competitive bone in his body. "But we've just had sports day and I saw a very different Albie. He won his running race and I was so pleased. He's got his dad's fast twitch [muscle fibres built for speed], definitely."

Was there a mums' race? "There wasn't! I was gutted," Kenny cackles. Other parents don't treat her any differently from anyone else, not least because several well-known sportspeople's children, including Sir Chris Hoy's, also attend Albie's school. "Luckily, they're in the year below us so they'll never be in the same parents' race. Chris would destroy us."

Albie's played some football but Kenny was "horrified" by parents bellowing on the sidelines. "The language was horrendous! You're never going to encourage a six-year-old to compete when every time he steps on a field, adults shout at him. Cycling is very friendly."

The tennis community's equally supportive, at least that's been Kenny's impression of the local club that Albie's joined. "But even if he's fast – and he should be coming from Jason and me – it's whether he's got the will. Sport's savage. You might take it a step forward, and then the next year they say, 'Hang on, you're not good enough. Go back.' If he's got the mentality for that – great. If not, we'll find something else."

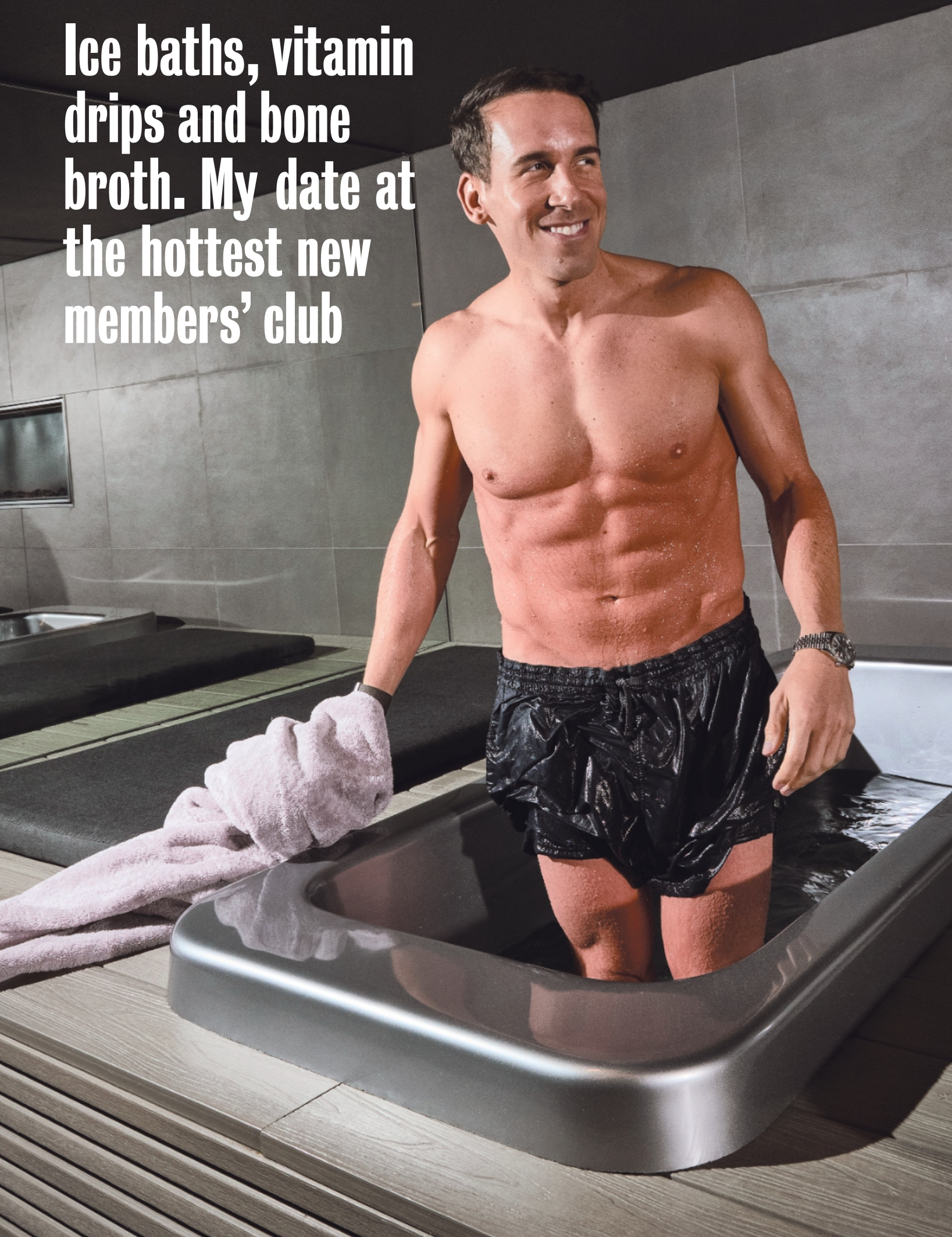
On International Women's Day, she allowed Albie to take one of her medals out of its frame and into school. "I was a bit worried because I've seen a couple of people drop theirs and they smash just like that. I'm not sure you can get them replaced." She laughs merrily.

Kenny may be demob happy, but won't she feel differently in Paris watching her peers from the commentary box?

"I've spoken to Jessica Ennis-Hill and Denise Lewis – they both said be ready to feel nervous and like you wish you were racing. I hope I won't, but I just don't know. But being on the other side brings a different excitement. Normally, the Olympics are so stressful. You enjoy the race but you don't really take in any of the atmosphere; cycling tends to fall at the end, so you don't get to do any of the partying in the Olympic village. This time I feel I'll be able to enjoy the Olympics for what it is."

Kenny beams, then pronounces – again with that unwavering champion's determination – "I'm going to have fun." ■

Ice baths, vitamin drips and bone broth. My date at the hottest new members' club



Writer Will Pavia, left, with Jonathan Leary, photographed by Aaron Richter in Leary's Remedy Place club in New York



At Remedy Place in New York, you won't find cocktails on the menu. Instead there are cold plunges, intravenous infusions and lymphatic drainage. The club's founder, Jonathan Leary, says it's the cool new way to hang out. But could it really catch on over here? Will Pavia books in (he's the one on the left above)

New York's newest social club is on the ground floor of an office building in the Flatiron District. The windows are tinted black. From the street it has the dimly lit aspect of a nightclub. Monthly memberships range from \$350 to \$2,250 (£270 to £1,730).

Just inside the door stand two spectacularly good-looking people: a young man and a young woman in form-fitting black outfits. Beyond them there's a bar lined with stools that offers bone broth and other elixirs, but no beer, wine or cocktails. Most of the fluids they serve here are administered not in a glass at all but down the tube of an intravenous drip.

There is no restaurant here either, just a "restoration bar" where a range of jars contain what look to me like small pieces of wood. Apparently these are snacks, made by a company in Los Angeles. I wouldn't know whether to eat them or to start work on a bird's nest.

Do I have a reservation, the young woman asks.

The first Remedy Place opened in Los Angeles in 2019. This is club number two, with another set to open in New York later this year. That will be followed by one in the new year in Boston, and London perhaps in the future. The two clubs handled more than 60,000 reservations last year for ice baths, acupuncture, intravenous vitamin infusions and other treatments – non-members can also pay as they go. The idea is that you do these treatments with friends or on a date in a social setting, the way you might once have gone for a cocktail.

"It's like a social club for people who are really into health and wellness," says one patron, Tatum Fuller, 23, who works in marketing. "The same way people would join Soho House or Casa Cipriani."

It is expensive (\$55 for an ice bath and breathwork; \$150 for lymphatic drainage), she says, but people work going to Remedy Place into their expenditure in the same way they would previously have budgeted for big nights out at the weekend. A lot of her generation don't drink. "Instead of tequila sodas, it's cold plunges," she says. Fuller loves a freezing bath. "It's the best," she says. "You feel like a newborn person."

Jonathan Leary, the club's founder, says he had the idea for an entirely new kind of social club – one that offers trendy health-boosting treatments to enjoy with friends – while working as a chiropractor in Hollywood. He made his patients feel fabulous, he says, advising them to give up drinking, take regular cold dips and saunas, eat better food. But they were also lonely. "They said, 'Because of the lifestyle changes you made me do, I can't go out. I can't see friends.'" Because everywhere

A monthly membership costs up to \$2,250. 'Often couples come on date nights'

they might go would offer them fries or a frozen margarita.

Leary is 34. He has dark eyes, prominent front teeth and a wonky smile. He reminds me of the boy in an American film who saves the day and can't believe his luck. We're lying at the back of the club, facing each other on a bed that is enclosed in a cylindrical chamber. The whole place is done out in shades of grey, like a set from the sci-fi movie *Gattaca*.

These bed chambers are where clients come for an IV vitamin drip. Often, he says, couples do this for a date night.

Not a first date, surely?

"I think it's more appropriate for a second or third," he says.

So maybe coffee, the cinema, ice skating, then the intravenous drip.

"Alcohol consumption has been going down every year," Leary says. Younger generations "are going to need a new experience".

This is it, he says. "We could be having a coffee in a coffee shop or having a drink for this interview," he says. "But today we are doing it over IVs."

A chicly dressed nurse named Anne-Marie Dolgetta, 27, comes to take our order. The IV bags here are really excellent, she says. "It's one of the best bags for the price. It's a really solid bag." She talks about them at great length, like a sommelier in a fancy restaurant.

"The Multi bag and our Remedy bag are the two biggest offerings," she says. "The Remedy bags are like a Cadillac version of the Multi. The Multi is kind of like my maintenance, for someone whose just coming in, wants to try it... It's well rounded but it's not, like, a superheavy hitter. So sometimes it's a nice entry point."

She asks if I have any concerns about being hooked up to a drip. I do. She must think me dreadfully old-fashioned.

"These are things that either you make or you would ingest in food," she says. "So they're all natural." But we don't naturally have vitamins injected into our veins. A toxicologist named Edward Boyer assured me of this when I rang him up. We evolved to eat vitamins, not inject them. In the developed world, the number of people with vitamin deficiencies "is virtually zero", he adds. "The idea that you are going to be better after this expensive infusion of vitamins is nonsense."

There is, though, a persistent if unproved idea that they help with hangovers, and as it happens...

"You drank last night," Leary says, sounding dreadfully disappointed.

Dolgetta springs into action. I need a Multi bag, she says. Then she will throw in some glutathione. It's an antioxidant, produced by the liver. She'll give me a syringe full of it at the end of the drip.

The Multi bag costs \$250. Glutathione is an extra \$50. "That's a pretty standard price in New York," Dolgetta says.

She connects me up to a bag of bright yellow liquid she hangs from a hook above the bed. The vitamins have "a kind of gross, fake cherry flavour", she says. I might taste it. "Don't get nervous if you do."

She performs the same operation on Leary, telling me that I can ask any questions "while you're dripping". I'd never heard the verb used like this. The cold liquid runs up the veins in my arm and I try to chat nonchalantly with Leary. He looks perfectly at ease. I'm not knocking this, I say. But I do wonder if I could enjoy chatty bant with a tube running into my arm.

"Well, it's your first time," Leary says. "Doing anything that isn't normal takes some adapting, right?" But after a while it's no different from grabbing a latte, he says. "I have so many meetings doing this because I think it's way easier."

Leary reads self-improvement books, writes a journal daily and follows a strict routine: up at 6am; 15oz (443ml) water before he gets out of bed; cold shower; workout; go back home, no breakfast – only water laced with powdered creatine and collagen. And another cold shower. The showers and ice baths have trained his body for the cold, he says. In winter, in New York, he no longer needs a large coat.

Then, meetings from 8.30am until 6pm, with a salad bowl for lunch. Some evenings, an ice bath. Dinner at 7pm. Forty-five minutes before he turns in for the night, another routine for his hair.

Four years ago he had a hair transplant. "The hairs that they put in stayed and the rest fell out," he says. "I looked terrible." Then he tried a hair-loss medication containing minoxidil and finasteride. "This is the first time I've used a medication as an adult," he says. He regards it as his only vice. He rubs it onto his head along with rosemary, peppermint and botanical oil. Then he puts on a cap filled with little red lights, which is meant to encourage hair growth. His hair has all grown back. He has a thick brown cap of it now. "More than I've ever had," he says.

Then, at least when he is in Los Angeles, he gets into a red-light bed that resembles a tanning bed and chews on a resistance ball, a "jaw exerciser", which helps to grow his jawline.

"It's for aesthetic purposes. Some people do fillers. I do exercises," he says. "And then, after that, I tape my mouth shut and go to sleep."

Leary and Pavia with their IV vitamin drips



Lymphatic compression



The sack is tightening around my crotch. I feel like Bond strapped down in Goldfinger



Pavia tries an ice bath

“You actually get 20 per cent more oxygen to the body if you just breathe in and out through your nose,” he says. “So by taping your mouth shut, it will help improve your sleep score, but then it also helps give more oxygen to the body.”

Leary grew up in Rhode Island. His ambition was to become a doctor, but he also worked as a personal trainer. His clients got steadily healthier, he says. The doctors he met in hospital as a pre-med student looked very unhealthy by comparison: stressed, overworked, unhappy. The father of one of his friends was a chiropractor and offered him some advice. “He’s like, ‘Listen, in California a chiropractor is a primary care physician. They just can’t prescribe meds or perform surgery.’”

Leary was initially suspicious of alternative medicine. But if he got a doctorate as a chiropractor, it would allow him to open his own practice. He became a “concierge” chiropractor, ministering to athletes and executives with back or joint problems who were trying to avoid surgery.

Soon he was shuttling between the mansions of Los Angeles. His big-hitting clients advised him on how to open Remedy Place. Kendall Jenner posted a video of herself recumbent in one of his ice baths. Kim Kardashian visited the New York branch after it opened in 2022. There’s a video of her in a swimsuit lowering herself into a steel trough filled with frigid water.

“There’s nothing that will shift you emotionally, physically, mentally, more in six minutes than an ice bath,” Leary says. “I think this is the most powerful thing that humans can do in six minutes.”

Dolgetta, looking in to check on us, says that after her first ice bath she went out and got a tattoo.

Our IV drips are finished. Somehow, that enormous bag of liquid has disappeared up my arm.

“You look younger,” Dolgetta says. “It’s crazy.”

Do I feel any better? I’m not sure. I’m fretting about the ice bath, wondering what tattoo I will get.

First there is something called a “lymphatic compression”. Leary and I climb on to another bed and post ourselves into large rubbery sacks lined with air bags. They fit around your legs like an enormous pair of trousers and zip up to your chest.

They scan your body. Then the bags inflate and the trousers tighten. “It wrings you out, all the way up to your chest, over and over again,” Leary says.

They are typically used to treat arthritis and various other conditions associated with a build-up of fluids in the lymphatic system. “These are [Food and Drug Administration] approved

medical devices,” Leary says. “These are \$36,000 each.”

The compression has reached my thighs. Can you really have a business meeting like this?

“I compare it with what I normally have to do for a meeting,” Leary says. “Either being seated with a coffee or... a drink.” This is “the perfect substitution”.

The sack is now tightening around my crotch.

“Or, like, some people are with their spouse, they need a date night once a week and they’re sitting in front of the TV,” Leary says. “Why be in front of the TV when we could be in here, squeezeegeeing out our lymphatic system?”

Good question, but I’m afraid I’m entirely focused on when the machine will stop tightening around my crotch. I feel like Sean Connery in *Goldfinger*, strapped to the table and shouting, “Do you expect me to talk?”

Some people meditate while doing this, Leary continues.

The tightening stops. I start listening again. The machine moves on, up and down. Then it’s bath time.

A row of stainless steel tubs are set in a raised platform lit by a water-vapour fire, with fake flames. It’s modern-looking, I suppose. But the words “torture chamber” keep popping into my head.

We strip to our trunks. Leary’s pectorals glow like planets in the firelight.

Getting into freezing water causes a “cold shock response”, according to Mike Tipton, a physiology professor at the University of Portsmouth. The body is flooded with adrenaline, serotonin, cortisol and endorphins. But evidence that it is good for you “is almost all anecdotal”, he says. He also says the cold shock response peaks after two minutes in water that’s 10C. Spending longer in colder water is more painful, but it produces no greater effect, he says.

The baths at Remedy Place are 3.8C and Leary says you should do 6 minutes.

“I’ve just found over the past nine and a half years that six minutes is like the sweet spot,” he says. “The first two minutes, three minutes, are the hardest. But I’m telling you, when you step out of the tub, there’s no better feeling.”

I would not on balance say it is the best thing that you can do in six minutes. I try to lie back and think of England, but there is some unmanly shrieking. The water feels cruel and sharp. But after two minutes, it’s easier. And I’m certainly wide awake afterwards.

We repair to the sauna. I ask Leary if he drinks. Only very occasionally, he says. “Alcohol is one of the worst toxins we can put in our body. Everyone’s like, ‘This is how I de-stress,’” he says. “It’s crazy to think that culturally we just did that, but it’s cool that it’s really changing.” ■

CASH DROPS, POLICE RAIDS,
CAR SWITCHES ON THE SCHOOL RUN

MY FATHER, THE CRIMINAL



Stephanie Jory's suburban childhood was anything but ordinary. Her charismatic father sent her to private schools and paid for lavish holidays. He was also one of Britain's biggest counterfeiters. Ben Machell meets her



Stephanie Jory, 45,
photographed by Eva Pentel
at Gilgamesh restaurant
(gilgameshlondon.co.uk).
Styling: Hannah Skelley

Stephanie Jory grew up in a large semi-detached house on a leafy north London street. Her parents drove nice German cars, she and her younger brother both went to nice private schools and, as a family, they would enjoy nice holidays abroad: Tuscany, Andalusia, New York, Mexico.

They were comfortably off. More than comfortable really, for there was a certain suburban extravagance about the Jorys during the Eighties and Nineties. They would host black-tie New Year's Eve blowouts and dine at exclusive restaurants such as Langan's and Rules, while birthdays and Christmases were times of Cartier watches and fur coats and gift-wrapped toys stacked from ceiling to floor. "I remember big presents," Jory says, frowning. "Always really big presents."

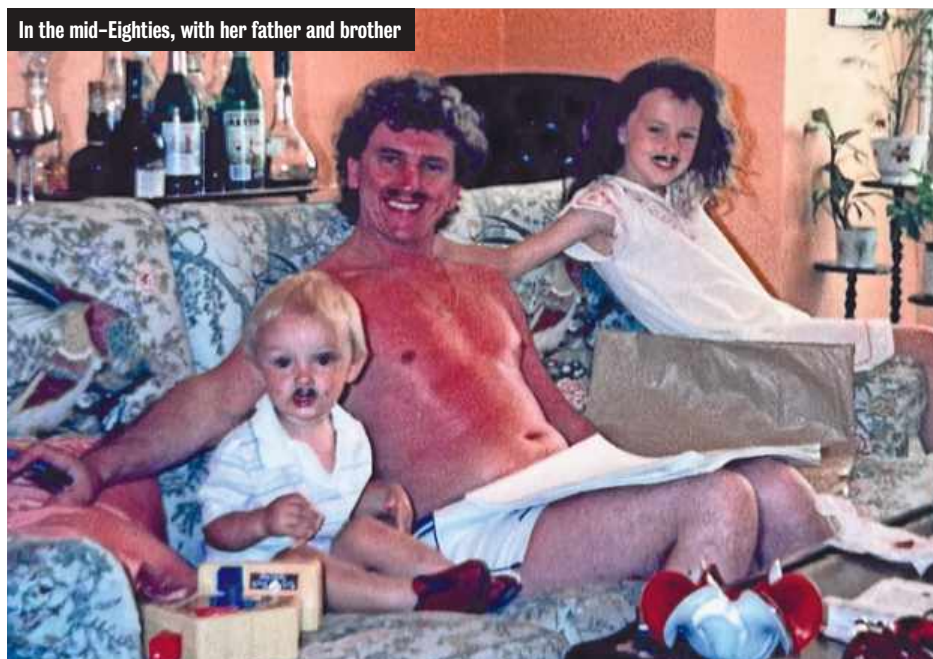
Her mother did bits of volunteering, working with children who had special needs, but it was Jory's father, Stephen, who was the breadwinner. He worked in industrial printing, a career that would often see him spend large amounts of time in America, a fact that struck Jory as impossibly glamorous when she was young.

But that was not the only thing that seemed to set them apart from the other families on their street or at the school gate. The other parents did not, as far as Jory was aware, instruct their children to wave and smile at the plain-clothes police detectives parked outside their home every morning. Other children would not find their houses had been repeatedly broken into and the floorboards prised up. Nor would their fathers make odd diversions on the school run, switching cars halfway along, hurrying their kids out of one and into another while scanning the street.

None of Jory's friends had ever come home to find police officers emptying their wardrobes onto their bedroom floor, and none was ever saddled with the chore of helping their mother count and bundle stacks of banknotes at the kitchen table, then stashing them in the eaves or beneath the cellar stairs. These were things, she understood without really knowing why, that made her family different.

One day, she walked into the living room to find her mother and grandmother watching the early evening news. Jory, who was still at primary school, was surprised because there, on the television screen, was her father being escorted into an imposing building she would later understand was a criminal court. "He was wearing a long leather jacket and he had his long curly hair. And I remember saying, 'Oh, that's Daddy.' But my mum and nan said, 'No, no, that's not Daddy,'" Jory says. But, of course, she knew it was. So why were these grown-ups saying that it wasn't? Later, a girl in the school

In the mid-Eighties, with her father and brother



ONE FRIEND WAS A KRAY, LATER CONVICTED OF MURDER. 'WE HUNG OUT TOGETHER. WE WENT TO WHIPSNADE ZOO'

playground would stride up to Jory and loudly inform her that, "Your dad's just an old crook." When she repeated this back at home, she was greeted with laughter. "Nobody in my family ever said, 'Look, your dad's a criminal,'" she says.

Instead, she had to gradually piece together that her father was, in fact, one of Britain's most successful counterfeiters. Starting in the Seventies, Stephen Jory had begun to produce and sell fake designer perfumes, eventually overseeing a £300 million operation with a factory in Acapulco. He was finally caught in 1985 and, after serving a prison sentence – the first of many absences that would come to be presented to his children as American "business trips" – he would pivot to the mass production of forged banknotes, an incredibly complex and high-risk endeavour that would lead to untold millions, potentially billions, of pounds of fake sterling circulating in the economy.

"By the time I was 13, I knew exactly what was happening. When I was older, I saw some of the notes. My dad would say, 'Can you feel the difference between these?'" Jory says, mimicking the action of rubbing £20 notes between her fingers. Even then, the notion that her family was involved in something fundamentally wrong did not trouble her. "It didn't even occur to me."

How does growing up in a criminal family shape you? How does it inform your sense of identity and morality? And what's it like having to navigate childhood when your dad is a notorious, well, crook?

These are not questions I had ever spent much time considering until a mutual friend introduced me to Jory. She had, the friend explained, a story I might find interesting. Sometimes you worry when people tell you this – what it often means is that the person in question is opening a boutique or setting up an online business and they would like you to write about it for publicity. That they have, in other words, something to sell.

Jory is not selling anything. It's just that, at the age of 45, she has found herself, much to her surprise, able to talk about a childhood and adolescence that was by turns painful, funny, surreal and frightening and which, more often than not, sounds like a Judy Blume novel crossed with *The Sopranos*.

I meet Jory at a café in north London near to where she lives with her husband and young son. Within ten minutes she is describing how, while on a family holiday in Spain, she found herself being arrested by armed police on driving off a ferry. And how even when her dad was on the run and supposed to be lying low, he still grudgingly collected her from her ballet lesson when nobody else could. And how one childhood friend was a grandson of the gangster Charlie Kray, and that years later she would read in the papers of how her friend and his father had been found guilty of dismembering a man. "I remember thinking, 'Well, I knew these guys were criminals,'" she says, as though still trying to make sense of it. "But we used to hang out together. We went to Whipsnade Zoo."

Counterfeit banknotes seized during Operation Mermaid, 1999



Stephen Jory appearing in *Behind the Crime*, Channel 4



During proceedings at Winchester Crown Court, 1999

Jory is tall and slender. Unlike her parents, who never lost their Cockney accents, she speaks with a voice that is crisp and bell-chime bourgeois. This is not unusual, she says, for the children of career criminals. “We all went to squeaky-clean private schools. And our dads all went to prison.” In her twenties she worked as a comedian and is a gifted mimic, aping the voices and mannerisms of the swaggering geezers her dad would consort with and who would slip her (real) £50 notes, or re-enacting the delight of her mother on being handed a box containing the keys to a new Mercedes. She places her long fingers to her cheeks, widens her eyes and lets out a high squeal of pleasure.

Today she works as a psychotherapist specialising in trauma, a role in which she has her own experiences to draw on. She passively absorbed all the stress and drip-drip anxiety of her parents’ criminal life from as early as she can remember. She would see her father peering through the living-room curtains during the day and observe that her mother sometimes slept

with a large knife under her pillow. This atmosphere hardwired in her a fearful watchfulness that would, ultimately, contribute to a teenage eating disorder. “I was hyperaware,” she says. “I was afraid a lot, but I didn’t know exactly what I was afraid of.” As she moved through her teens, this fear was joined by anger: anger that her father, despite his repeated assurances, was unable to stay out of jail. She lets out a long breath. “He would constantly promise that he would never go back to prison. And every single time he did.”

She and her father enjoyed an intensely close “intuitive” relationship. One of the sad ironies of her odd childhood was that, for all the fear and anxiety his criminal career caused, he was the only person capable of making her feel at ease. “I felt very safe with him. Very held. And I’ve never felt like that with anyone else.”

She describes how her father’s route into criminality was atypical. He’d grown up on a council estate in east London with law-abiding parents and had shown enough creative talent to have been offered a

place at art school in the late Sixties. But he turned it down, opting instead to apply his creativity to a life of crime. “I think he wanted to make money. And be known for his talents. And achieve some sort of fame,” Jory says. “And I suppose in that way, art and crime can be very similar.”

From the start he exhibited a restless energy and roguish charisma. He was practically minded but also prone to the kind of quixotic delusion that career criminals tend to require. Jory’s mother, on the other hand, had a less romantic understanding of where crime can lead. Her father had run a number of illegal underground bookmakers but had managed to pivot to legitimacy and did well out of it. However, he still did some “underground bits”, which was how he came to be shot dead in Hatton Garden. “My mum was 20 when it happened. She knew who killed her dad; they were family friends,” Jory says matter-of-factly. “But they never got caught because nothing could be proved.” This fact only deepened her mother’s sense of paranoia and fear of betrayal that would eventually be inherited by Jory herself. “I always have this feeling that people are going to cheat me or pull the wool over my eyes,” she says. “My husband can’t understand it.”

After the rise and fall of his counterfeit perfume empire, Jory’s father would return from prison determined to find his next big score. She thinks he looked down on petty crime and drug dealing “because you didn’t need to be particularly clever. It wasn’t an intellectual exercise.” By the start of the Nineties he had settled on counterfeiting money, having come into possession of some banknote printing plates, then acquiring a four-colour printing press housed on the private land of an acquaintance and the services of some sufficiently expert but morally flexible printers. They would then sell bundles of this fake money to other criminal organisations, including the Russian mafia.

Stephen Jory would later recount these exploits in a book, *Funny Money*, which he wrote from (spoiler) prison. And what stays with you is what a strange, baroque place the criminal underworld is: a world of continual secret meetings and whispered opportunities, of constant schemes, rumours and deceptions, populated by an endless cast of hangers-on, hardmen, cowards, snitches and bent police officers. Stephen Jory’s own account of his career feels like an extended anxiety dream – his first run of fake £20 notes somehow printed the Queen with a beard – punctuated with occasional exhilarating success. It was an addictive lifestyle that required him to be in near-perpetual motion, his daughter says.

“He’d say he was going to take me and my brother to the cinema. But we wouldn’t go straight to the cinema. We’d ➔



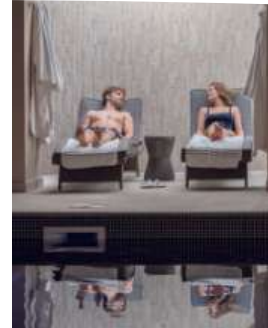
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do two drops on the way and then we'd stop in a wine bar and he'd chat to some people, then we'd go to another person's house and pick up some more money. And then we'd go to the cinema," she says. "Only he might pop out during the film. Then on the way back we'd do two more drops. We were always on my dad's schedule. Work was always happening."

As Jory entered her teens, though, something began to change within her. As a young child she had loved going to friends' houses as there was something deeply comforting about the calmness of a conventional family home compared with her own. "But from secondary school onwards I began to think that everyone else's parents were so boring," she says, drawing out the "booring" and rolling her eyes. Conventional suburban life was tedious, she came to believe. "My dad created a real sense of exceptionalism. He'd look at other families and tell me that the biggest thing they had to worry about was paying their mortgage each month. That they don't know the meaning of fear."

Jory describes what you might call the sociology of the criminal family.

When so many of your schemes depend on your own optimism – often bordering on delusion – this can inform your general view of life. In combination with the adrenaline required to keep going, this can have a potent effect, as if the nervous anxiety required by the lifestyle acts as a potent upper. "Things feel heightened and fantastic all the time," she says. "Almost like you're invincible." This can foster a kind of naivety. As a tweenager, Jory trained as a dancer. "My parents told me I was going to be the next Madonna. And they believed it. To them, it was obvious. There was a lot of fantasy."

But Jory did not need fantasy. What she needed was stability. She feared for her father and dreaded the prospect of him returning to prison. Deep down she wanted to know that her father loved her more than he loved the life of a criminal. At 14 she began dating an older boyfriend who was charismatic but abusive. She became bulimic and, eventually, suicidal. "It was much easier to obsess over food and my boyfriend than it was to think about my dad," she says. "I turned my anger inwards." Indeed, what she did not realise at the time but can see clearly now was just how angry she was at her parents. For one thing, they did little to prise her away from the boyfriend who was clearly making her life miserable. "My dad should have just tied him up, dragged him somewhere and told him that if he ever saw me again he'd slash his head off," she says with feeling. "That's what I would do. And I'm not a criminal."

Her father, though, prided himself on being not the leg-breaking type. After making a suicide attempt, she remembers waking up in hospital to see her parents

telling her, with hopeful smiles, they had booked them all a nice holiday. "That was their solution," Jory says. She shuts her eyes and slowly sinks back into an imaginary pillow. "I just thought, 'Oh my God.'"

She began to see a therapist, who knew who her father was and suggested a family therapy session. "So we all rocked up and sat down," Jory says. After some general questions about family dynamics, Jory's brother, who was then 11, began to cry. "So my mum instantly shut it down. 'Look – you're upsetting him. We're leaving.'" They ushered a despondent Jory out of the room. At her next session, her therapist looked at her seriously. "She just said, 'Your dad is a psychopath.'" This shocked Jory at the time, but she now accepts that for all his charm and wit, her father's lack of empathy and remorse and general egocentricity mean the term is probably fair. "I now realise there's a spectrum."

When Jory was 16, her father was arrested and charged with relatively minor offences that would, nevertheless, mean a stint in prison. He arranged with the police to enter custody a day late so

not to return to the family home. Shortly after sending the message, she was stopped by the police – it was them following her in an unmarked car – and arrested. Her father never received her text. He had already been seized. She was not charged but her father received a 12-year sentence, reduced to 11 on appeal. "He broke his promise," she says flatly. "I was shattered."

Like her father, Jory secured a place at art school. Unlike him, she accepted. She would visit him in prison. He would hold her hands closely in his and she would feel her heart trill at the affection he was showing her. Only then would he slip her a small piece of paper – a secret note, in code, to be passed to her mother – and she would realise that the hand-holding was just a ruse to allow him to continue his schemes, plans and dreams. That he was using her. "I remember thinking, 'I f***ing hate you,'" she says. "I couldn't believe anything my dad said. 'Does he love me? What does he really feel about me?'"

From this point on, though, Stephen Jory's dreams remained just that – dreams, unfulfilled and fleeting. On his release,

'BY 13, I KNEW WHAT WAS HAPPENING. I USED TO THINK EVERYONE ELSE'S PARENTS WERE SO BORING'

that he could present Jory with a car for her 17th birthday. There was a delirious surreality to her parents' smiles and hugs as she was led to the driveway and handed the keys. "I remember thinking, 'Is this real? Why is everybody acting happy? You're going to prison tomorrow. Why aren't we all crying? This is not supposed to happen to people. It's not normal.'"

Her father's time inside did not permanently derail the counterfeiting operation. After his release, Stephen Jory was brutally attacked with machetes and baseball bats one night in Hackney. She and her mother raced to the hospital to find him in full traction. "He was purple and green. Both legs up. Everything broken," she says. And what made it worse was that he was chirpy. The whole thing had been a case of mistaken identity, he said. Some police had been passing while he was attacked and they intervened, which was a stroke of luck. It was as if the whole thing was already a funny story. "It was the first time I really broke down. I was just crying and crying, and afterwards I couldn't leave the house for a long time because I was afraid something could happen to me."

The police were closing in on her father's counterfeiting operation, with a dedicated team running what was called Operation Mermaid. One evening in 1998, Jory was driving when she noticed a car tailing her. Gripped by a sense of foreboding, she texted her dad telling him

he did not return to crime. Divorced, he lived with Jory for a time, losing himself in both the art he had chosen to abandon in favour of crime – he began to paint and sketch again – as well as in drink. He descended into alcoholism and died in a car crash in May 2005. Jory says she feels a huge amount of guilt about this, because in her mind the dynamic of their relationship demanded that she somehow provide salvation. "Because I was supposed to save him. I was the special child."

Jory has finished her tea. She remains close to her mother: "We've worked through a lot of stuff. Our relationship is OK." She still carries grief for her father and pain from the experiences he put her through, knowingly or not. But for all this, she retains a profound nostalgia, even affection, for the strange life she and her family had lived while the rest of us were being conventional and following the rules. The other day, by chance, she happened to catch a US reality show called *Mob Wives* and found herself almost overcome with emotion at how familiar it was. "The decor. The ritziness. The extravagance. It was like watching my own family."

Sometimes, when she is out with friends, she will spot somebody her father had known – often a large, ageing geezer – and go over and chat briefly. Afterwards, her friends will ask her who on earth that was. And she will just smile and tell them it was somebody from a different life. ■

FANCY A STAY IN MY STATELY?

(One might even find us on Airbnb)

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Kirtlington Park

From £10,000 per night





Knowlton Court

From £10,000 per night



Julie and Luke Montagu of Mapperton



Mapperton

From £2,750 per night

Those grand family estates won't pay for themselves, you know. Enterprising aristos are turning their stately homes into holiday rentals. But what's it like to let the normies in? Matthew Bell reports

About nine years ago, when I was working for Tatler magazine, I attended a meeting of a support network for people who had accidentally inherited a castle. It took place at Aynhoe Park in Oxfordshire, which in those days was noted for its collection of stuffed zoo animals. The “Next Generation” conference of the Historic Houses Association was an annual affair that lasted a weekend and was essentially a very grand Debtors Anonymous meeting in which pink-cheeked princelings could unburden themselves of their anxieties about how to pay for their moats to be cleaned. “How can I make my château make money?” one frazzled châtelaine wailed to a room of gravely nodding faces. “It’s six hours from Paris. I can’t move it.” After they had got it all off their chests, they did what the European aristocracy do best and had a ball, in which everyone got bloated and then vommed all over the rosebeds.

The thing is, back then it really was a struggle to keep a country house going, because owners still thought they could live in them and make money. They would come up with genteel business schemes such as clay pigeon shooting or house tours, or build tearooms selling tastefully packaged boxes of soap. But you need to sell a lot of soap to pay for a new roof. These periphery ventures were never going to generate the hundreds of thousands of pounds needed to cover maintenance and insurance costs.

Now, as a younger generation is taking over from their parents, the concept of opening up their homes to make some serious dosh has taken hold. This new aristocracy is no longer constrained by ideas of gentility. It’s all about making hard cash in whatever way you can. And if, gulp, you are prepared to open your grand front door to the great unwashed, there is money to be made. According to data compiled by AirDNA, which monitors the market, demand for luxury stays costing more than £800 a night has increased by 73 per cent since 2019, while for homes costing more than £1,200 per night it’s up 91 per cent.

Some houses now have their own websites, some join “luxury collections”, others sign up to Airbnb, which recently seized on the popularity of *Bridgerton* and *Saltburn* by launching a *Bridgerton*-inspired collection of stays. “We’re very proud at Airbnb to have normalised this idea that you can open up your house and it’s going to be OK,” says Amanda Cupples, the company’s general manager for the UK and Europe.

The latest to join the trend is Luke Montagu, Viscount Hinchingbrooke, the 54-year-old owner of one of Britain’s most beautiful manor houses, Mapperton in



Mapperton

From £2,750 per night



Dabton House

From £3,000 per night



Coombe End Manor

From £5,000 per night

Dorset. “We have huge costs,” he says, rattling off some telephone-length numbers that clearly occupy a front and forward position in his mind. “£200,000 a year on maintenance. More than £60,000 on insurance, almost £100,000 on utilities. So we have to be creative.”

Montagu’s parents, the Earl and Countess of Sandwich, handed over the reins to their eldest son in 2016. Until then, Mapperton had always been a rather private place, voted “the nation’s finest manor house” by the discerning readers of *Country Life* in 2006. All that changed partly thanks to Montagu’s wife, Julie Fisher, a yoga instructor from Illinois who had enjoyed some fame as one of the more likeable characters in the 2014 reality TV show *Ladies of London*. Then she and Montagu launched a YouTube channel, Mapperton Live, which relays in exhaustive detail even the most banal aspects of life in a stately, from cleaning the swimming pool to the cancelling of

her ladyship’s yoga classes so they can focus on house tours. They have built a loyal fanbase.

“Because we have this successful YouTube channel, we have been looking at ways to encourage some of those viewers to come and see Mapperton for themselves,” Montagu says. “We started doing this thing called Grand Historic Tours in which my wife and I host guests for five days and the guests go off and visit other houses. We had to invest quite a lot of money upgrading the bedrooms and the plumbing. When I took over the house, the water kind of dripped out of the taps and was a dark brown colour because of all the rust. So we ripped all that out and put in a modern hot water system.”

The tours have attracted mostly American visitors with typically Wodehousian consequences. “Our American guests found two taps in the Edwardian baths very bewildering, and couldn’t work out how to use the 2ft-high

PREVIOUS SPREAD: LOYD & TOWNSEND/ROSE/AT/CASTLES.COM; LYNSEY MELVILLE/PHOTOGRAPHY; GRAHAM MELLANBY, COURTESY OF THE AIRBNB COMMUNITY; THIS SPREAD: GRAHAM MELLANBY; CIRCE HAMILTON; MILES WILLIS; WALTER DALKEITH; COURTESY OF THE AIRBNB COMMUNITY



William and Laura Cash at Upton Cressett Hall

Upton Cressett Hall

From £250 per night



Gilmerton House

From £3,500 per night



Middleton Castle

From £3,000 per night



Charingworth House

From £999 per night

'We spend £200,000 a year on maintenance. More than £60,000 on insurance. Almost £100,000 on utilities. So we have to be creative'

plug," Montagu says. "We had to explain that the bowl and jug were to help with hair washing – no shower attachments in those days. As they were all regular watchers of our YouTube channel, they knew that we often have leaks and were most disappointed not to find any when there was a downpour."

Having spent all that money refurbishing the guest rooms, it then made sense to rent out the whole house for a few weeks of the year while they are not there, he says. How much will he charge? "Between £2,000 and £4,000 a night. So if you've got ten people in ten bedrooms that's only £200 a night." Is he nervous about letting strangers bounce on his ancestral bed? "Well, they won't be staying in our bedroom," he clarifies. Nor will the main drawing room, with its museum-quality furniture and paintings, be included. These will be locked. "But there are lots of other rooms."

Over in Norfolk, Thomas Barclay is also keen to attract paying guests, especially

The UK's poshest Airbnbs

- Northcourt House, Isle of Wight**
£1,045 per night
Grade II listed Jacobean manor house with grand regal rooms (including a music room) and 15 acres of gardens.
- Manor House, Norfolk** *£920 per night*
Medieval coastal property with natural swimming pond and wood-fired sauna.
- Blackcraig Castle, Ballintuim, Perthshire**
From £155 per night
Romantic Scottish castle surrounded by forests and hills.
- Charingworth House, Gloucestershire**
From £999 per night
Traditional Cotswold stone pile with terrace, gardens and dining hall.
- The Gatehouse at Upton Cressett Hall, Shropshire** *From £250 per night*
Elizabethan gatehouse with Thatcher Suite where the former PM once stayed.

Americans, to his home, Middleton Castle, complete with moat, keep and castellations. It rents from £3,000 per night. "I really like how passionate Americans are. They're so interested," says Barclay, 45, who took over the estate from his parents last year. "In a big property there's always something that needs fixing or a problem that needs solving. So I could be trying to sit down and do some marketing when I'm pulled off to fix a leak. But it's exhilarating and the reward for me is when we have a house full of guests enjoying the experience of living in a castle."

Most of Barclay's bookings tend to be for milestone birthday celebrations – they've had everything from a 30th to a 90th. "I was a bit anxious about having the public in at the beginning," he confesses. He is always present to check people in and out, so that he can check the silver spoons are all still in place. "I very much want to meet people when they arrive, but once they're

INSIDER TIP



Florida is one of the most family-friendly states in the US, known for its famous theme parks, great weather, sandy beaches, history and wildlife. With airboat rides, walking tours, beautiful gardens and special sporting events, every activity is an opportunity to make cherished memories. From fantastic shopping to world-class golf courses, it's a place where people of all ages can enjoy an endless list of things to see and do.

By **Stephanie, TUI rep**

STATE OF PLAY

Shipwreck dives, rocket launches, racing car rides and kayaking past alligators: Florida is one fun adventure for **Peter Ellegard**

Beyond the thrills of Orlando's theme parks, a whole other world of bucket list experiences will set your pulse racing in Florida. They call it the Sunshine State, but to me it's the State of Excitement.

During many visits to this adventure playground, I have taken part in activities ranging from the adrenaline-inducing to awe-inspiring. Canoe or kayak trips on Florida's many rivers and backwaters are a great way to immerse yourself in its abundant nature – and sometimes they're surprisingly close to towns and cities.

On a canoe adventure along the Hillsborough River, just 15 minutes from Tampa, I paddled past huge alligators basking in dappled sunlight on the tree-shrouded banks – all thankfully oblivious to me. And as I navigated the peaceful Imperial River near Fort Myers, a playful otter popped up right in front of my kayak not once but twice.

Spot manatees – sea cows – as you row the clear waters of Florida's springs. And look out for the diminutive Key deer when kayaking through tangled mangroves on Big Pine Key in the Florida Keys – though they proved elusive for me.

I've also taken exhilarating catamaran sailing excursions into the Atlantic, with wild dolphins riding the bow waves, and cruised from Key West and Panama City Beach to watch dreamy sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico.

Skimming the marshes and waterways of Florida's Everglades aboard fast, powerful airboats gives me a buzz every time. You can also take airboat rides on rivers and lakes elsewhere in Florida.

Below the waves lies a magical world. I have marvelled at the kaleidoscope of colours when diving the Florida Keys' coral reefs, teeming with dazzling tropical fish. And I have explored the



Quick getaway: holiday thrills on an Everglades airboat and inside the Kennedy Space Center



SHUTTERSTOCK

wrecks of ships sunk as artificial reefs off the Keys to create a fascinating diving trail. Another shipwreck trail off Florida's Panhandle coast stretches all the way from Pensacola to Panama City.

Daytona Beach's satellite city Ormond Beach is lauded as the birthplace of speed, with car races first held on the shoreline in 1903. Today, they are staged at the Daytona International Speedway track. On days when no contests are on, you can ride shotgun in a racing car hurtling around the banked track at high speeds. That's a hair-raising drive I'll never forget.

More sedate is seeing Florida from aloft, which I have enjoyed in a helicopter flying over the sugar-white Gulf Coast beaches and in a hot air balloon floating serenely above Orlando.

At Walt Disney World, you can hover 120m over Disney Springs in Aerophile, a tethered, handpainted helium balloon that is the largest of its kind in the world. Take things very much higher by watching a rocket soar into space from Cape Canaveral at beach vantage points along Florida's Space Coast. Then visit the Kennedy Space Center and strap yourself in for a simulated Space Shuttle launch. You'll have a real blast.



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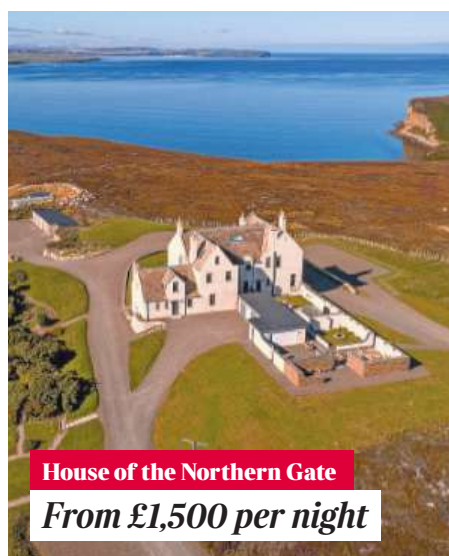
settled in they don't want me hanging around." He does, however, admit that Americans are usually keen to meet a living, breathing member of the British aristocracy. And to judge by Middleton Castle's 42 rave reviews on Google, they are not disappointed, singling out "Tom and the resident peacock" for particular high praise.

Not all rentals are, ahem, quite as they should be. The châtelaine of one vast castle in Scotland thought she was bringing in some useful cash when she rented out the whole place for a few days while she and her husband were in London. On their return they found some of the furniture had been moved and subsequently discovered the house had been used to shoot a porn film. "They were never able to look at the sofa bolsters in quite the same way again," a friend says.

William Cash, the journalist and publisher, once rented out his grade I listed moated Elizabethan manor house, Upton Cressett Hall in Shropshire, on Airbnb, but found the result so awful he has never done it again. "It was one of the most depressing experiences of my life," he says. "This group of people arrived from London in a white minibus all wearing white fur. And they just spent the whole of new year eating McDonald's and popcorn in our house while we cowered in a cottage. So I said never again."

What Cash has done, however, is to renovate the Elizabethan gatehouse and four cottages around a courtyard, which he lets out in its entirety for multi-generational family gatherings. "This is definitely a booming trend," he says. Cash has also converted a 15th-century barn into a banqueting hall with frescoes replicating those of the Palazzo Davanzati in Florence. Here guests can book a catered banquet. "What you don't want when having a family party is to have to stop off at Sainsbury's on the way."

And it pays. Cash used to do "teas and tours" but says they never made enough money. "We would open twice a week and have maybe two visitors strolling round." Now it's all about sweating your "heritage assets". "We tried doing a history festival – £10k down the drain," he says. He uses several agencies to rent out the gatehouse including Airbnb, which he says is one of the best because you can vet the guests in advance. "Do I google a guest beforehand? Of course I do. We had one chap who was on the run from the police, although I only discovered that once he was here. He arrived in a van containing his worldly possessions, and when he asked to extend his stay for another week he tried to show me a wire transfer, which was fake. I looked into him and found he was wanted by the police. I didn't turn him in, but I asked him to leave and locked up the place so he couldn't come back."



Over on Scotland's east coast, James Erskine, 37, has recently taken over the 17-bedroom Cambo, famous for its snowdrops. He can command £4,700 a night for it. "It's a monstrous big place and it would be preposterous to have it just for us," he says. And in southwest Scotland is Dabton House, the "cherished" 11-bedroom family home of the 10th Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch, among the largest landowners in Scotland. You can now lounge on their duck-egg sofas and enjoy views of Drumlanrig Castle for £3,000 a night.

Letting the lower orders into your stately home is actually not as foreign a concept as you might think, says Jeremy Musson, a former architectural editor of *Country Life* and the author of books including *The English Manor House* and *The Country House: Past, Present, Future*. "Country houses were always hubs of the rural economy, which in many ways they have become again," he says. "In some ways they were always quite public environments and all about a prestige that at root was commercial too."

While in many grand piles weddings have long been an important source of income, exclusive rentals put much less strain on the house and its staff, owners say. "We have a group of golfers who take the house for a weekend and they are ideal," says Matthew Kinloch, 33, owner of Gilmerton House, an 18th-century jewel east of Edinburgh, who charges groups £3,500 per night. "There's no wear and tear on the house because they're out playing golf all day, then they come home, have a few drinks and go to bed." When guests arrive he moves to a cottage over the road.

At Pylewell Park in Hampshire, home of the Roper-Curzon family, its graceful balustrades and formal gardens are yours for between £3,000 and £6,000 a night in high season. Pylewell is unusual as it was recently jointly inherited by ten siblings,

the ten children of the late Lord Teynham. The Roper-Curzons are known for being bon viveurs and the house, which has 13 bedrooms and sits in its own parkland overlooking the Solent, has seen many a party over the years. The antics of paying guests are mostly quite tame in comparison, one family member reports.

Jonathan Townsend-Rose, 64, is an Old Harrovian and the founder of Loyd & Townsend Rose (LTR). They are the go-to people if you're after the full *Downton Abbey* experience, offering places such as Knowsley Hall (17 bedrooms, museum-grade art collection, state rooms) or Kirtlington Park (eight bedrooms, Capability Brown parkland, polo club next door).

"The key thing to remember about this area of the market is that it offers our guests the privacy and security they would never get in a hotel," Townsend-Rose says. Can the service of a couple of old butlers really be that good? "Yes. It's actually easier for a couple of butlers to give a greater level of service in a house that they know intimately. And extra staff are always brought in for a rental, though many of our clients also bring their own staff."

Americans account for 80 per cent of his client base. They love British history and "they also have the money and are used to paying that kind of money", he says. Ah yes, the money. LTR's rates start at £10,000 per night, for which you get such architectural masterpieces as Knowlton Court, a 19-bedroom Tudor manor in Kent, or Farleigh Wallop in Hampshire, seat of the earls of Portsmouth. Away from LTR, for half that you could take 20 friends to chic Coombe End Manor, near Cheltenham (£5,000 a night).

Each house tends to have some kind of USP, and for the House of the Northern Gate it's remoteness. The nine-bedroom house can be hired from £1,500 a night. It stands on the far north coast of Scotland near the Castle of Mey, where the Queen Mother used to hide. "We're at the end of the earth, so getting an electrician in can be a challenge," says George Dunnett, whose father bought it "as some kind of romantic dream" in 2018. Luckily, Dunnett, 46, makes human-resources software for a living and has designed various gadgets for controlling the internet and heating remotely from London, where he lives. The whole place is now run on renewables. "I think with all projects like this, you tend to underestimate how much it's going to cost to renovate – that was certainly the case with us. But I wouldn't change anything. We love having family get-togethers here, and now running it as a business is just as fun and exciting."

Or as James Erskine describes life at Cambo in Fife, "Running a big house is like having an angry baby. It's a very nice baby, but it needs a lot of looking after." ■

Eating out

Giles Coren



TOM JACKSON

‘Almost certainly the best pub in England (terms and conditions apply and, no, I haven’t been to your local)’

Horse and Groom, Gloucestershire

The great essayist William Hazlitt loved a nice long walk in the countryside as much as his very good mates, the Romantic poets. But the bugger of it was, they just wouldn’t shut up.

“One of the pleasantest things in the world is going a journey,” he writes in the third essay of his book *Table-Talk*, first published in 1822. “But I like to go by myself. I can enjoy society in a room; but out of doors, nature is company enough for me. I am then never less alone than when alone. I cannot see the wit of walking and talking at the same time. When I am in the country I wish to vegetate like the country. I am not for criticising hedgerows and black cattle. I go out of town in order to forget the town and all that is in it.”

Imagine, then, your mate Wordsworth, puffing along next to you, telling you how lonely he feels.

“As a cloud, mate, that’s how lonely. You know, one of them big white puffy ones that floats on high o’er dale and...”

“I know what a cloud is, Bill. Now, please, let me walk in peace.”

“Look!”

“What?”

“Over there! Beside the lake, beneath the trees!”

“Not this again?”

“Fluttering and dancing in the breeze...”

“Every bloody time, Bill.”

“A crowd! A host!”

“They’re just daffodils, old chap.

They don’t get more golden from being talked about.”

“Ten thousand see I at a glance!”

“It’s about 40 daffs, Bill. If that. It’s not 10,000. You sit here and talk to them if you want; I’m off up that hill for some peace and quiet.”

But it was another of the Lake Poets who was Hazlitt’s main problem. “My old friend Coleridge,” he writes, “could go on in the most delightful explanatory way over hill and dale a summer’s day, and convert a landscape into a didactic poem or a Pindaric ode.”

It drove poor Hazza mad, by all accounts, this endless poetic chatter. But he did make one exception to his rule of silence:

“I grant there is one subject on which it is pleasant to talk on a journey; and that is, what one shall have for supper when we get to our inn... The open air improves this sort of conversation or friendly altercation, by setting a keener edge on appetite. Every mile of the road heightens the flavour of the viands we expect at the end of it... Eggs and a rasher, a rabbit smothered in onions, or an excellent veal-cutlet!”

And I am with him all the way.

Which is why, when the Corens are in the countryside, since we do not ride or hunt or shoot or fish, what we always do is find somewhere terrific to eat, then search up a walk on the AllTrails app (for which I thank God every day – without it we’d just be another tragic statistic,



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 pubonthehill.com)
Cooking 10
Service 10
Location 10
Score 10
Price £50/head

another family of townies who took a wrong turn in bad weather without the correct equipment...) and march to it, mile after mile, spotting birds, flagging up tumuli, sniffing for evidence of badgers and, when the legs tire and the brain addles, calling up the menu of where we're going on my phone and planning what we'll have.

"Is there a burger?" said Sam last Saturday, deep into the fourth mile of the Bourton-on-the-Hill to Sezincote circular, which takes you through the gorgeous 18th-century estate of Bourton House, past Thickleather coppice and into the Sezincote estate with views of the utterly bonkers 1805 Mogul Indian palace and its surrounding gardens and ponds.

"Not only that," I replied. "There's a double cheeseburger with an Otis & Belle brioche bun and house fries."

"Get in!" he replied, Coleridge-like.

"Although," I said, "do you remember the glazed ham hock for two with fried eggs and chips from the Halfway at Kineton?"

"With the black, crunchy crust tasting of treacle and the steam that rises when you cut in and the pink slippery flesh that you spear and drag through the bright, coppery Cacklebean yolks?"

"Yup. Well, they've got that too."

"So do they have that vegetarian pie that you said in your review was the best in England?" said Esther.

"Doesn't look like it," I said, squinting in the bright sun at the tiny writing on my phone. "But there's monkfish scampi..."

"Yay!"

"Atlantic prawn cocktail..."

"Woohool!"

"And for Mum, gazpacho and a strawberry bellini..."

"And then some wine."

Our destination was the Horse and Groom at Bourton-on-the-Hill, the 2016 Good Pub Guide pub of the year, a cosy spot with stunning views and lovely people but pretty average food, I always thought, which has been taken over by Nathan Eades and Liam Goff of the Halfway at Kineton and is thus, now, with their immense cooking bolted on to the rambling old space and fantastic gardens, almost certainly the best pub in England. *(Terms and conditions apply, experiences can go up as well as down, you might not like it, no, I haven't been to your local, frankly it's just the sort of thing I say, see website for full disclaimer.)*

It has not changed much inside, nor should it. It is lived-in and lovely, but on a rare warm summer's day we busted through into the two-tiered garden, with its mature trees and shrubs and shaggy lawns, and while the gravelled seating area is very smart and the Covid-era huts will be great in the rain (and handy for feeding up to, I would guess, 150 at a sitting on busy weekends), we climbed to the high lawn and a not too guano-spattered picnic table under a tree. Eating outside I can take or leave. But eating under a tree – the dappled shade, the birdsong, the faint insect hum, the view over yellow stone buildings, old slate roofs, bent chimneys, cobalt skies, fields slowly browning to the harvest, all framed by a good, sharp privet hedge

– that is truly living. The English rural pub is the greatest of all things on earth and the Horse and Groom is perhaps its apogee.

You know most of what we ate. Nathan has been telling people that the food here will be more obviously pubby than at the Halfway, and people have been laughing. Not because the names of the dishes are not pub-familiar but because the execution is so unpubbily precise, imaginative and typical of his and Liam's work.

The Atlantic prawn cocktail (£11.50) was two layers of fat, aromatic wild prawns in a cut glass whisky tumbler, split by a layer of crisp salad, dressed with pea shoots and a slice of lemon, and served with warm, fresh soda bread.

The monkfish scampi (£11.50) were freshly breaded and fried with a dark golden crumb and the sweet meaty texture of monkfish tail was in many ways more compelling than the sloppy, salty nag of crayfish tail rattling in the sweaty hole. With them was a glistening saffron aioli, a pickled shallot and watercress salad and a wedge of Gem lettuce. The Scotch egg (£11) was equally well fried, shiny as a brass finial, warm, porky and sweet, the yolk a sunshine gel, with shoots and a pickled walnut puree.

And please don't write to tell me that you can get dishes with these same names at Wetherspoons for two thirds of the price, because I will be compelled to repeat John Ruskin's observation that, "There is hardly anything in the world that cannot be made a little worse and sold a little cheaper, and the people who consider price alone are that man's lawful prey."

The double cheeseburger (£18) is a plain, saladless, hip and sticky masterpiece of its kind. The less "pubby" gazpacho (£9.50) was cool and sweet, strongly red pepper-scented, served with toasted sourdough. Gnocchi (£19.50) were uniquely long and delightfully stiff, tumbled with warm, summery English peas and broad beans and radishes. The ham hock described above was better than ever, a glazed hock bomb that burst from its sticky crust scattered with pork-rind "popcorn", fried scallions and Chinese seaweed-style fried cabbage specks like a ham Jesus rising again on the third day, the four bright local eggs, fresher than fresh, lined up alongside, attendant as disciples.

And then we rolled off our benches right into the long Cotswold grass, like Laurie Lee, set down from the apple cart not far from here at the age of three in the summer of 1917, and slept like babies. ■

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'I beat my son in an arm-wrestling challenge – but only because I cheated. Not my finest hour'



DAN KENNEDY

It's not as if I usually go about being all cocky, yet this past week gave me cause to feel even more ashamed of myself than usual. Stung by a benignly uncontroversial remark my wife made to our son, reported by him to me, I challenged the lad to an arm-wrestle. And won, which makes my behaviour worse. If Sam had won, putting his old man in his place, that would have been a charming, self-deprecating circle-of-life story to tell against myself. As it is, I just look like a dick.

Sam was out for a coffee with his mum. They were talking, I think, about his exercise regime, which involves circuit training, kettlebells, squats, climbing, swimming and ice baths and is seriously impressive. He is so committed that Nicola and I have to tell him to take it easier, to avoid getting injured or overly bulky. At a pocket battleship 5ft 7in, Sam has to avoid packing on too much muscle. I suspect that was the context for Nicola's remark.

"Moom [that's what the children call their mother] reckons I'm probably stronger than you are now," Sam relayed to me later that night as I paced around the garden getting my steps up, while he immersed himself in his plunge pool. He wasn't boasting or trying to cause trouble; he was just catching me up on his day, stating what she and he obviously thought was an uncontroversial fact.

"Oh, does she now?" I replied.

"Yeah. I mean, I probably am, right? I'm 27, I train pretty much every day and, all right, you go to the gym, but you're 60 next month, so that's fair enough."

"Hmnn, I suppose so," I grunted. And went back inside to stew.

I mean, it shouldn't matter, right? It really, really shouldn't matter...

"What's all this about you saying Sam is stronger than me?" I asked Nicola the next night, the three of us having tea. I was partly playing things for laughs, the old curmudgeon, pretending to be graceless about giving way to youth. But also I was affronted that she might say that, however much I understood her motives. I was even more affronted that she might believe it to be true. Plus, a secret fear that it was true added injury to insult.

Nicola patiently explained the context and how, at 27 versus all-but 60, it was perfectly natural.

"Let's have an arm-wrestle," I said to Sam.

His mother persuaded him that this was not a good idea.

This next night, however, Nicola was not present while Rachel, Sam's sister, was.

"Let's have an arm-wrestle," I heard myself saying once again.

"Yeah, go on!" Rachel said.

"OK," Sam said.

I should, in retrospect, have relinquished the field at that point. Sam is forever suggesting we wrestle or spar or engage in some other form of unarmed combat. It's a family joke that every so often, in homage to Ronnie Pickering, the Hull hardman who went viral a few years ago when footage emerged of him repeatedly trying to get into a fight with a fellow motorist, Sam will ask, "D'yer wanna bare-knuckle? Yer want a bare-knuckle?"

Ever since he turned 16, by when he was already into serious training, I have always refused, not only because he is ripped, stacked, jacked, shredded and all those other modern ways of saying muscular, but because he's my son. "Fighting," I explain, "is about what you're prepared to do to win and because I'm your dad, and because therefore nature determines that I love you more than you love me, I have no desire to hurt you. Quite the opposite. Whereas, well..."

But on this occasion, my ego got the better of me. We set up at a low table, Rachel spectating, and locked our right palms together in the classic Eighties-throwback pose. Sly and Arnie would have approved.

In an arm-wrestle, you generally know straight away whether you're going to win or lose. Against my son, unusually, I couldn't tell. We were matched for strength and I knew if it came to a test of stamina, I would lose. If I was going to win, I would have to win quickly.

In *Persuader*, Jack Reacher is up against a 400lb steroid-munching monster bad guy called Paulie. Jack, Herculean as he is, realises from the outset he's in trouble. So he cheats, mercilessly crushing Big Paulie's four fat fingers together.

I didn't stoop that low, because I didn't need to. I just cocked my wrist to get an angle, as a prop forward will try to get away with shifting his hips to gain an advantage at the scrum, and I wrenched Sam's forearm down but also back, which is poor form, not to mention against the rules. But hey, all's fair in love, war and arm-wrestling.

Then I did the same thing left-handed. As I say, not my finest hour. ■

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