

THE  TIMES

# MAGAZINE

31.10.20

## NO ORDINARY JOE

**BIDEN'S WORLD THE PRIVATE SIDE  
OF A WANNABE PRESIDENT**

**ALL HAIL THE  
GENE QUEEN**  
*By Tom Whipple*

**THE LONELINESS  
OF BEN WHISHAW**

**I'VE JOINED  
THE TWINS SET**  
*By Lucy Bannerman*

# loaf



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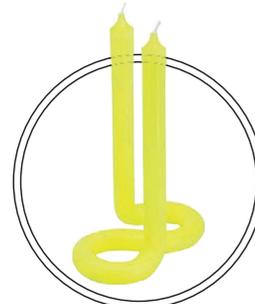
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T H E

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# CAITLIN MORAN

## WANTED: SILENT FIREWORKS

The bangs make them more exciting? Yes, but so would cocaine

There are several things that we think of as “totally normal” that, did they not already exist, we would never invent now. Pudding, for instance. Pudding is berserk. You eat a whole meal of meat, and then another whole meal of cake?

That’s too much. Why not keep going and have a third meal of ham, and then a fourth of beans? You’re already being ludicrous. No one would invent “Second Lunch: Cake” now. It’s a mad remnant of the past.

Likewise, ties. They’re basically a chest pelmet, to cover up the buttons on your shirt. What mad, prudish era did we have to live through when buttons needed a petticoat to cover them? And why are we still doing it?

And so it is with fireworks. Or, more specifically, the BANG in fireworks. We’re currently at the beginning of Fireworks Season – these days, it starts around Halloween, continues over both weekends around Bonfire Night and then redoubles at Diwali and New Year’s Eve. As has been pointed out for many, many years, Fireworks Season is a nightmarish time for people with dogs, small children and those who were in the military or have PTSD. And no wonder – at any time between sundown and lam, any night of Fireworks Season can suddenly erupt into what sounds like the Valentine’s Day Massacre or a small war. Last year, our dog was so scared that she would climb up inside my jumper and stay there all evening, shaking uncontrollably and crying actual dog tears. In the end, I had to hold my hands over her ears and sing to her. No dog wants that.

In a way, it’s weird we’re not *all* freaked out by fireworks: after all, there are no other instances in life where hearing a series of loud explosions is *good*. Unless you’re a former gold prospector with a very specific backstory about dynamiting Last Chance Gulch in 1879 and subsequently finding the mother lode, whenever humans hear a “BANG!” it tends to mean “visits to A&E”, “dealing with a lot of rubble” and “wondering where your leg has gone”. It never bodes well.

Why, in 2020, do fireworks still have a “bang”? We wouldn’t invent them like that now. If someone had only just devised a way to light up the sky with vast, phosphorescent chrysanthemums, everyone would be like,



When we humans hear a ‘BANG!’ it tends to mean ‘visits to A&E’ and ‘wondering where your leg has gone’

“Cor, this is gorgeous! You have turned the heavens into a celestial city of ecstatic sparks! Well done, you, Edward Firework!”

But if Edward Firework then went on to explain that this transcendent manmade aurora borealis came with the mandatory accompaniment of, essentially, the first 23 minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*, everyone would be like, “No. Just... don’t. Why ruin it?”

And indeed, why? Making beautiful fireworks go “bang” is genuinely demented – like inventing fairy lights that scream, or balloon animals that emit a low, tortured groan of, “I’m dying.” No other beautiful, visual thing we’ve invented is accompanied by abhorrent noises: the Louvre doesn’t insist the *Mona Lisa* be displayed in a room that permanently plays *We Like to Party!* by Vengaboys; Sissinghurst doesn’t have a resident banshee in a gazebo; St Paul’s doesn’t repeatedly *retch*.

I’m trying to work through every possible reason to keep the BANG in fireworks, but it’s proving pretty easy to dismiss them all. “People might not notice the fireworks are going off if they’re not accompanied by a BANG!” Just... pointing could work? Also: THE SKY IS ON FIRE. WE’LL NOTICE.

“The bang makes it more exciting!” Yes, but so would cocaine, and we don’t include that in the box. Those who would like a bang are more than welcome to pop on their headphones and download the audio of chimney stacks being demolished, or people dynamiting dead whales on beaches. It could be like silent disco. Or, here’s an idea, instead of a bang you could have something *genuinely* exciting, like John Lennon screaming *Twist and Shout*, Kate Bush singing *Wow*, or Han Solo shouting, “Hit it, Chewie!”

And presumably it would be cheaper to make fireworks that didn’t have a cannon attached, which highlights the class element to this. Basically, the only way to let off noisy fireworks *without* massively inconveniencing hundreds of other people and their pets is if you live on a vast estate and can pay your butler to take your dogs somewhere quiet for the night. For everyone else – with neighbours, a social conscience and a limited budget – much cheaper, silent fireworks are A Thing That Needs Inventing As Soon As Possible.

As things stand, however, I’m bracing myself to spend the next two weeks with a cockapoo up my jumper, to whom I will sing that perennial Prince classic about Fireworks Season: *When Dogs Cry*. ■

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# What I've learnt **The Mooch**



INTERVIEW Jane Mulkerrins

*Anthony Scaramucci, aka 'the Mooch', 56, lasted ten days as White House director of communications in 2017. He was fired for making comments about Trump to *The New Yorker*, which he believed to be off the record. He has five children and lives with his second wife on Long Island.*

**I'm like a nuclear cockroach.** Drop several atom bombs on me and I'll figure out a way to crawl out of the rubble.

**This is a very different election to 2016.** Then, Donald Trump was running as an insurgent, disruptive candidate. Now he's got four years of failure as president, while hijacking the Republican Party and establishing the cult of Trump.

**I would never dishonour my dad by telling you that I grew up poor, but there was financial anxiety in the house.** My grandmother was a maid, my mother was a housewife. I had a paper round and gave

half the money to my parents. I was very motivated to make my own money. I ended up going to Harvard, I worked at Goldman Sachs and built two businesses. **I needed to construct a network of influential and affluent people to be successful.** But I wasn't a member of a social club. I had never hit a golf ball, never swung a tennis racket. One entry into those spheres of influence was through politics – the first political cheque that I wrote was to Rudy Giuliani in 1989. And it's like being Michael Corleone in *The Godfather Part III* – once you're in, you can't get out. **Trump is a ridiculous liar.** And a bully. There's nothing more un-American than being a bully, particularly a bully with power. **This is a great culture war.** And Trump is the last white man standing, believing that he is preventing the latte-sipping

black transvestites from taking over your culture and ruining your country.

**I don't regret working for Trump.** But the notion of going to war for him in the White House was too intoxicating for me. I've been on speaking engagements around the world I never would have had access to; I've met new clients. There was a silver lining to working for him.

**I'm tougher now.** I don't mind when people write excoriating things about me. But when you're not ready for it, it can be painful. But I think it worked out some kinks in my personality. You know *The Shawshank Redemption*? I was going through that sewer pipe in 2017.

**You can be right or you can be married.** When I was in the White House, my wife filed for divorce. There were misunderstandings about our goals as a couple. The

good news is we've reconciled and our relationship is stronger as a result. If you really love somebody you don't always have to be right. **There's no way I'd have got from my blue-collar family** to where I am today if I wasn't willing to take extraordinary levels of risk. **The problem with Trump is when you get close enough** and you're observing the incompetence and you're observing the abhorrent behaviour, it's not something that you can unsee. And your silence makes you complicit. Your silence makes you an accomplice. **My dad said I was a Republican, so I became a Republican.** But I'm a moderate one and I'm socially liberal. I worked on legalising gay marriage here in New York. **I was too myopic four years ago.** I've become more empathetic, more aware of the pain Trump is inflicting, more aware of the racial tension that he is stoking. ■

# Spinal column Melanie Reid

## ‘We all chipped in together to buy our beloved local pub. Then the world shut down’

A year ago, on an infectious wave of enthusiasm, about 250 of us bought our local pub. Friends, neighbours, my family, everyone chipped in to what we recognised as a brave but good-hearted scheme. The Scottish Land Fund backed us. We were all, even the hard-nosed pragmatists among us, fuelled by optimism. If we pulled this off...

In January, our board members were more than faintly star-struck when they were approached by the Michelin-starred chef Tom Kerridge, asking if we'd like to feature in a three-part BBC Two series he was making on rescuing Britain's pubs. One in four pubs had disappeared since 2008, and 12 more a week were joining them. He wanted to see if he could help us turn things round.

We were immeasurably chuffed – our wee pub! Get us, we're going on telly! – to be one of four chosen: Cornwall, London, Gloucestershire and Scotland. The filming started just as local volunteers got stuck into the refurbishment of our tall, shabby, 300-year-old drovers' inn, the kind of listed building you could easily sink £1 million into. We had about £30,000 in cash.

“The cameras were there again today,” Dave would say. He was wary, knowing the pratfalls that documentary-makers live by.

Our project worried Tom too. With only an agency chef on the payroll, were we up to the hard job of making it a sustainable business? There were lots of stakeholders with different ideas. Our reliance on volunteer labour made us vulnerable, and to be



viable long-term, we had to attract customers from a wider area.

Tom warned us that good chefs were hard to come by – even he struggled – and visitors wouldn't buy, “We're just volunteers,” as an excuse for poor service. We had to train staff properly, unpaid or not, and our standards had to be as high as anywhere.

Flights were booked for members of our board to go to his pub, the Coach, in Marlow, to study the nitty-gritty of success. And then, bang – the world shut down. And every single pub, from Tom's prize ones down, was fighting for survival together.

Later in the summer, when it was allowed, he and his film crew

returned to see what progress we had made on the refurb. What the volunteers, including Dave and Dougie, had done astonished him. “Him coming was like a visit from God,” quipped one of the hardest workers. “It did a lot for morale. He was genuinely amazed.”

Half the village and our local MSP turned out, spaced round the car park, and cheered when Tom said he was blown away by what we'd achieved. It was very sweet; a simple celebration of community spirit. How little people can make something big.

“You've put your heart and soul into this and it shows,” said our mentor. Hiding behind a car, I listened, feeling moved and proud,

because he spoke as someone who cared, not as a celebrity.

Then I was ambushed: a couple of friends, who'd spent weeks making the bar accessible to wheelchairs, asked me to be filmed testing it for the first time. I don't know if the footage made the cut, but I do know that when Harry opened his widened door for me, and I saw inside, my amazement was unfaked. Our “small, dingy bar” (Tom's verdict) was transformed – vastly roomier, reorganised, refreshed, with subtle colours and details.

Harry did betray me on camera – I really pray this isn't included – by informing me my wheelchair was the widest in the village. It was very funny. Everyone was a little high. So you're telling me my bum looks big in this, huh? What a thing to say to a woman.

The cameras returned one last time in autumn when the six bedrooms and the heritage room were finished. I've only seen pictures of the bedrooms (the budget didn't stretch to a lift, sadly), but Dougie tells me they're like a boutique hotel. We hope they look good on telly.

Judge for yourself when *Saving Britain's Pubs with Tom Kerridge* airs on BBC Two early in November. I believe we're in the second and third episodes, but everyone who values pubs should watch the series. By then, we hope the restrictions, which closed our booming restaurant, will be lifted. If not, the board has other plans. We've flourished against the odds so far, and we're not giving up. ■

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

COLLECTION

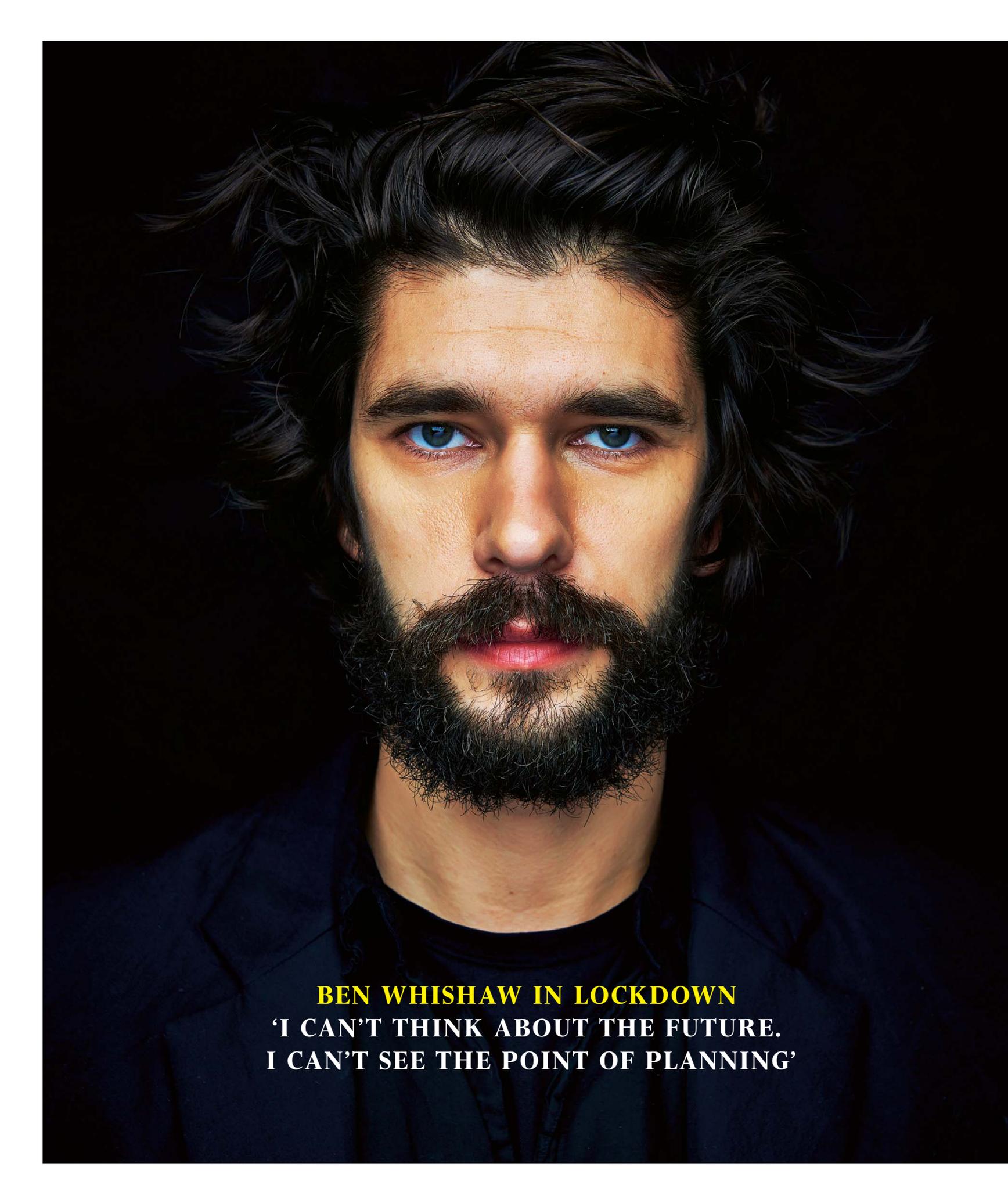
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**BEN WHISHAW IN LOCKDOWN**

**'I CAN'T THINK ABOUT THE FUTURE.  
I CAN'T SEE THE POINT OF PLANNING'**



Ben Whishaw, 40,  
photographed by  
Matt Doyle

Award-winning actor Ben Whishaw was about to return as Q in the new Bond movie when the pandemic struck. What's it like to go from one high-profile role after another – to nothing? He talks to Chrissy Iley

**B**en Whishaw and I are seated on benches outside a restaurant in east London. Inside is a vast emporium and lots of chandeliers, but its glamour is infected with coronavirus reminders – hand sanitiser on tables and “Don’t go this way, go that way” signs. It feels as if we are seeing the dawn of something much worse that’s going to happen.

Whishaw appears a little thin; even in a chunky bottle-green jumper and jeans, he looks as if he could fall down the crack of a pavement. His facial hair accentuates already well-defined cheekbones.

There is something portentous about the afternoon, as if it’s going to thunder, but it doesn’t. It’s to do with the fact we don’t know what social restrictions are coming; that we’re on the eve of something bad again. “It’s true, but this time we’ve gone through it already. We don’t want to go there again but there seems no stopping it,” Whishaw says. “It seems inevitable, inevitable bleakness.” Right now, he says, he really wants a cheese toastie, but he doesn’t get up to order it.

We are talking a few weeks before what we believe is the November release of the latest Bond film, *No Time to Die*, in which Whishaw, 40, reprises his role as the fastidious quartermaster, Q. Whishaw is enthusiastic, not knowing that, days later, it will be delayed for the second time.

“It is hard to remember a time before walking around in masks, washing our hands every five minutes and sanitisers, and I think the Bond film is just what we really need right now, I really do,” he says. “We need something that is thrilling and fun and a kind of escapism. Bond is the one film that people might actually want to be persuaded to go out and see. This is something that is diverse and multigenerational; it could unite everybody.”

Despite his enthusiasm, he says, it’s hard to talk about the new film, “Partly because it was long ago. Although it wasn’t *that* long ago, it does feel like it. But also, we never did get the full script. I did my bits not in chronological order, so I find it hard. I’m not allowed to tell you what happens in the story, and even if I was I couldn’t, because of the way that it happened. But I can say that very late in the day I give him some technology that helps.”

Do they not give you a full script because everything is changing all the time or because they’re so paranoid that things will be leaked? “It’s partly the secrecy that always surrounds it, but on this one, to be honest, it was a difficult journey. Although it was part-intentional, the director works in quite an improvisational way and we had a very tight deadline. But as I say, they don’t tell us anything.”

The plus side of coronavirus is that it has allowed him a pause in a career in which

Whishaw co-starring with Daniel Craig in 2015’s *Spectre*



Playing Norman Scott opposite Hugh Grant’s Jeremy Thorpe in *A Very English Scandal*



projects have tumbled into each other. He has completed shooting a new series of *Fargo*, due to be released in Britain in 2021, in which he’s joined the cast for the first time. Filming for his next project, in which he plays Adam Kay in the TV series *This Is Going to Hurt* – based on Kay’s book about life as a junior doctor in the NHS – has been put back to January. “At the earliest,” he says. He has gone from nonstop working to doing... “Nothing. I’ve been a bit of a hermit. Once we were forced to stop, I didn’t have any inclination to do anything really. I wanted to stop. I’ve seen my family when we were allowed to and I’ve gone for long walks and had loads of naps,” he says, not even trying not to sound bleak.

The last time we met was in Chicago, before lockdown and ahead of the original Bond release planned for April. He was shooting *Fargo* – now going back to the Fifties, when an African-American crime syndicate goes to war with the Italian mafia in Kansas City – playing gang member Rabbi Milligan.

We were at his Airbnb apartment, which he “got sort of by accident”. It was in an elegant building with airy rooms, high ceilings and views of Lake Michigan. Whishaw was wearing a shirt with a sketched image on the back – a scene from *Orpheus and Eurydice*.

“I like being on the ninth floor and looking over the lake,” he said. “I can watch the sun come up and watch it change. I can sit on the sofa by the window for hours and daydream. And I’ve had time to do that, which is lovely.”

I’ve met Ben Whishaw a few times and he seems self-sufficient – pragmatic, even. He has certainly been pragmatic in his acting choices, earning both the status of national treasure (he was the voice of Paddington, he’s Q in the James Bond films, Keats in *Bright Star*, Sebastian Flyte in *Brideshead Revisited*) and the title “actor of his generation” following *Hamlet* (when he was not long out of drama school) and his Golden Globe-garnering

performance as Norman Scott opposite Hugh Grant in *A Very English Scandal*. He has moved with dexterity between roles that were openly gay, sexually ambiguous and straight. He is in a civil partnership with Australian composer Mark Bradshaw, although I’m guessing they didn’t get to see that much of each other while he was in the USA. “Mmm,” was his response.

“I think this year I am going to be much more at home. I’m gonna do my house up; it’s the time,” he said. “It’s nice to be in demand, but I do think I need to be at home for a little while. It’s been six months here. That’s a long time away. Mark visited – he came out for a month – and I was back at Christmas. It’s definitely a big test.”

What was unknown to us at the time was how fast Whishaw’s prediction of returning to home turf would materialise. A few days later, all flights to Europe were banned. There was a small window to get to the UK.

The Bond movie became the first big film to postpone release, although when we meet in London he doesn’t know why that decision had been taken so early. “I honestly have no idea,” he says. “I just got a text message from Barbara... They never explained.” Perhaps because it’s called *No Time to Die*. We laugh. Perhaps a little too manically, because we know scary times may follow.

His hair was cropped in the summer when he was wearing a wig for *Fargo*. Now it’s longer. He’s recently given up meat, he tells me. “I don’t feel healthier, but I made the decision I was going to do it and I like to see things through.”

People may assume that Whishaw is an outsider who doesn’t fit in, I suggest. Like Q, the techno-wizard who traditionally has seemed to be a foil for Bond, living in a separate world of gadgetry. Or Scott, the penniless stable lad who was seduced by Jeremy Thorpe and unceremoniously dumped, in *A Very English Scandal*.

Alongside Chris Rock in the new season of *Fargo*



## 'I'M AFRAID OF MEETING PEOPLE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO TALK ABOUT'



"I don't know. Things are pretty contradictory," he says. "I wanted to do *Fargo* because it's a lot about immigrants... How do you become an American, and what does that mean? Who is let in and who is left out? My character doesn't fit in anywhere.

"I'm not really a rabbi. I'm an Irishman who's been raised by a Jewish family and is now living with an Italian family. They're all criminals, and they all call him Rabbi. They're the people he's part of. I have a tiny forehead. So they shaved my hairline to make it higher. I was happy to cut it very short; it was for a part, but when the filming was over, I properly shaved it all off and that felt great.

"Have you ever done that?" he asks. No, it's different for girls. "Oh, yeah."

*This Is Going to Hurt* comes at a time when there is a debate as to whether straight men should play gay roles just as able-bodied actors shouldn't play quadriplegics. Adam Kay is gay. When I say I think if you're an actor, you act, he replies, "I'm in agreement with you."

I think people used to speculate more about sexuality 10 or 20 years ago. But ending the speculation as to whether Whishaw was gay – making something private public – was of course massive to him. Mark Bradshaw became his civil partner in 2012 and coming out wasn't easy, but I have the impression that it was easier than he imagined it to be. Indeed, at the time he said, "Everyone was surprisingly lovely." They met on the set of *Bright Star* in 2009 and have a home together in London. Would he ever want to be married? "No," he replies.

The last time we met, he reintroduced me to the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim. This was when the song *Being Alive* was relaunched. "I need a break from that song," he had said. "I find it quite painful to listen to." My theory is, you only listen to painful songs when you're in pain. "Yes. Wail. Cry. And feel free to let the pain out.

"I'm still afraid of meeting people," he adds. On the set of *Mary Poppins Returns*, for example, he was afraid to meet Meryl Streep. Does the fear increase the more famous the person is? "No, it's anybody. I get anxious that I'm really bad at small talk. And I've been doing a lot of hanging around on set, where I should be doing lots of small-talking. I'm just quite shit at it. I don't know what to talk to people about."

Maybe it's just because you think if you haven't got anything in common with that person, you can't do small or big talk. "Absolutely. I get anxious about it, so now I just think, 'I'll sit here quietly and do my work,' or I get overwhelmed. There are so many people and I find it quite draining."

Whishaw was born in Clifton, Bedfordshire. His parents split when he and his nonidentical twin brother were young. They are totally unlike. "He is blond, came out first and was very pink. I was a squashed, dark thing. We were always dressed the same and were taken out together even to things I was not interested in, like football. I've always defined myself by him, but in opposition to him." Nonetheless, they get on well, and Whishaw is the perfect uncle.

His mother worked on the make-up counters in department stores selling Clinique. His father was a footballer. It is often written that he's an IT consultant. "He's definitely not an IT guy, definitely not. He's done all sorts of things – he worked for Rediffusion, he ran a nightclub and he managed a fleet of cars. Now he works in a sports facility. He doesn't talk about it very much and I don't press him." Do you find it difficult to ask questions? Is it hard to ask your dad stuff? "No, I do ask people questions, but sometimes not the people I know well. I feel with my dad I ought to have asked the question a long time ago, and now it's too embarrassing to ask it. And

I know he would play down what he does. I don't know why he wouldn't really want to share that kind of stuff with me, but more importantly, he's a really good bloke."

Last year's meme was, "Do one thing a day that you are afraid of." This year it's, "Just do one thing." I tell him about an Instagram live show I did called *Love in the Time of Corona*, about the problems when the dynamics of relationships suddenly changed and people couldn't get away from each other. The divorce rate went up. "Yes," he nods sagely.

Did he survive? "Yes, I've survived, but I'm not going to talk about it." There is no point in meandering around how the dynamic of Whishaw and his partner might have changed – he just looks too done in to talk about it. He also says he's lost his ability to predict anything. "Everything is so touch and go. And I don't know how people are going to be feeling if we go into total lockdown again. What's going to happen? I don't know. I've given up thinking about it.

"I went to Regent's Park and saw *Jesus Christ Superstar* on a screen," he recalls. "I sat on the lawn and listened to *I Don't Know How to Love Him* and it was so moving. It had been such an effort; you couldn't get into the theatre because there were so few seats and they were sold out. It was projected onto a screen for people who wanted desperately to see something live with other people. We saw the bravery and the commitment of the performers to a socially distanced performance where they had to stand two metres apart. It was really beautiful. I cried for the first 20 minutes.

"I find that I can't think about the future at all. I can't see what is going to happen beyond this second. I can't see the point in planning. Although some people have been productive I am happy just to exist. I get up whenever I need; nap quite a bit. I have done absolutely nothing."

Whishaw thrives on adrenaline and takes pride in his work. He is accustomed to being brilliant and basking in that. "Maybe I was just busy," he counters.

"I trust sometime in the future it will come back. For the moment, during lockdown, I painted my room blue, I learnt how to put up shelves and pictures and I actually learnt how to develop photographs; that is quite impressive, isn't it?" he says, not so impressed with himself. This is a man who is used to throwing his entire being not just into another person but into another world. He wasn't designed to do nothing but put up shelves.

The waitress explains that the cheese toastie has to be ordered at the deli counter, not from her, so he says that he will go up there in a minute. But we know he won't. ■

*No Time to Die* is scheduled for release in April 2021

# 'I was in agony, miles from a hospital. I was losing my baby – and my life was in danger'

This month model Chrissy Teigen made headlines posting pictures from her hospital bed after a miscarriage. Times journalist Lucy Bannerman describes her own struggle to have a baby: from an ectopic haemorrhage to multiple failed pregnancies. This is her story



Chrissy Teigen's Instagram post from hospital, with her husband, John Legend



Lucy Bannerman with her  
15-month-old twins, Kit,  
left, and Nina, photographed  
by Dan Kennedy



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# 'HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT TWINS?'

I was lying down, legs splayed, as the fertility doctor prepared to impregnate me.

Ten eggs had been collected. Of the seven embryos created, three had been discarded and two put in storage, leaving the question of how many to “transfer”.

I couldn't see exactly how she or the embryologist were handling the precious culture dishes, fresh from the lab, but in my imagination she might as well have been brandishing a syringe with our future kids in each hand, two thumbs over the plungers, waiting for me to decide.

How did I feel about twins? No idea. Luke and Leia, good; Ronnie and Reggie, not so good. I was 39. What did she advise?

“If you were ten years younger, I'd say put in one. But at your age...” She shrugged. “Best try two and see what sticks.”

And so, 37 weeks and one day later, I found myself having the weirdest ten minutes of my life, as I tried to welcome my newborn daughter, while still, slightly distractedly, trying to give birth to my son.

Like around 9,000 other women in UK every year, I became a mother to twins, bringing to an end four bewildering years of miscarriage, infertility and an ectopic pregnancy that nearly killed me.

Our first son had breezed into the world without a problem. But the slow creep of unexplained infertility that followed, the monthly cycle of hope and despair, of digging ever deeper to celebrate the joy of others while growing ever more despondent about my own failure to get pregnant and stay pregnant, slowly, quietly cast a veil over everything – at least, in private.

To complain about not having a second child when you're already lucky enough to be a parent felt like complaining about not having a second home in a world of homelessness. Greedy. Ungrateful. But I longed for it. The longer I waited, the more I longed.

Precisely a year before having our twins, pregnancy had nearly killed me. I hadn't realised I was around nine weeks gone. Three years of “not this time” blue lines on pregnancy sticks, of cruel false-positives and exhausting apps and ovulation kits, of saliva swabs and temperature checks, of measuring and predicting and second-guessing every twinge or cramp, had combined to kill all joy and ramp up stress. I needed a break. If I was pregnant, I reckoned, I'd soon find out.

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## We were in a log cabin deep in the wilderness of Oregon, and I was bleeding heavily

And boy, did this one declare itself. I'd ignored the searing abdominal pains that had faded overnight and waved away the lightheadedness, but there was no ignoring what happened next. Reader, please forgive me for the extreme oversharing – there's a point to this, I promise, and it might even save your life – but I knew something was wrong when I shat over my husband. Not my style. Generally try to avoid that kind of thing. But you know things are bad when your husband is trying to lift you up out of your own excrement, as you're slipping in and out of consciousness, eyes rolling back in your head, having collapsed on the bathroom floor, and it's not even the fourth most pressing issue in the room at that moment. By that point, we were way beyond embarrassment.

The pain was like nothing I'd ever known. (And I say that as someone whose only pain relief when giving birth first time round was a paracetamol and a tuna sandwich – after my son was born.)

Barely aware of what was happening and only vaguely registering his frantic taps to my cheek and calls of my name, I willed myself into the anaesthesia of sleep.

There was a problem. It was the middle of the night and we were in a log cabin deep in the wilderness of Oregon. The nearest outpost of civilisation was the daunting mountaintop hotel that doubled as the Overlook in *The Shining*. Not an ideal location for a medical emergency, although the elevators of blood from that film would prove a fairly neat description of what was happening.

I refused to be moved from the floor – it was too excruciating even to reach the bed – and insisted we go nowhere until daylight, unaware that I was haemorrhaging. The embryo of our second child had implanted itself in the wrong place, rupturing the fallopian tube where it was stuck.

My belly was filling with blood. A new, sharper pain emerged from the fog, slicing through it like the beacon of a lighthouse, flashing from the tip of my shoulder and dislodging a word from my memory: ectopic.

Fast-forward several hours and we were in a gleaming, empty American hospital, off-duty doctors were being paged to come in and I was soon being warned by a surgeon who looked like Carrie-Anne Moss from *The Matrix* that she would not know how much of my reproductive system she'd have to remove until she got in there. I had no choice. I tried to reassure myself that I certainly wouldn't be having any more babies if I were dead.

When I awoke from surgery, the surgeons had gone. Two nurses were busying themselves with drips and monitors.

What did they take, I slurred. How many ovaries were left? Was I infertile?

They looked at each other blankly. One thought perhaps it was just one ovary. The other reckoned it might have been both. Nobody seemed to know.

It's almost comical looking back on it now. My husband was told I was late coming out of surgery because I'd become upset in the recovery room. No shit. No one could tell me if I still had a womb. ➔

Eventually, a call was made to the surgeon's home. I could hear children in the background, as the heroic Carrie-Anne Moss confirmed she'd removed only one mangled tube. The rest was intact. There was still a chance I could have children.

I wept with relief, and spent the rest of the night in that hospital equal parts grateful and dismayed that, had I been an uninsured American, or not taken out that last-minute travel insurance, the whole ordeal would have cost me one fallopian tube and around £30,000. How many women over the years, I wondered, had died like that?

Back home, my specialist looked over the surgery photographs I'd been given as a gory souvenir, nodding quietly in admiration of the surgeon's work. Ectopic pregnancy is the most common cause of maternal death in the first trimester and there are around 11,000 emergency admissions in the UK every year. Most, thankfully, are detected before collapse.

"You must have had an angel on your shoulder," said the specialist, a calm woman not usually prone to hyperbole. The incident I overshaded earlier? Many women have different symptoms with an ectopic, she explained, but loss of bowel control is particularly common among the fatalities.

The ectopic emergency may have been the most dramatic episode on my fertility rollercoaster, but it wasn't the most upsetting. It had a legitimacy, which made it easier to discuss. I had bragging rights. I was lucky to be alive. There was no expectation to plaster on a smile and carry on. That pleasure is saved for when you are miscarrying.

It happened 12 months into the wilderness years – suddenly, then gradually.

I'd always naively thought of miscarriage as a one-off catastrophic event, done in a day; an awful realisation that you'd misread the numbers on that lottery ticket and wouldn't be having that gloriously imagined future after all, before returning to normal life. I hadn't realised it could be a surreal bereavement in slow motion.

I lost the baby early, around nine weeks.

But it took three weeks for the hope to flicker out, three weeks of continuing in my day job as a reporter for this newspaper, of covering a terror attack that for so many families unleashed the kind of grief so stark and real it made everything else insignificant.

In a world where those things happen, it's almost understandable why there are so few ways of talking about the loss of the not-quite lives that haven't yet begun. There's no public language to express that peculiar, internalised pain of losing something no one else knows is there. That's used up on the living.

Instead there's just a deadening dissonance between the world around you and the secret drama going on inside your body.



## As I was recovering, a male acquaintance chided me to hurry up and have a second child

I'd assumed everything was over, with that first violent, car-stopping blast of blood. But fear burst into short-lived joy in the dimly lit scanning room, when the probe touched the gel on my stomach and I heard the unexpected punch of a heartbeat I'd given up all hope of hearing.

"This little one's just fine," I remember the sonographer saying, pointing out the curl of a six-week-old foetus. She printed off a picture.

Yes, there was that dark disc of bleeding, lurking beyond the baby floating in its sac, but that can get better and often does, she reassured me. Only it didn't. With every secret trip to the hospital, the shadow loomed larger in every scan, until the wee one was surrounded. How strange to walk around, a zombie in your own life, waiting to find out who has won: the baby or the bleed.

One morning, I woke up knowing there was no more life inside, calmly filed my story, made some arrangements with the workmen who were building an extension and took myself back to the now familiar unit to do what needed to be done. And that's when you realise it's just the beginning.

There's a reason no one talks about that bit. It's visceral and traumatic. Weeks later, as I was still recovering, I remember a male acquaintance chiding me to hurry up and have a second child because I wasn't getting any younger. I felt like ripping out the

lady nappy I was wearing, throwing it at him and shrieking, "THIS! THIS IS THE REMNANTS OF MY SECOND CHILD, YOU ARSEHOLE." To my regret, I didn't. Instead, I did what many women do in this agonisingly common scenario: said nothing and cried angry, hot tears somewhere else. God forbid I should make him feel awkward.

I write about this not because it's remotely unusual; quite the opposite. This is the common, garden variety of early miscarriage. It's the kind happening every day behind fixed smiles and toilet cubicle doors. There are around 250,000 miscarriages in the UK every year. There will be around 600 happening today. I find it astonishing that every day there are women, stoically going about their jobs, holding meetings, finishing reports, going to Tesco, while hiding the fact there's a baby dying inside them.

I've heard it called "the secret sadness club". We hear a lot about sex and we hear plenty from birth onwards, but very little about the bit in between, unless it is the sanitised "good news" version of cradled baby bumps and wholesome blooming.

Well, no. The messy high drama of the bit in between, and I mean all of it, from the fear, the failures, the false alarms to the injections, the surgery and the sheer exhausting, emotional toll of it, are not just the outtakes to be deleted from the main story. They *are* the story. It is the unspoken zone, in which many women experience the lowest points of their lives. These are the scars we carry for life, yet there is an expectation not to talk about it, like some kind of ovarian omertà.

Chrissy Teigen, the social media star, has challenged that. When she announced the loss of her third child halfway through her pregnancy earlier this month, sharing those harrowing photographs from her hospital bed, it was shocking. Rarely do we see something so commonly shrouded with such shame and secrecy being shared in real time with such candour. Teigen forced 33 million followers on Instagram to confront the absurd notion that pregnancy has a 100 per cent success rate.

"We only ever hear the happy stories," says Nana-Adwoa Mbeutcha, a radio producer, who said the collective silence meant she was completely unprepared when she lost her fourth child, a daughter, at 18 weeks.

"It was a complete and utter shock. I had to go through the whole process of giving birth. You don't see it on TV; you don't hear about it. I had never encountered anyone who had told me about going through it."

She discovered the baby had died on the Friday and she gave birth on the Monday.

On the same day as saying goodbye to a baby girl whom hospital staff had "dressed in a cute, knitted hat" and wrapped in

# A different perspective

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blankets, she took her kids to McDonald's. "I ploughed on." The next day, she went to a playgroup. "Everyone was like, 'How was your weekend?' I was like, 'Yeah, fine...'"

Mbeutchu, who talks about her own pregnancy loss on the *Dope Black Mums* podcast, believes the unwritten rule that urges women to keep the first and most risky trimester of their pregnancy secret "is part of the problem. I understand that nobody wants to lose a baby and then have to tell people about losing a baby. But there are all these women – and men – walking around suffering in silence. We have to challenge this notion of being so hush-hush in the first 12 weeks."

Had there been more openness, she says, "It would have helped. I would have had more understanding that this happened, and greater knowledge of what to expect."

It occurs to me that someone should write a book: what to expect when you're not expecting.

The taboo is beginning to be broken.

Stella Creasy, the Labour MP, recently revealed how she carried on with her public role, holding meetings and attending rallies, while privately enduring the misery of two miscarriages. "It ate away at my soul," she said.

The comedian Katherine Ryan has described how she continued performing after miscarrying her second child, making people laugh for a living for an entire month while she waited for the deceased embryo to leave her body. "I felt like a walking tomb," she said.

Until recently I'd also kept my experiences more or less a secret – partly from superstition, trying not to tempt fate, but also not wanting to be seen to fail. I realised that, without even meaning to, I'd also been perpetuating the myth of the 100 per cent success rate.

I'd worry for anyone who dared announce their pregnancy before they'd reached that magic three-month mark. But why? In case the subsequent loss of their baby made them look... foolish?

Where does the tradition of the silent first three months even come from? Is it to protect the mums-who-may-or-may-not-be? Or is it to save the rest of us from having to deal with the outcome?

What if we did away with that rule altogether? What if it became normal to share the news before the pee has even cooled on the Clearblue dipstick? Might it encourage kinder conversations?

Maybe, just maybe, if the three in four pregnancies that do make it are celebrated in open knowledge of the one in four that don't, it might just encourage the insensitive strangers, the well-meaning friends and family, to stop for a second and consider whether the woman in front of them has a baby dying

inside her before they start pressing her on her future plans for children. And I suspect there's not a woman alive who wouldn't welcome that.

This goes beyond talking and sharing just to make ourselves feel better. Invisibility means less research and poorer outcomes. Just 2.1 per cent of all UK public health funding goes into reproductive health and childbirth, despite women and girls making up 51 per cent of the population and being the ones who, well, gestate 100 per cent of humanity.

In other words, the reward for grinning and bearing it is that they don't bother funding research into it.

Nisha Ganatra believes we've arrived at a watershed moment. She's the Golden Globe-winning director behind the television series *Transparent* and the film *Late Night*,

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## When a binman shouted, 'Twins!' from across the street, I realised I wasn't concealing my secrets

---

starring Emma Thompson and Mindy Kaling. Her latest project has earned awards and rave reviews and, in a similar way to the outpouring of support for Chrissy Teigen, has prompted a wave of women to share details of their own reproductive lives on social media, often for the first time. But it's not a film or a television programme. It's an advert. For Bodyform. (Can't say I often recommend fanny-pad adverts... But seriously. Watch it.)

*Womb Stories* is a three-minute film that depicts the ups and downs of being female, in all its pain and gory glory. The positive choice not to have children. The relief at realising you're not pregnant. Lying in agony on the bathroom floor. Endometriosis. IVF injections. The moment an antenatal scan delivers the longest, loudest silence you'll ever hear.

What it does not show: a single rollerblading woman being pulled along the beachfront by dalmatians. Because nobody actually does that.

"It would be so easy to say, let's keep going with the rollerblading," says Ganatra, who worked on the project with the advertising agency AMV BBDO. When a campaign "pushes the envelope so hard", she says, "That encourages everybody to move on with them, and not just perpetuate the bullshit."

I tell her it resonates for me because it takes the deleted scenes from women's public lives and puts them front and centre.

"Deleted scenes. That's such a fantastic way to put it. Yes."

Its honesty is shocking, says Ganatra,

because, "You don't know what you're missing until you're missing it. I didn't realise how much I wanted to watch a female superhero film until I watched *Wonder Woman*."

It's the same with the messy business of fertility, she says. "We're told it's all so lovely, it's all the same experience. That's very damaging to young girls, women and society in general. So why continue? Everyone knows what women [really] go through."

"The more specific we are about our experiences, the more we find we're not alone."

She's not a fan of the rule of keeping pregnancies secret for the first three months. "It's such a burden to bear," she says. "Where did it come from? Who knows? But we know we're not keeping that going any more, because the more we portray the everyday experiences and the ups and downs of being a woman, the more we normalise it, and then absolutely we will shift the culture. That's what the best films and TV and advertising do. They shift the culture."

Two weeks after the IVF transfer, on the morning of the scan to see what had stuck, I saw two woodpeckers resting on a branch and felt it was a good omen. (Did I mention I'm superstitious?) Every single day of the pregnancy that followed was fraught with anxiety and dread. Walking into a toilet cubicle filled me with terror. I was petrified. I told as few people as possible.

Only when a binman shouted, "Twins!" at me from across the street did I realise that perhaps I wasn't concealing my two little secrets quite as effectively as I thought. They were born the day Boris Johnson became prime minister and now, at 15 months, may even already be able to do a better job.

I often think of all the other anxious couples and single women who were there alongside us in their hospital gowns that day, as we all waited to be wheeled into theatre for our eggs to be collected. I hope that the IVF was as good to them as it was to us.

We are now part of the "twincrease". There are double buggies everywhere. (I went to a parent and baby screening at the cinema – remember those? – and realised the entire front row was occupied by women with twins.)

Forty years ago, one in every 100 births was a multiple birth. Now it's one in 65, partly because of the rise in people seeking fertility treatment – around one in four IVF births results in twins, compared with around one in 80 after natural conception – but it's also because women are becoming mothers later, so the egg follicles go into overdrive to produce a last blast of eggs, an "everything must go sale", before you hit the menopause.

Thanks to all these experiences, good and bad, here I am, battle-scarred but grateful beyond belief. How do I feel about twins? Where do I even begin? ■



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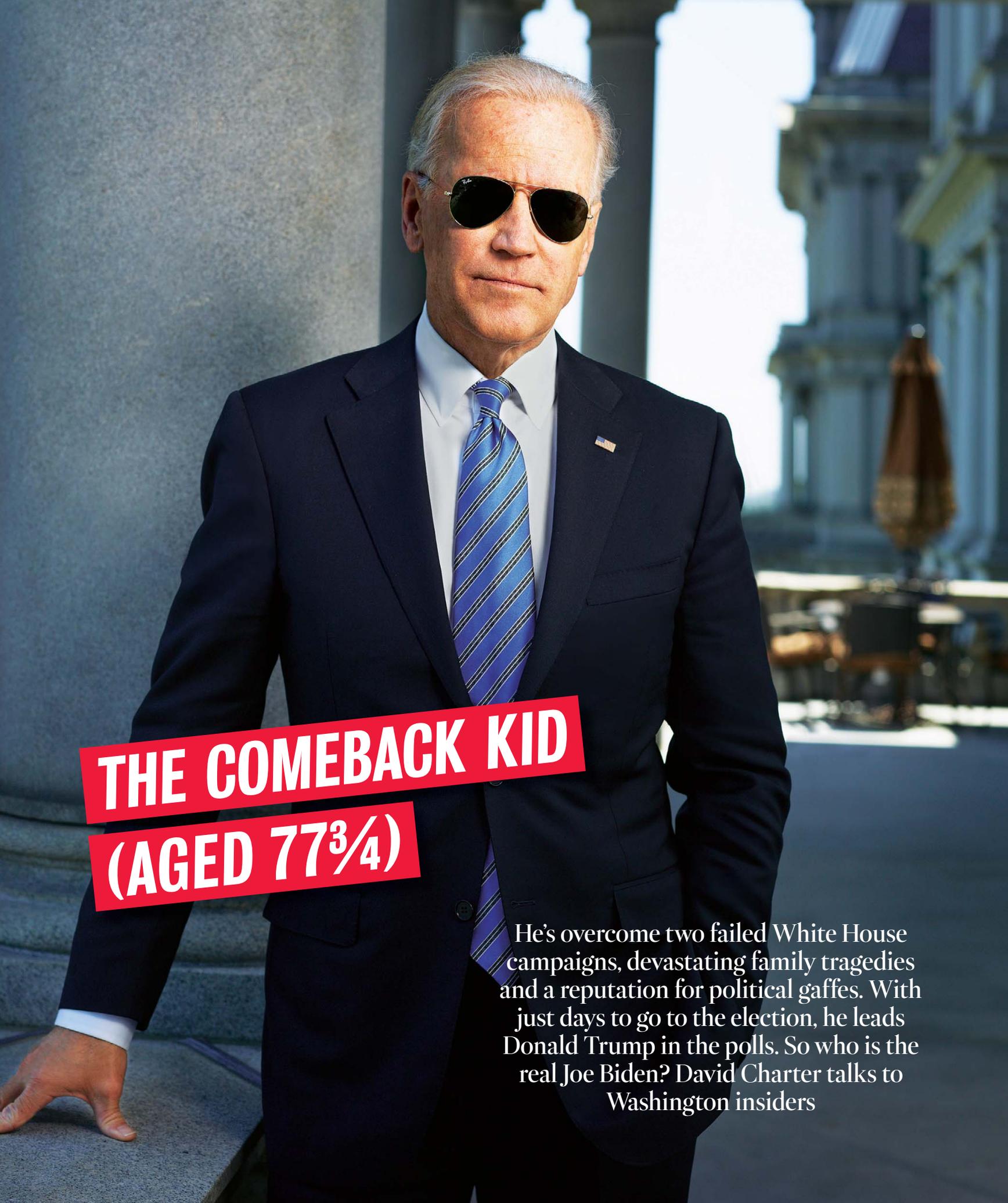
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Joe Biden stumping for Barack Obama in Springfield, Illinois, 2008. Opposite: Biden in 2013



# THE COMEBACK KID

(AGED 77<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>)

He's overcome two failed White House campaigns, devastating family tragedies and a reputation for political gaffes. With just days to go to the election, he leads Donald Trump in the polls. So who is the real Joe Biden? David Charter talks to Washington insiders



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**T**he queue for Hillary Clinton was long and ran like clockwork. A quick word with the candidate, a handshake and smile for the camera, then on to the next in line. In a nearby but smaller function room, somewhere in a scrum of bodies, Barack Obama was being mobbed.

It was the night before the autumn 2007 gathering of senior Democrats from across America and the party's potential presidential candidates were sounding out support. Joe Biden, embarking on his second White House run, issued an open invitation to his hotel room.

"I remember with a friend going to Biden's hotel room and he was in there with Beau and Hunter [his sons] and, like, two other people," recalled a Democrat operative.

"It was hilarious – he didn't feel hard done by that Hillary and Obama had these massive crowds. He would talk to anybody and it was totally genuine. You would have thought you were his best friend."

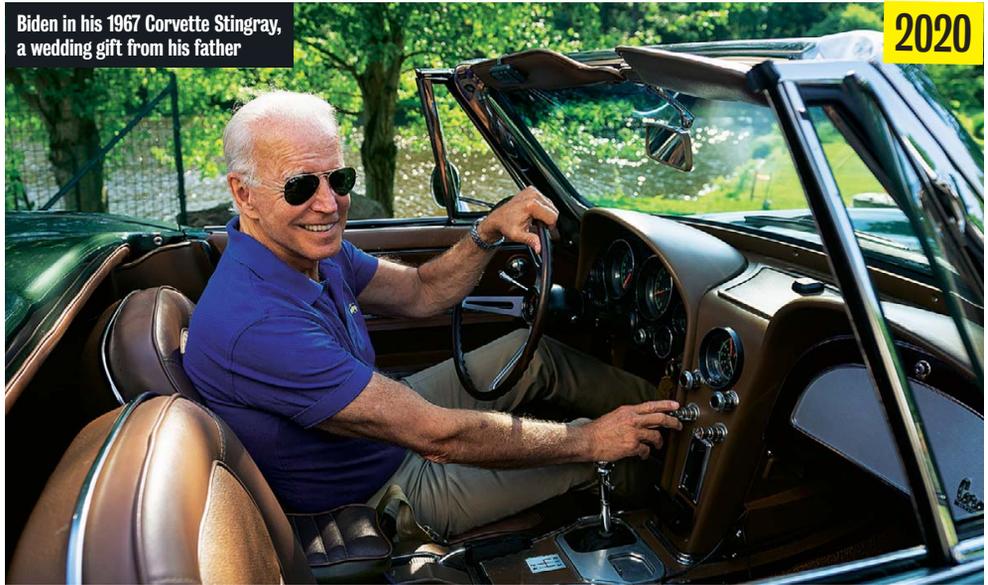
That was Joe Biden. Amiable. Authentic. Also-ran.

Nobody outside his immediate family thought he could be president. Ten months later, *The New York Times* greeted Obama's announcement of Biden as his 2008 running mate by noting, "At his age... shorn of any remaining ambition to run for president on his own, he could find himself in a less complex political relationship with Obama than most vice-presidents have with their presidents." Nor did Obama envisage Biden running again when he awarded him the Medal of Freedom with Distinction in January 2017, telling him it was for "your love of country, and for your lifetime of service".

So how did a man whose long career seemed well and truly over – who will be 78 before the end of November, making him older than Ronald Reagan when he left office – find himself favourite to win the White House? The answer is simple yet extraordinary. Donald Trump convinced 63 million voters that he would Make America Great Again. Four years on, after a chaotic presidency and a once-in-a-century pandemic that has highlighted Trump's worst character flaws and leadership failings, many Americans just want someone to make America America again. And out of the largest and most diverse field of candidates in its history, the Democratic Party concluded that its best offer was a well-worn old shoe from Delaware.

Who more fitting for a return to normality than Joe? Born in Scranton, a small city so humdrum it served as the setting for the US version of *The Office*. The guy who was always there, sticking around, trying to make himself useful. The Forrest Gump of Democratic

Biden in his 1967 Corvette Stingray, a wedding gift from his father



2020

**'I MIGHT SATISFY NEILIA IN BED, BUT I DID NOT HAVE MUCH TIME FOR ANYTHING ELSE'**



Being sworn in as senator for Delaware (his son Beau, foreground, was injured in a car crash that killed Biden's wife and daughter)

1973

politics. Trump tried to kill him off by labelling him Sleepy Joe just when the nation wanted a rest. Sure, Biden sometimes sniffed young ladies' hair in awkward photocalls. But Donald Trump had extramarital sex with a porn actress (allegedly) and is defending himself from rape allegations in New York. And yes, Biden is a gaffe machine. But Trump exaggerates, insults and lies constantly. Biden's son has dodgy business dealings in Ukraine and China. But Trump won't reveal his tax

returns and, in Helsinki in 2018, backed Vladimir Putin over his own security services.

Trump has given cover to all Biden's faults, finally making him look presidential. In contrast to the man he aims to succeed, Biden's long career in politics and his epic personal tragedies made him America's consoler-in-chief at a time when a deadly virus has further poisoned a polarised era. Nobody turned up for Biden's 2008 presidential run because he was nobody

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## AFTER HIS FIRST WIFE'S DEATH, HE SAID THAT HE CONTEMPLATED SUICIDE

alongside more exciting rivals like Obama, Clinton and John Edwards. Now it's familiar Joe, a man so cautious he wears two masks on plane rides, who meets the moment.

Astonishing as it may seem today, as we watch Biden ramble through policy answers, muddle numbers and forget names, there was a time when his dynamism brought frequent comparisons to John F. Kennedy. Both men rose quickly with the support of large Irish-American families and were first elected at the age of 29 to Congress. Both families went on to endure the unimaginable pain of lives cruelly cut short by tragedy. Kennedy was the first Catholic president; Biden, who attends Mass every Sunday, is on the cusp of becoming the second.

"He is the unluckiest person I've ever known personally, and he is the luckiest person I've ever known," says Ted Kaufman, an old friend from Delaware, who was there right from the start as part of Biden's first long-shot Senate campaign in 1972, and eventually took over his seat when he rose to the vice-presidency. Biden was then a man in a hurry. He told the mother of his first wife, Neilia Hunter, doubtful about her daughter marrying the son of a car dealer from a poor Catholic family, that he aimed to be a senator by the time he was 30 and go on to be president.

With just two years on the local council behind him, Biden took on Delaware's well-known, two-term Republican senator, J. Caleb Boggs, who was expected to win easily. Neilia was the political strategist, while Valerie Biden Owens, Biden's younger sister, managed the campaign as she would his six subsequent Senate re-election campaigns and his first two disastrous presidential runs.

"I was the campaign manager because I was the only one who took him seriously," she told National Public Radio in 2007. "My mom was the chairman, my brother Jimmy Biden was the finance chair, my brother Frankie Biden was the volunteer coordinator. And everybody thought my dad was the candidate because he was in his early sixties and looked like he should've been – a very distinguished-looking man." Kaufman put the upstart campaign's shock victory down to Biden's energy and the appeal of his photogenic young family. It was an all-American fairytale that, according to Biden, led Neilia to ask him out of the blue, "What's going to happen, Joey? Things are too good."

Kaufman, now 81, recalls the day everything changed. "Obviously, the big game-changer for him was that on December 18, 1972, six weeks after the election, Neilia was bringing the Christmas tree home, with their two sons and



At his 30th birthday party with his first wife, Neilia

daughter in the car, and got hit by a tractor trailer," Kaufman says. "She was killed, and the daughter was killed, and the two sons were in the hospital. I went to the memorial service. It was awful. I mean, he and Neilia were a real love match. They walked around holding hands. The worst thing is, you're on top of the world. You're 29 years old. You've been elected to the United States Senate. And then, bang, you get hit with this thing.

"He was really devastated. Later on, one of the reasons I worked for him to become president was because he had so much character, and I saw that then. It was awful watching him go through it."

Until then, Biden never lacked for self-confidence or certainty, surrounded by his large, close family. However, he almost bailed out of his Senate seat and had to be talked round by Democratic leaders. Under a special dispensation from the chamber, he was sworn in at his sons' hospital bedsides. He later said that he contemplated suicide. He became "Amtrak Joe", named for his 94-minute train commute between Washington and the small city of Wilmington, Delaware, where Valerie and her husband, Bruce, moved in to help care for the boys.

"Six-thirty every day, I came home," Kaufman recalls. "I'll bet you easily, a majority of the times, when I left, the Senate was still running. So he didn't take the 6.30, he took the 7, the 7.30, the 8, the 10. He did not stay in Washington. Lots of politicians talk about family values; Joe Biden lives family values."

Biden's loss became the bedrock of his political brand as the great comforter, a man who could truly feel your pain. His relatability relied on this and a fund of well-worn stories of his working-class upbringing, the mom-and-pop home truths, his overcoming a childhood stutter and finding true love again with second wife Jill – tales all washed a little smoother by the tide of passing years.

The Biden we don't know, the young man racked with both bereavement and burning

ambition, was captured in a remarkable and long-forgotten magazine interview 18 months after that first great tragedy. His office had resisted numerous requests from journalists, fearing they were keen to put him in another fairytale, this time of the eligible young prince seeking a mother for his beloved boys. Then he agreed to speak to Kitty Kelley, legendary biographer of Rock Hudson and Frank Sinatra, and he opened up in an extraordinary way that most would consider naive today for a man harbouring presidential ambitions.

"Neilia was my very best friend, my greatest ally, my sensuous lover," the 31-year-old senator confided. "The longer we lived together, the more we enjoyed everything from sex to sports. Most guys don't really know what I lost because they never knew what I had. Our marriage was sensational." There was more, much more. It was clear that Biden was still grieving hard. "My beautiful millionaire wife... didn't want me to run for the Senate – we had such a beautiful thing going, and we knew all those stories about what politics can do to a marriage. She didn't want that to happen. At first she stayed at home with the kids while I campaigned, but that didn't work out because I'd come back too tired to talk to her. I might satisfy her in bed, but I didn't have much time for anything else. That's when she started campaigning with me and that's when I started winning."

As if that were not enough, Kelley had one of those chance encounters that journalists dream about. In a Senate lift with Biden, they bumped into another member who inquired, "Hi, Joe, how are you? I understand you're going to be getting married soon."

Biden was "flustered", but later opened up about dating Francie Barnard, a 28-year-old reporter for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. "I do indeed want to get married again. I hate the image of the gay young bachelor about town. That's just not my style. I am not a womaniser," he said. "I would like very much to fall in love and be married again because basically I am a family man. I want to find a woman to adore me again. And I would like very much to fall in love and marry someone exactly like Francie Barnard. I think she is bright, pretty and engaging... She is the only woman I have dated and I am with her every chance I can."

Biden, however, went on to deny that wedding bells were imminent. "I can look you straight in the eye and say that I have no present or future plans of getting married. Besides, why should someone like Francie

Continues on page 34

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# THE TIMES Eat!

PULL OUT



Clodagh McKenna, 45

## INSIDE IRISH CHEF CLODAGH McKENNA'S KITCHEN

*She trained at Ballymaloe School, and set up farmers' markets across the country. Now she lives on the 'Downton' Highclere estate, creating a sustainable homestead*





## BUTTER CHICKEN CURRY

Serves 4

If I go out for an Indian meal, this is the curry that I order – the creamy, perfectly spiced sauce is so addictive. It freezes well, so double the recipe and freeze half for a rainy day.

- 500g boneless, skinless chicken thighs
- 2 tbsp olive oil • 1 onion, diced • 4 garlic cloves, crushed • 1 red chilli, finely chopped
- 1 tbsp fresh ginger, peeled and grated
- 1 tsp garam masala • 3 tbsp tomato puree
- 400ml hot chicken stock • 50g whole almonds, toasted and chopped

### For the marinade

- Juice of 1 lemon • 2 tsp ground cumin
- 2 tsp paprika • 1 tsp hot chilli powder
- 200ml Greek yoghurt • Salt and pepper

### To serve

- Basmati rice • Naan bread
- Mango chutney • Lime wedges

1 Start by making the marinade. Place all the ingredients in a bowl, whisk together and season. Chop the chicken into bite-sized

pieces and toss with the marinade. Cover with clingfilm and chill in the fridge for 1 hour.  
 2 Place a large saucepan over a medium heat. Add the olive oil and stir in the onion, garlic, chilli and ginger and cook for 5 minutes. Stir in the garam masala and puree and cook for 2 minutes, then add the stock and marinated chicken. Cook for 5 minutes over a medium heat, then reduce to low and cook for 15 minutes until the chicken is cooked and the sauce has thickened.  
 3 Sprinkle in the almonds. Serve with rice, naan bread, mango chutney and lime wedges.

## CREAMY POLENTA WITH GREEN VEGETABLES AND GREMOLATA

Serves 2

If you have any polenta left over, pour it into a baking dish and let it set in the fridge. The following day, fry it off in butter and enjoy it with a poached egg and harissa.

- Salt and pepper • 80g polenta • 1 tbsp olive oil or salted butter, plus 1 tbsp oil for cooking • 6 purple-sprouting broccoli stems,



- halved lengthways • 6 asparagus spears, halved • 100g fresh or frozen peas (thawed if frozen) • 100g mangetout • 150g mushrooms, such as chestnut, ceps or porcini, sliced

### For the gremolata

- 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil • 2 tbsp finely chopped flat-leaf parsley • 2 garlic cloves, crushed • Zest of 1 small lemon, plus 1-2 tsp juice and extra zest to garnish

1 Pour 600ml water into a saucepan over a medium heat and season. Once the water has come to the boil, whisk in the polenta. Reduce the heat, cover and cook for about 25 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes. Once it has cooked, stir in 1 tbsp olive oil or butter.

2 Meanwhile, make the gremolata. Place all the ingredients in a blender and pulse until you have a thick salsa consistency. Set aside.

3 Place a large frying pan over a medium heat and add 1 tbsp olive oil. Add the vegetables, season and cook for 5 minutes.

4 Divide the polenta between two warmed bowls, followed by the vegetables and a dollop of the gremolata on top. Garnish with a sprinkling of lemon zest.

PHOTOGRAPHS Dora Kazmierak



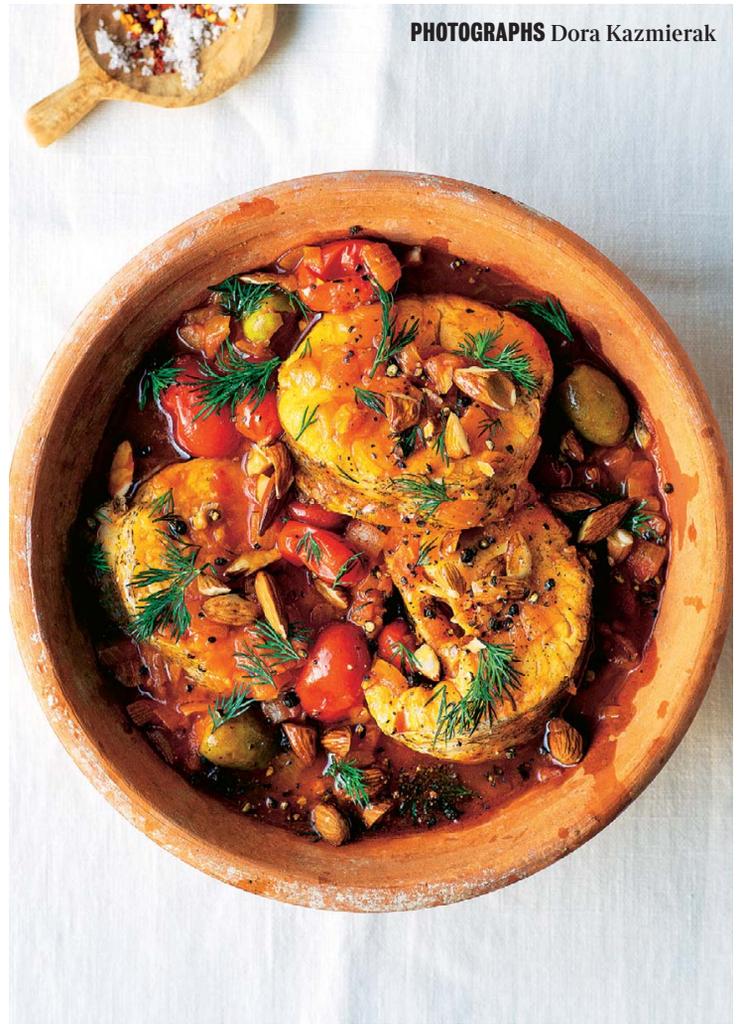
**PRAWN LAKSA WITH RICE NOODLES**

*Serves 2*

Sometimes I add a couple of pak choi to this dish – you just pop them in after you have added the stock and coconut milk. You could also add chard, kale or spinach.

- 1 tbsp olive oil • 1 red chilli, deseeded and finely sliced • 2½ tbsp Thai red curry paste • 600ml hot vegetable stock • 400g tin coconut milk • 2 tsp fish sauce • 100g rice noodles • Juice of 1 lime, plus wedges to serve • 150g raw king prawns, peeled • 1 tbsp roughly chopped coriander, plus leaves to garnish • Salt and pepper

1 Place a saucepan over a medium heat and add the olive oil. Stir in the chilli and cook for 1 minute, then add the curry paste and cook for a further minute. Whisk in the stock and coconut milk and bring to the boil. Stir in the fish sauce and noodles and cook for 2 minutes. 2 Add the lime juice and prawns and cook for about 4 minutes. Add the coriander and season. 3 Serve in bowls topped with coriander leaves and lime wedges for squeezing over.



**SPANISH FISH STEW**

*Serves 4*

I like to serve this dish with herbed rice to add freshness to the aromatic flavours of the stew. Use whatever fresh herbs you have, chop them finely and mix them through cooked rice.

- 2 tbsp olive oil • 800g white fish, such as ling, haddock, hake or whiting, cut into 5cm pieces, skin on or removed • Salt and pepper • 1 onion, finely chopped • 3 garlic cloves, crushed • 400g tin cherry tomatoes • 2 tbsp whole almonds, finely chopped • 12 green olives, pitted and chopped • A good pinch of saffron threads, soaked in 2 tbsp warm water • 300ml dry white wine • 1 tbsp finely chopped flat-leaf parsley • 1 tbsp finely chopped fresh dill, plus extra sprigs to garnish

1 Preheat the oven to 180C/Gas 4. Place a frying pan over a medium heat and pour in 1 tbsp olive oil. Add the fish, season and cook for just 30 seconds on each side, then transfer to an ovenproof casserole dish. 2 Place the frying pan back over a medium heat and add the remaining 1 tbsp oil. Stir

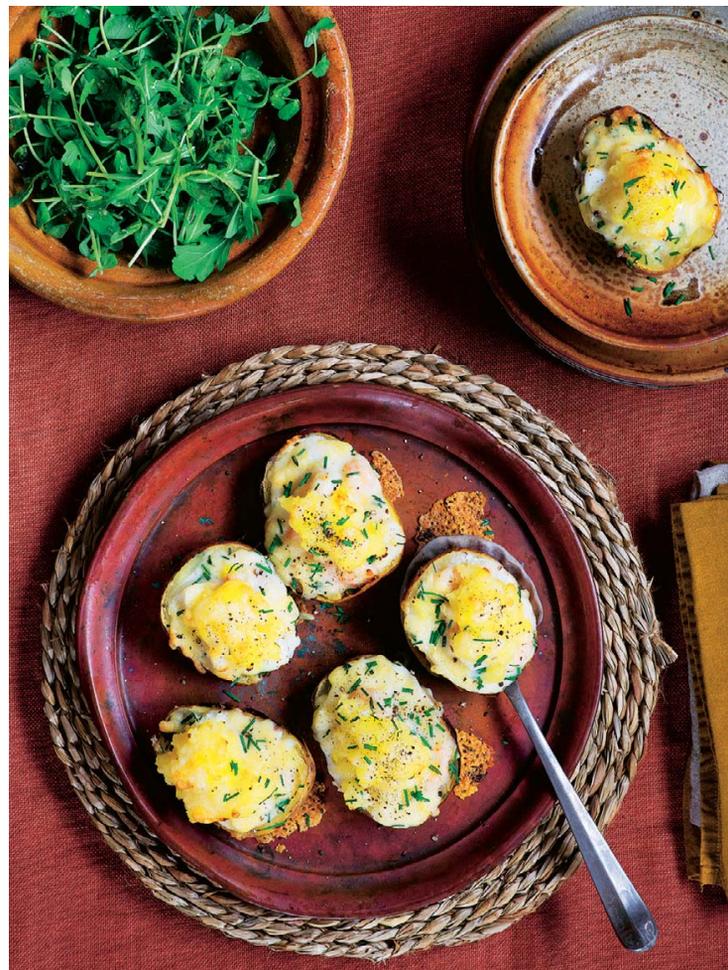
in the onion and garlic, cover and cook for 2-3 minutes. Remove the lid and stir in the tomatoes. Season and cook for a further 5 minutes, then transfer to the casserole dish. 3 Stir in the almonds along with the olives and the saffron and soaking water. Add the wine followed by 250ml water, cover with the lid and cook in the oven for 30 minutes. 4 Stir in the chopped fresh herbs and serve with herbed rice, potatoes or a big green salad and lemon wedges. Garnish with extra sprigs of dill and twists of black pepper, if you wish.

**CRISPY GALETTE WITH BUTTERNUT SQUASH, FETA AND OLIVES**

*Serves 2-4 (overleaf)*

A galette is a rustic free-form tart, and so much easier to make than a traditional pastry tart. I use shop-bought filo pastry made with butter, which is important because it gives that buttery flavour and great crispy texture.

- 400g butternut squash, peeled, deseeded and diced • 3 tbsp olive oil, plus extra • Salt and pepper • 8 filo pastry sheets ➔



- 50g feta, crumbled • 1 tbsp fresh thyme leaves • 12 black olives, pitted and halved
- 1 tsp runny honey

1 Preheat the oven to 180C/Gas 4. Place the squash in a shallow roasting tin. Drizzle with the olive oil, season with salt and pepper and toss to coat. Roast for 20 minutes.

2 Overlap the filo pastry sheets on an oiled baking tray lined with greaseproof paper, placing each one on top at a different angle so that all the corners create a star-like shape. Arrange the roasted squash in the centre of the pastry, leaving a 4cm border uncovered. Sprinkle with the feta, thyme and olives and drizzle over the honey. Fold in the rim of pastry around the galette and brush the pastry with olive oil. Bake for 20 minutes or until the crust is golden.

3 Leave to cool slightly before serving. Serve warm with a green leaf salad, if you wish.

## FISH PIE BAKED POTATOES

*Serves 4*

You can make these a day ahead and they freeze really well. I love serving a large platter of green vegetables alongside – green beans

tossed in butter, broad beans with fresh mint, chard with a sprinkle of chilli, or spinach creamed with fresh nutmeg

- 4 baking potatoes, scrubbed • Salt and pepper • 125g salted butter • 50g cheddar, finely grated • 300ml whole milk • 1 bay leaf
- 5 black peppercorns • 250g fish pie mix, such as salmon, white fish and smoked fish
- 200g raw prawns, peeled • 70g plain flour
- 100ml dry white wine (optional) • 1 tsp Dijon mustard • 1 tbsp finely chopped fresh chives, plus extra to garnish

1 Preheat the oven to 200C/Gas 6. Prick the potatoes all over with a fork and sprinkle with salt. Bake for 1 hour or until tender. Remove from the oven and leave to cool enough so that you can handle them. Leave the oven on.

2 Scoop out the potato flesh into a bowl, leaving a 1cm potato shell. Mash the flesh with 50g butter and mix in the grated cheese. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.

3 Place a saucepan over a medium heat and add the milk, bay leaf and peppercorns. Bring to the boil, add the fish and prawns, reduce the heat to low and poach for 4-5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the fish to a plate and discard the bay leaf and peppercorns.

4 Place a clean saucepan over a low heat and melt the remaining 75g butter, then whisk in the flour to make a thick paste or roux and cook for 3 minutes.

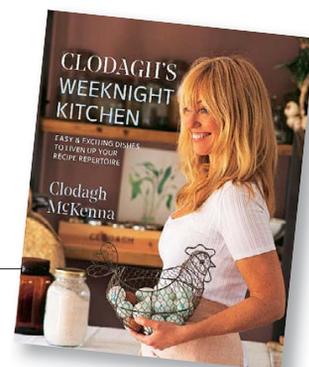
5 Slowly whisk in the poaching milk and continue whisking until you reach a smooth consistency.

6 Whisk in the white wine, if using, and then simmer for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in the mustard and chives, followed by the fish and prawns. Season with salt and pepper.

7 Spoon the fish and sauce into the potato shells and top with the mashed potato and cheese mixture. Place them on a baking tray and bake for 20 minutes until piping hot and the cheesy mash is golden.

8 Serve with a sprinkling of chopped chives and a generous twist of black pepper. ■

Extracted from  
**Clodagh's Weeknight Kitchen** by Clodagh McKenna (Kyle Books, £20)



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marry a guy like me who is still in love with his wife, who has a political constituency and a ready-made family. She deserves better than that.” Maybe Barnard read the article and called it a day; maybe it was almost over anyway. A few months later she married Bob Woodward, the investigative reporter who has become the pre-eminent chronicler of the Trump presidency. The couple divorced after five years and Barnard, who remarried, died last year.

That lusty interview is a reminder that Biden hasn’t always been a liver-spotted grandad, his face enhanced by plastic surgery, his gleaming teeth defying his years. It is also an important indicator that quite a lot about the Biden story has been airbrushed or romanticised to create a consistent narrative out of the myriad messy little steps that make up everyone’s life.

Not often mentioned is that he started out as a Republican, beginning his legal career in 1968 with a firm headed by a prominent party member. In 2008, he told *Time* magazine that, “I thought of myself as a Republican for six or seven months, no longer.”

Friends have said he considered running for office as a Republican. David Walsh, a classmate at the private Catholic Archmere Academy for boys, who was Biden’s partner when he set up his own law firm, said, “I think that if he could have gotten a more likely shot at becoming a United States senator as a Republican, I guess he would have done it.”

The act of representing people, of being “adored” perhaps, was simply more important to Biden than political affiliation. It’s an insight that helps to explain how he became known for his willingness to reach across the political divide in Congress to get things done – a characteristic that adds to his appeal as the antidote to the atmosphere of mean-spirited division in Washington today.

Biden often says that his life was rescued by Jill Jacobs, the teacher he married in 1977 (“She allowed me to dream again”), and the pair tell a charming tale of their courtship. Jill modelled for some local advertising that Joe saw on a poster at Wilmington airport, so the story goes. His brother Frank said he knew her and could get her phone number, which Joe called to arrange a date in March 1975. “He came to the door and he had a sport coat and loafers, and I thought, ‘God, this is never going to work, not in a million years,’” Jill told *Vogue* in 2016. She was 23. “He was nine years older! But we went out to see *A Man and a Woman* at the movie theatre in Philadelphia, and we really hit it off. When we came home... he shook my hand good night... I went upstairs and called my mother at lam and said, ‘Mom, I finally met a gentleman.’”

They dated for a few months. By then, the Biden boys had got to know Jill and made up

their minds. One day, while Joe was shaving, six-year-old Hunter told him, “Beau thinks we should get married.” Beau, aged seven, explained, “We think we should marry Jill.”

The story continues with Jill turning down Joe’s first four proposals, concerned that she wanted to be absolutely sure so as not to let the boys down. In her May 2019 book, *Where the Light Enters: Building a Family, Discovering Myself*, she describes the fifth proposal, in the spring of 1977, as Joe was leaving for a 10-day overseas trip: “Look,” he said. “I’ve been as patient as I know how to be, but this has got my Irish up. Either you decide to marry me or that’s it – I’m out. I’m not asking again.” She writes, “His blue eyes, normally alight, seemed clouded with grey. He said, ‘I’m too much in love with you to just be friends.’” When Joe returned, she gave him her positive answer. Their daughter, Ashley, was born in 1981.

What is often left out of the tale is that Jill was already married when they first met, her divorce from her first husband, Bill Stevenson, coming through in May 1975. Stevenson went public in September this year with his own version of events. “I was betrayed by the Bidens. Joe was my friend, Jill was my wife,” he told talk show *Inside Edition*. “I introduced Joe to Jill in 1972... Jill, Joe, Neilia and I were in his kitchen. How do you forget that?” Stevenson claims that he discovered they were having an affair in 1974 and asked her to leave. A spokesman for Jill Biden said, “These claims are fictitious... Jill Biden separated from her first husband irreconcilably in the fall of 1974 and moved out of their marital home. Joe and Jill Biden had their first date in March of 1975.”

What is not disputed is that the strength of the Biden marriage was tested by the failure of his first presidential run after he plagiarised a speech by Neil Kinnock and then soon after suffered two aneurysms and a pulmonary embolism, which nearly killed him. Jill writes, “As a political spouse, I’ve found that my stoicism often serves me well. In 1988, when Joe’s first presidential campaign started to look bleak, people were constantly looking for cracks in our team. We all felt scrutinised, but I refused to show weakness.”

It was Biden’s current running mate, Kamala Harris, a senator from California of Jamaican and Indian parentage, who outed one of the political skeletons in his closet during the first TV debate for Democratic presidential candidates. “I’m going to now direct this at Vice-President Biden. I do not believe you are a racist. I agree with you when you commit yourself to the importance of finding common ground,” she began. Although Biden managed to keep a rueful poker face for most of her remarks, you can sense him thinking, “Uh oh,” as he looked over in anticipation of what was to come. She continued: “It’s personal. It was actually



hurtful to hear you talk about the reputations of two United States senators who built their reputations and career on the segregation of race in this country. It was not only that but you also worked with them to oppose bussing. There was a little girl in California who was part of the second class to integrate her public schools. She was bussed to school every day. That little girl was me.” At this point, Biden shot Harris another look that seemed to say, “Oh, that’s how it is, is it?”

It was hailed as the biggest bullseye of the night and briefly propelled Harris into real contention for the nomination, although she was unable to build any momentum and faded quickly. Bussing was a policy that took black children from poor areas away from sink schools for a better education at white schools in wealthier areas. In some cases, white children were sent the other way. Biden did not oppose voluntary bussing but did object when it was ordered by courts to overcome local – white – opposition. Harris was on a voluntary scheme but, no matter, she scored a hit.

Back in the day, Biden lined up behind his suburban white voter base to become the main Democratic voice in the Senate against the policy. This put him on the same side as southern segregationists and he worked closely with Jesse Helms, a Republican from North Carolina known as “Senator No” for voting against all the civil rights laws of the Sixties and Seventies. The men became friends, to the point where Biden remained in touch with his widow to her dying day.

In his speeches at the time Biden focused on the resentment felt by white families to “two-way bussing”, where their children were sent to integrate into black schools. In 1975 he warned, “We are going to end up with the races at war... You take people who aren’t racist, people who are good citizens, who believe in equal education and opportunity, and you stunt their children’s intellectual growth by bussing them to an inferior school, and you’re going to fill them with hatred. And what about the black student from Wilmington’s east side? You... bus him through

With Kamala Harris, now his running mate, September 2019



settlement from banks for homeowners who lost everything in the financial crisis. Their friendship led to Harris being taken into the Biden family embrace and she attended Beau's memorial service. On the fourth anniversary of his death she tweeted, "Thinking of @JoeBiden, @DrBiden and the entire Biden family today. Beau Biden was my friend." That was just four weeks before she pounced.

Biden's wife and sister were furious and when the time came for choosing a vice-presidential running mate, while Biden was able to put the debate aside, they were not. This explains the process that saw a dozen women considered before it came down to Harris and

woman." Biden told MSNBC that Beau was always the last one to pep him up before debates. "He'd grab me by the lapel. He still grabs me by the lapel every time I walk out... He walks with me."

Yet while family has been a constant source of strength for Joe Biden, it has also been something of an Achilles' heel. Rudy Giuliani, Trump's lawyer, spent almost two years digging for dirt on Biden's younger son, Hunter, a Yale Law School graduate, who has struggled with drug addiction and become entangled in various dubious business arrangements. What first attracted Trump's interest was Hunter's lucrative job on the board of Burisma, a Ukrainian gas company, which he joined in 2014 on a reported salary of up to \$50,000 a month while his father was still vice-president.

So eager was Trump for details that he ended up getting impeached for asking the Ukrainian prime minister to look into it – but that's another story. During impeachment hearings in Congress, George Kent, a career diplomat overseeing Ukraine policy, testified that in 2015 he warned the vice-president's staff that his son's position "could create the perception of a conflict of interest". Nothing was done about it. Asked by ABC News last October, "If your last name wasn't Biden, do you think you would've been asked to be on the board of Burisma?" Hunter, 50, replied: "I don't know. Probably not, in retrospect. But that's – you know – I don't think that there's a lot of things that would have happened in my life if my last name wasn't Biden."

The Biden campaign braced for an "October surprise" – a staple of American election campaigns – and one came along in the form of a supposed cache of hard-drive material from a broken Hunter Biden laptop. One email, purportedly from a Burisma executive, thanked Hunter for "giving an opportunity to meet your father" in 2015 while he was vice-president, despite Joe Biden's longstanding position that he never spoke to Hunter about his business activities. The Biden campaign said that no record existed of such a meeting, which wasn't quite a total denial.

Amid the detritus of Hunter's messy private life and business dealings, one text-message exchange, from February 24 last year, stood out. Two months before Biden launched his latest White House campaign, Hunter was in rehab, his mind in a bad place as he vented about being a "f\*\*\*ed-up addict who can't be trusted" who had damaged his father's political career. "If you don't run, I'll never have a chance at redemption," Hunter wrote. Biden reassured him: "I'll run but I need you"; "Only focus is recovery – nothing else". Biden began the text exchange: "Good morning my beautiful son I miss you and love you, Dad!"

Hunter was not the only relative close to Biden who traded on the name and drew

## 'I WAS BETRAYED BY THE BIDENS. I INTRODUCED THEM. JOE WAS MY FRIEND, JILL WAS MY WIFE'



With his sons Hunter, left, and Beau, 2004

Susan Rice, Obama's national security adviser, who worked so closely with Biden in the West Wing that they shared a bathroom.

Announcing his choice of running mate in August, Biden said: "I first met Kamala through my son Beau. He had enormous respect for her and her work. I thought a lot about that as I made this decision. There is no one's opinion I valued more than Beau's and I'm proud to have Kamala standing with me on this campaign."

Beau remains the yardstick by which Biden judges others and himself. He retains a very real presence in the life of the former vice-president, who keeps his late son's rosary in his pocket. "Beau should be the one running for president, not me," he told MSNBC in a moment of raw emotion in January, a time when Biden's lacklustre performance in Iowa, the first state to hold a vote on the Democratic field of candidates, put him on course for a poor fourth place. "Every morning I get up, not a joke, I think to myself, 'Is he proud of me?'"

In *Promise Me, Dad*, the book he wrote in tribute to his son, he writes, "Beau Biden, at age 45, was Joe Biden 2.0. He had all the best of me, but with the bugs and flaws engineered out." Given this saintly veneration, Biden's fond words for Pete Buttigieg, the whip-smart city mayor who ran against him for the Democratic nomination, signify that the 38-year-old Midwesterner is likely to figure in any Biden administration. When Buttigieg ended his campaign and backed Biden the night before Super Tuesday, the most important day in the race for the party's nomination, Biden said, "I don't think I've ever done this before, but he reminds me of my son Beau, and I know that may not mean much to most people, but to me, it's the highest compliment I can give any man or

Centerville every day, then send him back to the ghetto. How can he be encouraged to love his white brothers?"

His solution was longer-term investment in housing and other projects to encourage mixed neighbourhoods, which is eventually what happened as bussing fell out of favour. But besides this insight into what Biden was up to as a young senator, the attack by Harris hurt on a whole other level.

Joe Biden's life was deeply touched by tragedy again in 2015. He endured the loss from brain cancer of his dearly loved firstborn son, also named Joseph but affectionately known as Beau, aged 46. Biden cited it as the reason that he abandoned thoughts of challenging Hillary Clinton for the 2016 Democratic nomination, and close aides attested to his distracted despair at secret planning meetings for a run that eventually came to nought.

As attorney-general of Delaware, Beau forged a close professional friendship with his opposite number in California – an equally ambitious Democratic lawyer named Kamala Harris. They fought together for a higher



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damaging fire. Joe's brother Jimmy, seven years younger and a dead ringer for him, who helped to raise funds for his early Senate runs, attempted to buy a hedge fund in 2006 in a joint venture with – yes – his nephew Hunter.

When an investor got cold feet and demanded back \$1 million, the Bidens were able to obtain a loan from Washington First, a bank founded by one of Joe Biden's main backers, William Oldaker, according to the anti-corruption group ProPublica. The security for the loan was unclear, given that both men already had huge mortgages on their homes. ProPublica detailed six large loans that Jimmy received over the years from backers of Joe. For example, in the Seventies, when his brother sat on the Senate banking committee and Jimmy Biden reported a net worth of just \$10,000, he and a partner were able to borrow \$300,000 from First Pennsylvania Bank of Philadelphia for a nightclub venture that failed. Jimmy has gradually been eased out of Biden's campaign orbit and played no part in his 2020 run.

Joe Biden's main legislative achievements came under the umbrella of the 1994 Crime Bill. This incorporated the Violence Against Women Act, which funded investigations and brought in mandatory restitution payments by perpetrators. It was seen as an act of self-correction after he was criticised while chairman of the judiciary committee for the way he ran confirmation hearings three years earlier for Supreme Court justice Clarence Thomas. Anita Hill, a woman who said she was sexually harassed by Thomas, was subjected to aggressive questioning and Biden refused to call supportive witnesses. The Crime Bill also included the Federal Assault Weapons Ban, which outlawed the manufacture of civilian assault weapons and prohibited large-capacity magazines, but which lapsed after ten years and was not renewed. He came to regret the Crime Bill's increase in funding for police and prisons and its stiffening of sentences, which is blamed for fuelling America's high imprisonment rate, especially for black Americans.

What else was Biden doing in the Senate all those years? Besides acquiring a lot of foreign policy expertise that made him a useful diplomat under Obama, he was looking out for his state. The finance industry made Delaware its home because of a favourable regulatory atmosphere. From the Mother Jones website: "He cast votes that deregulated the banking industry, made it harder for individuals to escape credit-card debts and student loans, and protected his state's status as a corporate bankruptcy hub." In the words of a former governor who helped create its business-friendly laws, Delaware wanted to be "the Luxembourg of the United States".

Donald Trump tried many different ways to undermine Biden during the election

campaign, suggesting he is head of an organised crime family, a puppet of the far left and in the pocket of China. Perhaps the charge with the most resonance with voters is that Biden is suffering from age-related cognitive decline. The evidence includes multiple verbal slips, as well as strange outbursts such as when he told black radio host Charlamagne tha God in May, "I tell you what, if you have a problem figuring out whether you're for me or Trump, then you ain't black." This is another topic on which Trump has given Biden cover, revealing in his recounting of the "person, woman, man, camera, TV" memory test that it was the president who had actually been screened for cognitive deterioration.

There are too many examples of muddles not to suppose there has been some measure of decline, but Biden's supporters push back hard. Asked about Biden's "senior moments", Moe Vela, a lawyer who was his director of

would talk to. Biden later embraced the Democrats' "progressive" wing after winning the nomination to avoid the recriminations that bedevilled Hillary Clinton in 2016, when many supporters of Bernie Sanders rejected her. He set up a policy forum that teamed up different strands of the party, notably John Kerry, the former secretary of state, and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the standard-bearer of the radical left, on the climate group.

The result was a hostage to fortune gleefully exploited by his Republican opponent. Biden said that he rejected the Green New Deal, settling on policies that stopped short of the full package. Yet his website declares, "Biden believes the Green New Deal is a crucial framework for meeting the climate challenges we face." He was having his cake and eating it.

While this helped unite the party, squaring the circle in government won't be so easy. A Biden administration is likely to feature Republican appointments in a signal that the

## **BIDEN HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN A LIVER-SPOTTED GRANDAD, HIS FACE ENHANCED BY PLASTIC SURGERY AND GLEAMING WHITE TEETH**

administration in the White House, says, "Gaffes are not new to Joe Biden. That's a part of who he is for 45 years, so I don't know how anybody could be surprised. Moments in his speech where it looks like he... You're calling them senior moments – here's another perspective. This is a man who had such a severe stutter in his youth that he had to look into the mirror every day and practise. And if you talk to any stutterer, a stutter never goes away. You learn to cope with it.

"And so when you see what you call a 'senior moment' with Joe Biden, what you're seeing is that he has to think before he says a word, so sometimes there is a perceived delay. And sometimes, when you have to think before you say the word, you may lose your train of thought. Instead of criticising, let us celebrate somebody who has dealt with his disability, to go on and serve his nation in spite of it."

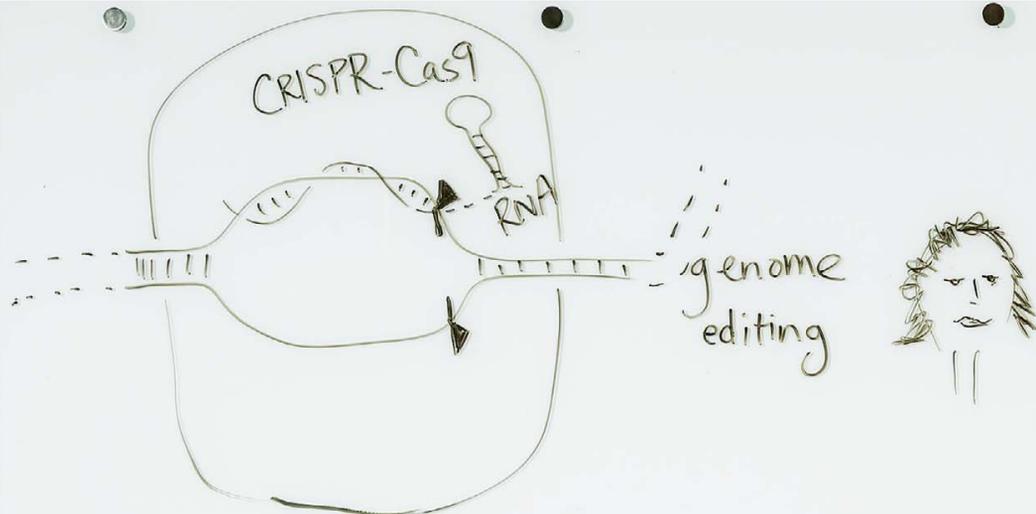
What type of president might Biden be? He is not particularly ideological and has a reputation as a moderate. He says he was motivated to run against Trump when he heard him say that, in the far-right 2017 demonstrations in Charlottesville when a counterprotester was killed, there were "very fine people on both sides".

Biden prides himself on his ability to bring people together. In the Senate, he worked with hardline conservatives that no Democrat

presidency is for all Americans – an attempt to heal the partisan wounds of the past four years. Again, the left is likely to be quickly disenchanted unless a Biden presidency pushes through some radical legislation.

In private conversations, Biden often refers to Franklin Roosevelt, whose bold New Deal hauled America out of the Great Depression. He believes 2020 calls for a similar response. He has not said this out loud, but he is working on the basis he will serve a single four-year term due to his age and he wants to make every moment count. Moody's, the ratings agency, analysed various election outcomes, including Trump winning, and concluded, "The economic outlook is strongest under the scenario in which Biden and the Democrats sweep Congress and fully adopt their economic agenda. In this scenario, the economy is expected to create 18.6 million jobs during Biden's term as president."

On a campaign call with supporters in July, Biden told them, "If we can't unite America we're gone, we're dead, democracy's dead... If I'm elected, I'm going to go down as one of the most progressive presidents in American history." After his 2008 presidential campaign, when almost nobody showed up for him, millions of Americans are now standing in long lines to cast early votes for Joe Biden, the guy who stuck around. ■



# ALL HAIL THE GENE QUEEN

Jennifer Doudna has just won the Nobel prize for chemistry – her discovery of Crispr, the groundbreaking gene-editing tool, is already revolutionising the treatment of disease. But does this brave new world mean a generation of designer superbabies?

**INTERVIEW** Tom Whipple

Jennifer Doudna, 56, photographed by Winni Wintermeyer at the University of California, Berkeley



**W**hen Jennifer Doudna woke up, she realised her phone had been buzzing on and off for some time.

It was still dark outside. In fact, her phone told her that, here in California, it was 3am. More pertinently – she might have thought, but didn’t – it was midday in Stockholm.

She answered. In the blurriness of her waking, she says she did not have an inkling why the world was so keen to speak to her at such a strange time on the first Wednesday in October.

“It was a reporter from *Nature* magazine. ‘Sorry to bother you so early,’ she said. ‘I’d like to ask you your response to the Nobel.’ I thought she was asking me about someone else winning. I said, ‘I don’t know. I’ve just woken up.’”

Unlike almost all other scientific prizes, Nobels are only decided on the morning of the prize. If the committee cannot reach the winners in an hour, they announce regardless. In Sweden, the Nobel committee had already read out Doudna’s citation. If she had been listening, she would have learnt she had shared the prize with a French scientist and long-time collaborator Emmanuelle Charpentier, “for the development of a method for genome editing”.

Another way of describing their work – work that has revolutionised genetics arguably faster than any discovery in history – is that it has given humans the power to control their own evolution.

“Oh my gosh!” said the reporter, realising she’d just broken the news. “You don’t know.”

What follows is a classic example of a perennial feelgood science story: the newly minted laureate in the wrong time zone.

The first thing that happened was that Doudna’s husband, Jamie Cate – also a professor at the University of California, Berkeley – went in to rouse their son. “He said, ‘Wake up! Your mother has won the Nobel prize,’” says Doudna, who is 56. “He was very matter of fact.” Teenagers, even those whose mothers have been awarded a Nobel, take a while to get into the party atmosphere when forced out of bed before dawn.

“But he did look at me that morning over coffee at 4am and say, ‘Mum, I’m really proud of you.’ It’s not often your 17-year-old says that.”

A quarter of an hour later, the TV crews arrived. Because of Covid-19, they conducted the interviews outside. “I felt a little bad because there were lights. And my neighbour at one point texted me and said, ‘Either there’s a problem in your garden or something very exciting is happening.’”

So far, so standard. There are, though, a few ways in which Doudna’s story is slightly

Doudna in her laboratory on campus at Berkeley



## ‘MY SON SAID, “I’M PROUD OF YOU.” IT’S NOT OFTEN YOUR 17-YEAR-OLD SAYS THAT’

different from the usual tale of US west coast laureates. The first is that, unlike other laureates jolted awake by a phone call in the small hours or dazzled by TV lights outside, Doudna was not new to fame. She has a book out, and she has – that ultimate imprimatur of pop-academic success – a TED Talk.

For much of the past decade, she has been the face of a technology that has gone from obscurity to ubiquity faster than any in the history of biology.

The second is that despite receiving the Nobel, the peak academic accolade humanity can give to anyone, she is still not so sure her legacy is assured. Quite the reverse.

“There’s always the worry I could be a Dr Frankenstein,” she says. “I couldn’t really live with myself if I didn’t take responsibility for the work that we had done.”

The first time I met Doudna was at a talk in 2018 at the Royal Society, Britain’s oldest and most prestigious scientific institution.

In the room above her, there was a bust of Charles Darwin, the father of evolution. Below, she talked about humanity’s ability to transcend natural selection and control evolution.

She put up a slide of an *Economist* cover that is now famous in the community. Under the title “Editing humanity”, it shows an annotated baby “improved” by science.

“Sprinter,” says a label pointing to its legs. “High IQ,” says another, pointing to its head.

This cover illustrated the power, the promise and most of all the fears of Crispr cas9, Doudna and Charpentier’s genome-editing tool – a tool with the potential to cure genetic disease, to tailor crops to our purposes, but also to fundamentally change our idea of our own humanity.

One day Crispr (pronounced crisper) may indeed make high-IQ, sprinting babies. It may create a Brave New World – for better or worse. But its story begins in microbes. It is difficult to categorise what it is that Doudna and Charpentier have done. Crispr is partly an invention, partly a discovery. It isn’t, as a concept at least, new. It was always there, if we knew where to look.

The first time we did look was in 1987, when a Japanese scientist spotted an oddity in the genome of a bacterium. There was a repeating sequence of genetic code, roughly palindromic, that seemed to act as a bookend.



With fellow prizewinner Emmanuelle Charpentier in 2015



With her husband, Jamie Cate, in 2019

This code would appear, then there would be an incomprehensible sequence of genetic letters – actggtcag – then it would appear again, and so on. The discovery was filed as an oddity, and largely forgotten.

Over the next two years, investigations into this obscure mystery made (very) slow, but steady, progress. One group of scientists realised that the incomprehensible sequences of code were not so incomprehensible. They were seen somewhere else: in viruses that attack bacteria.

Why would a bacteria store the genetic code of a virus that attacks it? Only one answer made sense. The bacteria must have saved bits of viral genetic code, so that when those dangerous viruses came into view it could spot them – and defeat them.

The code was part of the bacterial immune system, a library of dangerous pathogens. And the library, in turn, was a catalogue of targets. It used this code to build a molecular machine, an atomic-scale weapon that would seek out that particular string of DNA in the attacking virus. Then when it found it, having locked on to the threat, it snipped it up: shredding its attacker.

Suddenly, the oddity spotted in 1987 became something more profound. This, scientists thought, had the potential to be useful.

Then one day in 2012, in her office overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge,

Doudna became the scientist who completed this quarter-century puzzle – and found a use for Crispr.

She and her colleagues took the molecular machine the bacteria used to snip out viral DNA, and reprogrammed it. In their hands, it could instead snip out any DNA they chose – and replace it with a different set of DNA. It was a cut-and-paste function for the code of life. It allowed us to control our own evolution.

Crispr is not the first system for editing genetic code. But it is, by some distance, the best. Genome edits that once took a whole PhD to complete can be done in an afternoon – by a lab technician. Crispr is now ubiquitous. As a research tool, it can be used to understand what genes do, to make laboratory animals to investigate specific diseases, to engineer plants to survive climate change and drought.

In the week of our interview, there is a study published into using Crispr in fighting cancer by targeting the DNA inside tumour cells. There is another about stopping the progression of muscular dystrophy.

None of these, though, are what concerns Doudna. Ethically, they are little different from a drug. What concerns her is what happens if we make the changes not as a targeted intervention in the bodies of sick people, but instead at the point of fertilisation – changing every cell in a baby, and every cell in any babies that baby grows up to have. What happens if we make a designer baby?

When we spoke in early 2018, Doudna considered such a development – with what now seems like sweet naivety – a distant dystopian prospect, but one worth considering nevertheless. Neither of us had any inkling at the time that, in the very month we were speaking, the world's first full designer baby was already conceived.

After her Royal Society talk, we had met over the finger buffet. When did her thoughts move from the utility of Crispr in the laboratory to its potential for making superbabies? When did she realise she would spend much of her career talking about ethics?

“At the very end of 2012 I had my family over for dinner. It should have been a happy occasion, a holiday dinner, but I felt really down. I was sitting by myself in the room, and my sister came in. She said, ‘You’re looking unhappy.’ I said, ‘I feel this great weight. We’re doing this thing in the lab. I’m excited about it; I can see it’s a really powerful technology. I’m also feeling great anxiety.’ My mother was very ill and I was caring for her, and I thought, ‘How can I do everything I need to do? How can I be a daughter, a mum, a wife, and run my lab?’ It felt really intense.”

It only got worse. “Around mid-2013, I started talking to my spouse about human embryo editing. Initially my reaction

was, ‘I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want these crazy people emailing me.’ I eventually realised it was going to go there whether I talked or not. I could see the tsunami coming.”

Today, in a pandemic world, we are meeting over Zoom – with the Golden Gate Bridge as her digital background. Nine months after her Royal Society talk, she tells me, she received another email – and whether it was from a crazy person or not was a matter of opinion. But she knew that with it, far sooner than expected, the tsunami had arrived.

“I was about to leave for Hong Kong for the second international summit on human genome editing,” she says. This was a conference where, among other things, scientists were looking to build a consensus on an ethical framework for using her technology. The expectation was that they would call for a moratorium on its use in human embryos until more was known about how it worked, and until society had had time to consider the momentous moral ramifications.

The email was from one of the conference attendees, He Jiankui. He wanted Doudna to know about some research he was going to announce. He had edited the genomes of twin girls, Lulu and Nana, to give them resistance to HIV. The girls had been born a month earlier.

The conference had been worried about making Crispr embryos for research purposes that would then be aborted. These were Crispr babies breathing among us.

He Jiankui had expected congratulations. He didn’t get it. “You know, it’s quite a shock. Can you imagine receiving that?” says Doudna. It wasn’t, and still isn’t, completely clear how successful the edit he made to the girls was, or what the knock-on consequences might be. It was also a strange gene to change. If you want to confer resistance to HIV, far better to tell someone to use a condom. He is now in prison.

“That changed the whole focus of that meeting,” she says. “It went from being discussions about theoretically what might happen and how to deal with it to how to manage it now it had happened, and what do we do now?” And how much responsibility went to the creators of the technology – to Doudna and Charpentier?

On the campus of UC Berkeley, the roads are named after famous alumni. If you leave Doudna’s office and turn left at a row of sparsely filled parking spaces (“Reserved for Nobel laureates,” the notice explains), you find yourself on Oppenheimer Way, in honour of Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Manhattan Project’s Los Alamos Laboratory – the top-secret facility that developed the bombs for Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Just before Doudna received the email from He Jiankui, back when she was still

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jostling with the non-laureates for parking, she says she was reading the classic account of the work of Oppenheimer, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*.

In 1945, as the blinding flash of the Trinity test faded to reveal a grey mushroom cloud, Oppenheimer famously claimed he recalled the words from Hindu scripture, “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”

Like the atomic scientists before her, Doudna confesses she had felt a terrible responsibility on creating Crispr: “It was horrifying to know there was almost nobody in government that had any awareness of this.” And there was so much they needed to know.

Sometimes the dilemmas created by easy gene editing can feel a little like an undergraduate philosophy paper or an autogenerated list of Oxford Union debates. “This house believes that it is wrong to change the human genome to cure disease.” “This house believes it is wrong not to change the human genome to cure disease.” “This house believes we have a duty to make mosquitoes extinct.” “This house believes we should take control of human evolution – to make us faster, stronger and happier.”

No simple answers are available to these questions. You can set clear red lines – do use it to cure diseases; don’t enhance humans – but the closer you get to them, the less clear they become.

The case for the proposition, when arguing against those who would forbid its use, begins strongly. In fact, it arrives in Doudna’s inbox regularly with emails from desperate parents wanting to know if she can cure their children. She can’t, and she hates receiving the emails, but one day scientists might. Should they?

Let us start with something easy. You may remember sickle cell anaemia from biology classes. There is a gene mutation that affects blood cell production. If you have one copy, you are fine. If you have two copies, you have seriously misshapen blood cells and a life-changing illness that means you get easily tired and are prone to infection, heart injury, ulcers and eye damage.

A team has now developed a Crispr treatment to cure it, by fixing the sickle mutation in the bone marrow cells that make blood. It is still very expensive, but it works. A disease that blights the lives of millions is fixed. And who could seriously object to that? That’s ethical line No 1 happily crossed.

But what if you could go further and ensure that these people never pass the condition to their children? What if you could make what is called a “germline” modification to their eggs or sperm, to remove the mutation at source? If it is right to change it in one person, surely it is right to change it in their offspring?

Doudna has a practical example of this. “My mother’s family has Alzheimer’s all

through the family,” she says. None have had their DNA sequenced, but given the family history it seems at least plausible that they have a particular gene variant, ApoE4, that significantly raises the risk of dementia.

“Let’s say it’s ApoE4. I saw the suffering of family members, including my own mother. And, you know, if I knew there was a technology to avoid that, and it was safe, it’s hard to say that I wouldn’t want to use it.”

It seems barely even a question – of course, surely, she should tweak the genomes of her future grandchildren. Why stop at ApoE4? There’s the BRCA1 gene for breast cancer, and a host of genes linked to heart disease. There are non-Crispr ways of ensuring that you don’t get one gene mutation; there are no such ways of ensuring you remove a whole suite, to give your child the very best start in life. And who could object to that kind of designer baby?

Yet Doudna is not so sure. Suddenly you are considering deep time – not just your children, but their children and their descendants until the end of humanity itself. You are removing

## ‘THERE’S ALWAYS THE WORRY I COULD BE A DR FRANKENSTEIN’

a human trait that evolved for a reason, for ever more. Is that a responsibility you want?

“Why is that variant maintained in the human population?” she asks. A common gene variant is rarely a mistake. Sickle cell, for instance, is not all bad. It persists because those with just one copy of the mutation have protection against malaria. ApoE4 may confer an advantage we don’t understand. So should we remove it? “I struggle with it, honestly.”

OK, next stage. You’ve decided as a society that the ApoE4 variant and a whole host of similar genes are so pernicious it is indeed worth removing them from the human germline. But you don’t “remove” a gene – you change it. So what do you change the gene to?

What if, in making the change, you altered it to a variant that doesn’t just lower the risk of Alzheimer’s, it actively protects against it? Does that, in your red lines, count as cure or enhancement? Or what if you discovered there were a version of the gene that also increased intelligence? Would it be wrong, given you are changing it anyway, to pick that one? Would it, in fact, be perverse not to?

Doudna does not, she says, have the answers. Nor would she want to give them if she did. What she wants is not for her to take control, but for us to take control – for society to take on the burden of considering the problems, so that she can return to the laboratory.

The day before Doudna was woken in her bed, Roger Penrose, 89, received a call from

Stockholm while he was, in his words, “stark naked in the shower”. In Nobel week, Tuesday is physics day, and on the other side of the Atlantic the British mathematician had just won the prize for his work in the Sixties on black holes – a discipline with notably fewer ethical conundrums than gene editing.

Eighty-nine was, he declared, a “good age” to receive a Nobel. “If you’ve got grand ambitions it’s bad to get a Nobel too early,” he said, arguing it “gets in the way of your science”.

At 56, Doudna still has a lot of science she wants to do. When the pandemic struck, she and her colleagues switched to testing – becoming part of the network of laboratories that sprung up around the world to get ahead of the virus.

Now that that lab is running on its own, she has returned to Crispr, but with a pandemic theme. What if your Crispr machine was tweaked to seek out coronavirus? And what if, when it snipped out its DNA, it released a fluorescent particle to let you

know? That’s what she and her colleagues have made – a test that glows if coronavirus is present. They will be trialling it at Berkeley soon.

But how much involvement she will have is hard to tell. The second time we met, in her office, the world’s first Crispr babies were entering their second trimester. As our interview ended, I had asked her the question I knew she was waiting for and to which there was – both of us knew – no dignified answer.

When would she get the Nobel? Was she expecting it? Would it happen in 2019? In 2020? She batted it off, as she had to. Then, as we were shaking hands to leave, she added conspiratorially, “You know the best thing? It’s two women too – isn’t that great?”

Doudna has already become the face of Crispr. Now, with the Nobel – the first Nobel chemistry award to be shared solely between two women – she and Charpentier have also become the face of women in science. A lot more of her already squeezed time must be spent, she says, as “an ambassador for science”.

If this means less science, there are other compensations – as has already been pointed out to her. “The chancellor said, ‘You know, there’s this little prize, but really what we’re giving you is a parking space.’”

Below Doudna’s laboratory, on the corner of Oppenheimer Way, there is at last a section of pavement reserved just for her. Whether her car spends much time occupying it, though, is another matter. ■



# HOME Comforts

Bring the natural world into your home and create a calming space with Next Home that will lift your spirits every time you step through the door.  
By **Claudia Baillie**

**T**he way we live is changing, and as we spend more time at home it's never been as important to make sure our living spaces are as inviting and practical as possible.

Comfort is key, as is creating a space that feels like a sanctuary. And so with this in mind, Next Home has developed the Modern Country collection. Designed to bring a touch of boutique hotel style into your own home, the Modern Country range is a functional yet luxurious range of furniture, lighting and accessories that will sit effortlessly within any existing interior, whether that's a traditional home or a more contemporary space.

"For me, it's about blending the cosy familiarity of a farmhouse with that feeling you get when you're at a beautiful country hotel, so it has just a hint of grandness too," says home design manager Susie. "It's somewhere you can feel calm, comfortable and nurtured all at the same time. The items from this range will make you feel instantly relaxed whenever you enter a room."



## Textures and tones

At the heart of the collection is a tonal colour palette of greys, taupes, creams and beiges that is easy to decorate with, and ever easier to live with. The secret is to layer up textures and shades using cushions, throws, rugs and upholstery in order to add warmth and interest. “All our fabrics are really tactile, whether that’s something soft or plush like wool, linen, or velvet, or something with a rougher feel such as jute,” says Susie. “It’s about combining these elements to speak to your senses in a compelling way.”

## Past to present

Also key to the collection’s appeal are the subtle historic references, which help add personality while at the same time create maximum comfort. “For example, the shape and buttoning on the Charlbury sofa has a nod to a traditional Chesterfield,” Susie says. “You know it’s going to have a wonderful cocooning feel, but it also makes a statement – we’re all about furniture working really well while also looking good.”

Team it up with a chair from a different range, such as the Sherlock wingback, which takes its cue from traditional upholstery. “It’s important that things aren’t matchy matchy. Using more than one style adds a certain charm and the colour palette will instantly bring the pieces together.”

## Table talk

This mix and match approach follows through into the dining ranges, where nice looking, natural materials are used to create functional, durable pieces. “Our research has shown that the dining table has become the most important piece of furniture in the home,” says Susie.

“In recent months it’s been used not only for family breakfasts, lunches and evening meals but also for home schooling, working from home and a whole host of other activities. This means it could easily have ten different functions throughout the day. Taking that into consideration, this simple oak Adley design is solid, hard wearing and easy to clean, making it ideal for modern family living. It’s big enough to seat lots of people, and the benches tuck away neatly when not in use.”

Tabletop accessories include Malvern dinner and glassware and pom pom place mats, which have a refined yet casual feel. “The porcelain gives a nod to fine dining while the subtle, rippled texture adds a hand-crafted vibe,” says Susie. “The glasses are rippled, and the result is an elegant collection that can be used every day.”



**The great indoors:** (clockwise from top) pendant lighting, from £30; Charlbury Sofa, £1,299, with Malvern coffee table nest, £350, and chunky check border rug, from £75; Paris bed, from £550, with cotton check bed set, from £35; Warwick Dove Dinner set £30, Adley Table £650 & Bench £299, Branch Light £99

## Let there be light

Lighting plays a big part in the story as well – there’s a generous selection of pendant, wall and table lamps to choose from. “A mixture of ceiling, table and wall lighting can help to create different moods,” says Susie.

“The Gloucester range includes a smart pendant (top picture, third from right) that has nickel fittings and a clear glass shade for a lovely warm glow. It doesn’t dominate but can also feel modern.

Another favourite is the Brompton clear glass table lamp that floods the room with soft light. We also have touch lighting, which in a bedroom is a practical choice.”

## And so to bed

Crisp linen is another vital part of the look, and will make your room feel like

a boutique hotel – high thread count sheets, layers of softly draped, cable knit throws and a scattering of cushions for a cosy and welcoming atmosphere. “The buttoned Paris bed also makes a statement and brings a real sense of luxury to the space,” says Susie. “Together, these elements create a tranquil and restorative bedroom that sets the scene for a great night’s sleep.”

## THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DESIGN

Clinical psychologist Dr Jessamy Hibberd gives her advice on how to create a calming space

**1** Research shows that being in nature has significant and wide-ranging health benefits.

Choose natural materials where possible to bring the outdoors in. Incorporate house plants and maximise natural light for physical and psychological benefits.

**2** You develop associations with certain spaces, so cultivate positive ones by identifying the room’s purpose and how you want to feel when you’re in it. A bedroom needs to be relaxing, so clear items that disrupt that feeling.

**3** What you look at every day can have a positive effect on your mood. Photographs of loved ones can evoke fond memories and feelings of connection, while art can reflect something you love or remind you of somewhere you’ve been.

**4** Creating order relieves anxiety, so try to keep rooms clutter free, particularly those you want to relax in. But be realistic and don’t put too much pressure on yourself – homes are meant to be lived in and can’t stay tidy all of the time.

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# THE HOUSE THAT MR CHOW BUILT

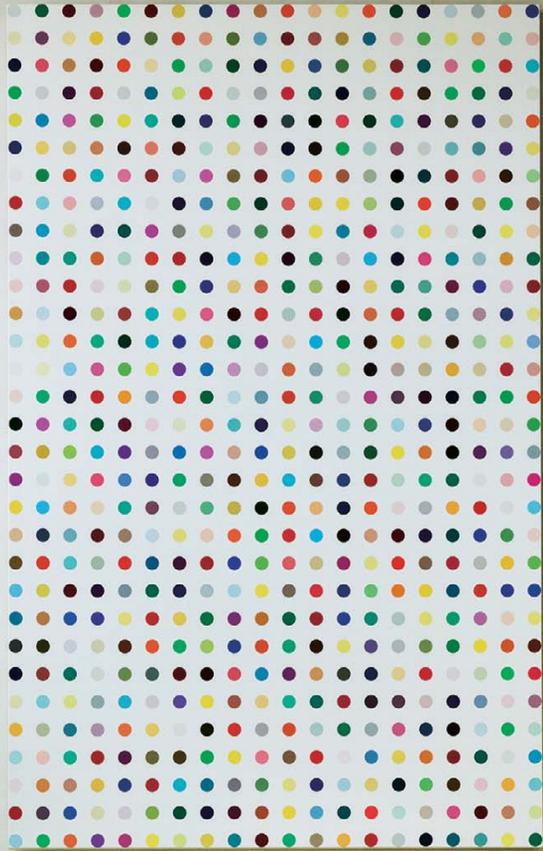
When an A-list restaurateur moved from London to Los Angeles with his fashion designer wife, they built a 'museum' fit for their extraordinary art collection



REPORT Georgina Roberts PHOTOGRAPHS Douglas Friedman



# Home!



The atrium gallery, with a Damien Hirst work above the fireplace, which is based on a Frank Lloyd Wright design. Opposite, from top: Eva Chow in the 'gold room', photographed by Kendrick Brinson; the terrace

**W**hen Michael Chow, the flamboyant, artistic son of a famous Chinese opera singer, opened his first restaurant in Knightsbridge in 1968, his idea was to create a place that served Chinese food served by Italian waiters, and with a menu the British could understand. Mr Chow quickly became an institution, thanks not only to its exorbitant prices and ritzy clientele, but for the restaurant's bold art deco interior featuring paintings by the era's hottest artists, such as David Hockney, Peter Blake, Allen Jones and Patrick Caulfield, including portraits of Chow in his distinctive black spectacles.

A restaurant followed in New York, where Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat were regulars. Such was Michael Chow's celebrity that his Peking-themed birthday party in the city in 1979 was held in Studio 54. Since then, the Mr Chow chain has expanded to Las Vegas, Miami and Beverly Hills, with diners over the years including everyone from Bianca Jagger and Mary Quant to Beyoncé and Jay-Z.

It's perhaps little surprise that a man whose business success lies in the merging of food, art and celebrity might want a home that reflects his passions. In 1992, Chow married his third wife, the Korean artist and fashion designer Eva Chun. (She followed Grace Coddington, later creative director of *Vogue*, and the model Tina Chow, who died of Aids in 1992.) Michael and Eva, now a celebrity power couple, moved to Los Angeles. Unable to find a property with walls large enough for their collection of modern art and antique furniture, they decided to build their own.

The result is an extraordinary vaulted mansion modelled on Spain's national gallery of 20th-century art, the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. "One limestone quarry in Italy was completely bought out to build this house," says Eva. Its 30ft high, 24in-thick cream walls showcase work by Damien Hirst, Richard Serra, Julian Schnabel and Ed Ruscha. "We have a large Keith Haring picture – we built the entry for that," she adds.

The house near Bel Air took seven years to build and was completed in 2007, with the help of Mexican architect Humberto Artigas. It's an eclectic mix of styles featuring replica 400-year-old Moorish columns and 16th and 17th-century Florentine-style carved ceilings. From a two-storeyed central atrium, glass doors slide open into a terrace and garden. There's a library – featuring a 16th-century Belgian tapestry and furniture by art deco master Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann – where the couple hosted a party for President Obama, attended by Kim Kardashian and Kanye



The gold room, with Pierre Chareau sofa and chairs and replica Jean Dunand screen (the Chows donated the original to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York)

West. Another room has gold-panelled walls. "My gold room is probably one of the most opulent parts of the house," Eva says. Beneath an 18th-century Murano glass chandelier sit two more art deco sofas and 15th-century Chinese furniture.

The house also features two glass-enclosed wine vaults with 1,800 bottles, although Eva says she is not "one of those collectors that buys the wine and looks at the bottles. I drink them as fast as I collect them." Then there's a subterranean "blue" cinema room, with underwater views of the swimming pool. "Michael wanted a Venice-like, building-inside-the-water feeling," Eva says. "Light from the pool comes in through the cinema. When people are swimming, it's like an aquarium."

Michael and Eva divorced in 2017, with her staying in the house, which contains some £50 million worth of art. She spent lockdown here with the couple's 23-year-old daughter, Asia. With 81-year-old Michael remarried, Eva now spends more time in her native South Korea. "I would probably feel so sad to give up this house," she says. "But I am single now. My lifestyle is different." ■







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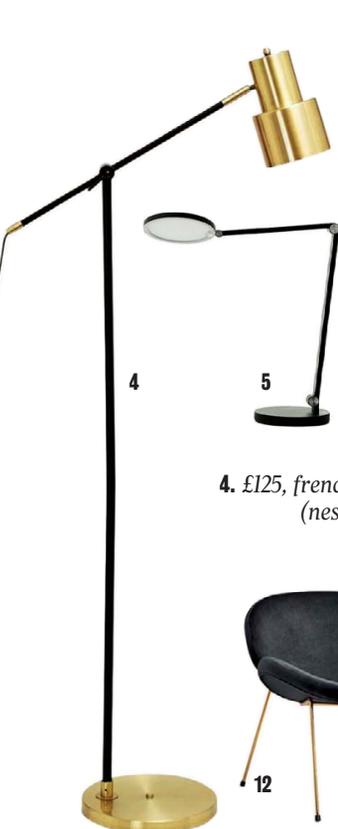
By Monique Rivalland

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johnlewis.com

Desk, £1,946, Laskasas  
(sweetpeaandwillow.com)



4. £125, frenchconnection.com. 5. £181, Frandsen (nunido.co.uk). 6. £150, ikea.com. 7. £748, Louis Poulsen (nest.co.uk). 8. £249, westelm.co.uk. 9. £99.99, zara.com. 10. £42, perchandparrow.com. 11. £79.99, hm.com.



12. £89, cultfurniture.com. 13. £355, westelm.co.uk. 14. £398, Kartell (amara.com). 15. £199, cultfurniture.com. 16. £195, grahamandgreen.co.uk. 17. £487.50, maisonsdumonde.com. 18. £699, westelm.co.uk. 19. £475, laredoute.co.uk. 20. £1,810, &Tradition (viaduct.co.uk).



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# Alfresco!

By Monique Rivalland



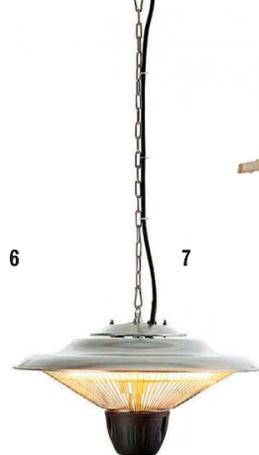
1. Chiminea, £89.40, RedFire (manomano.co.uk). 2. Chiminea, £169, made.com. 3. £122, Esschert Design (vidaxl.co.uk). 4. £216.99, Norfolk Leisure (wayfair.co.uk). 5. Patio heater, from £219.99, Heatsure (onbuy.com). 6. £100, Tweedmill (amara.com). 7. Patio heater, £79.90, Arebos (manomano.co.uk). 8. Light, £199, Fatboy (madeindesign.co.uk).



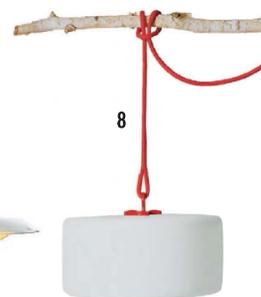
5



6



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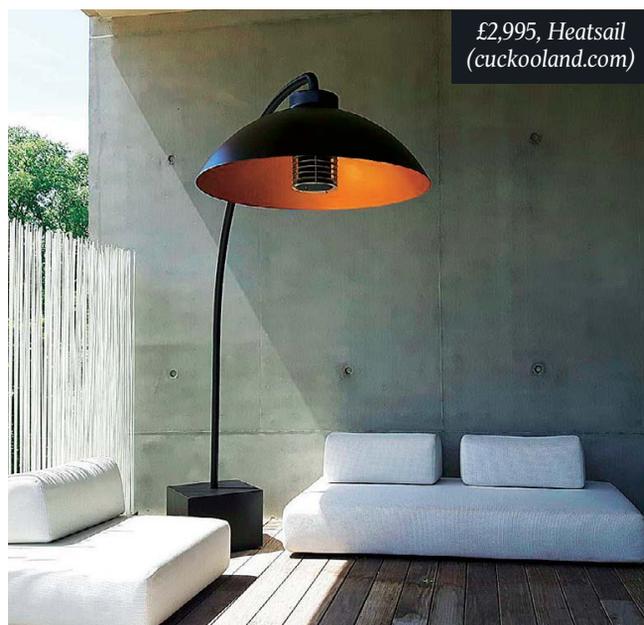


8

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14



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12. £148, &Tradition (madeindesign.co.uk). 13. £183, Kartell (madeindesign.co.uk). 14. £62.10, Hay (nest.co.uk). 15. £109, Fermob (connox.co.uk).

# Eating out Giles Coren

‘Most people assume I’m married to either Monica Galetti or Sue Perkins, or possibly both, like one of those “secret family on the other side of town” guys’



TOM JACKSON

## Mere

It's 15 years I've been doing telly now, mostly food-related, nothing earth-shattering, nothing too offensive – roughly one series a year on BBC Two plus occasional outings on other channels – never getting especially rich or famous, churning out some decent stuff without ever bedding into the mainstream, which has had the benefit of not wearing people out with overexposure. TV audiences have thus been slower to tire of me, paradoxically, than they might have been if I were better at it.

In essence, I am a sidekick, dragged along from series by big-name presenters more popular and charismatic than I, who nonetheless need a bumbling goof to bounce off from time to time. I am the Ernie Wise of middlebrow, hospitality-related, family entertainment. And although I began life as the quivering straight man to a young Gordon Ramsay in the first series of Channel 4's *The F Word* back in 2005, I am, for most people, depending on their age, either, “The bloke in that Sue Perkins thing where they dress up in chain mail and eat peacocks,” or, “The bloke in that thing with Monica Galetti where they travel the world grumbling about hotels which the likes of us can only dream of.”

So when Sue and I offered ourselves up at the height of the first lockdown to be auctioned off in aid of PPE for key workers – dinner for two with the pair of us, on us – I could think of nowhere more suitable for the big scoff to happen than at Monica's restaurant, Mere. Most people assume that I am married to either Monica or Sue, or possibly both, without the other one knowing, like one of those “secret family on the other side of town” guys. So what would happen if we all met up? Would it be like “crossing the streams” in *Ghostbusters*? Or when Marty McFly's mum met her older self in *Back to the Future Part II* and the space-time continuum was threatened?

If it was, then at least our two wonderful sponsors, Richard Parkinson and Hamilton McBrien, would be there to mop up the mess. It was Richard's treat, I gathered when we met in the bar upstairs, because I nearly mentioned the amount he'd paid, and he shushed me and said, “Hamilton doesn't know how much I spent!”

The three of them were already going on cocktails when I rolled in and we had a round of excellent Manhattans and the manager brought us menus to look at and then I squealed, “Oh my God, it's nearly quarter to eight!” because this was during the period of that utterly ridiculous 10pm curfew on bars and restaurants which, by the time you read this, I am confident will have been consigned to the spillages log of history, and we were already running out of time to have fun.



**Mere**

74 Charlotte Street,  
London W1  
(020 7268 6565;  
mere-restaurant.com)

**Score** I'm not going to rate Monica, because what if she starts rating me?

**Price** We paid £295.88 for food and service. Monica's sommelier (and husband), David, stood us the wine (because it was for charity), which is why I haven't mentioned how great it was.

So we sprinted downstairs and... I'd forgotten how pretty the restaurant was, with its blues and beiges, Samoan art, geometric patterns and gentle light. I went once in Mere's first week in March 2017 and loved the place, but the first series of *Amazing Hotels* was on air at the time and I just felt too closely twinned with Monica in the public eye to review it. Although she and I had never met when we began filming, we looked like friends on air and had gradually become so. Furthermore, I had lived through some of Mere's birth pains as Mon fought fires in Charlotte Street down dodgy phone lines from the Ecuadorean cloud forest and the plains of Samburu in northern Kenya, from the souk in Marrakesh, atop a skyscraper in Singapore and from Lapland's frozen tundra... and I didn't feel I could just walk in and go, "Meh, I don't like the colour scheme in the bogs but the chicken's okay, 8/10," so I skipped it.

But since then I have seen even more closely the dedication and passion that Monica brings to running her restaurant. And I say this as someone with no real dedication to or passion for anything. So it's kind of scary. She's on the phone to Fitzrovia at four in the morning from French Polynesia, talking about forks. She's bagging up fallen cacao pods from a plantation in St Lucia to take back to London to show her young staff where chocolate comes from. In filming breaks, when I'm in a hammock with a local lager, catching some rays, she's pounding the treadmill in the spa with weights in her fists and a headset

on, organising menus 7,000 miles away. She's on the first flight into Heathrow at dawn, still in her scuba kit from a scene spearing lionfish in the Caribbean, to cab straight to the restaurant for lunch prep...

I'm still possibly a bit close to Mon to be reviewing Mere in *The Times*, but there are precious few black women running their own cutting-edge, high-profile restaurants in this country (come on, name your favourites), and when you consider that Monica basically swam here from Samoa, via New Zealand, through shark-infested waters, to snare a bottom-rung job at Le Gavroche and fight her way up through the ranks like Rocky Balboa, well, it would be a damn shame if her restaurant and the young black women who might be inspired by it were shut out of this newspaper just because she's friends with me.

Her cooking is extraordinary. Her mastery of the skills is second to none. And the results on the plate, which I was seeing for only the second time in three years (apart from when she roasted me a guinea pig in the South American jungle), are just eye-popping.

My favourite dish? A cuttlefish thing where the body flesh was cut down into geometrically perfect ribbons and tangled like tagliatelle over a rich, beef-like ragout of the tentacles with olives, basil and sun-dried tomato. A small, beautiful thing in the centre of a huge, beautiful plate. Witty, self-referential and cosmically delicious.

As were little Porthilly oysters pressed into a rhombus of braised oxtail and served

on a rectangle of charred watermelon under nasturtium flowers. I liked the way the meat and seafood played with each other aside from the intrusion of fruit, finding it subtler than when the watermelon joined them in my mouth. But Monica will be the first to tell you that I know bugger all about anything.

But I do know the tomahawk of West Country venison was a dish from the filthiest dreams of Stone Age man made modern by the hand and eye of a rare, rare talent. The rib on the bone-in ribeye of deer had been "frenched" to give it that axe-like look (I'm realising as I write that "tomahawk" is a culturally appropriated Native American term, but maybe a Samoan chef can get away with that), and the meat cooked perfectly, so that the red centre glowed in the slashes where the dark-brown chop had been sliced for my convenience.

There was a charred segment of hispi cabbage that lay across the plate from the meat, perfectly mirroring the curve of its bone in the same way that the sails on the dinghies in Seurat's *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* mirror the curve of the bottoms of the promenading ladies. Both these sat on a vibrant zigzagzigzagzig of fermented blueberry sauce and there was a faggot of all the deer's little inside bits and pieces. And to think, critics used instinctively to praise the work of women chefs as "feminine".

On other plates I saw (for we do not share mouthfuls in these sad days) golden scallops with roasted figs on an almond gazpacho, roast loin of saddleback pork with black pudding and calvados sauce, and fat slivers of John Dory, on a warm salad of potato and fennel, with its moat of bouillabaisse sauce dotted with black garlic rouille, and I drooled.

And, because Richard and Hamilton and Sue love pudding, I also, for once, had pudding. And it was as beautiful a thing as I've seen outside a fairytale princess's hat shop, in which bands of silver sugar made a gold-topped cage over a sweet pastry tart filled with swirls of pale green, whipped pistachio ganache and blood-purple blackberry compote. Perfect in the mouth. Not too sweet. A little bit too beautiful.

Monica came out eventually to say hello and I thought I would cry. Sue and Mon had an elbow bump, the room gawped, Richard and Hamilton looked like maybe they had got their money's worth and I reflected, not for the first time, on how perfectly okay it is to be a sidekick, when the headline act can cook like this. ■

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# BEN MACHELL

## MY TOP 5 LOCKDOWN RULES

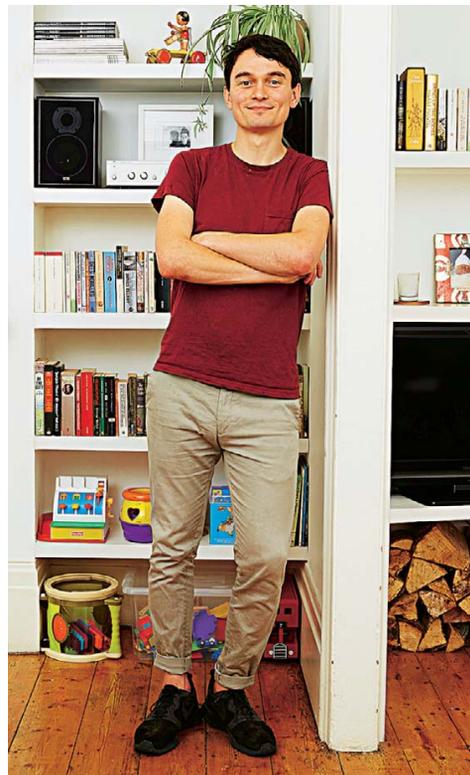
‘Perhaps casual sex is overrated. Maybe try to embrace state-sanctioned celibacy’

### 1 SEX

Right, OK, let's get this one out of the way first. Casual sex with someone from a different household is, under Tier 2 and Tier 3 restrictions, once again against the law. Some of our muckiest legal minds have been through the paperwork looking for loopholes and, while six-person indoor sex is still – thank God – technically allowed in Tier 1 locations, anywhere else, the state really doesn't want you at it with anyone you don't live with. So what do you do? Rather than fighting the system, rather than becoming some kind of sex terrorist, perhaps it's better for everyone if you just learn gently to rationalise your celibate existence. I mean, maybe sex is overrated. Maybe it's all just a huge scam cooked up by Ann Summers, Durex and Channel 4. And rather than angsting about what you can't have (ie, sex), why not consider what you might be able to achieve without it? I've been doing some research and it turns out some seriously impressive people either are or were virgins. Mother Teresa. The Dalai Lama. Nikola Tesla. Susan Boyle. Apparently, Sir Isaac Newton died a virgin, which is perhaps just as well. If he'd spent all his time on Tinder, he'd never have discovered gravity and then where would we be? So, maybe just embrace state-sanctioned celibacy and see where it takes you.

### 2 GOING TO THE PUB

You can sit inside a pub only with members of your household, which, to be honest, sort of defeats the entire object. Nevertheless, it is possible to adapt. If you have young children and change, a fruit machine will hold their attention for 20 minutes of solid drinking time. Plus, from a purely pedagogical perspective, fruities are all about probabilities, so it's a bit like you're making them do homework, which is responsible. Without your actual mates to talk to, your kids will also have to double as your sympathetic taproom confidants. Although again, this can be an educational experience for them as you expand their vocabulary to include new words and phrases



such as “sciatica”, “furlough” and “She wants to leave me”. See? Before you know it, it will seem weird not to go to the pub with your kids.

### 3 PARTIES AND SOCIALISING

Obviously, it's going to be impossible to enjoy a big blow-out under these new restrictions... Or is it? I'm not one of those fancy lawyer types (disclaimer: I am not a lawyer at all), but in skimming through the official guidelines, it seems there are a couple of exemptions that lend themselves to, I dunno, a certain amount of creative reading. Youth clubs, for example, are allowed to continue meeting. Could you therefore turn your house into a youth club? One in which all your friends are volunteer youth leaders? And which is open till late on

a Saturday night, despite the fact that no local young people have shown up yet? Because you've – \*cough\* – not actually told them about it? Guidelines also state that “commemorative events” allow for up to 15 people to meet, although they don't say what you need to be commemorating. Could you commemorate having a laugh? By simply and, I think, very fittingly having a laugh? You're also allowed to hold protests. Do canapés normally get served at protests? I don't see why not. More prosecco, officer?

### 4 APPAREL AND KIT

Sartorially, autumn/winter 2020 is very much about not dying of hypothermia while drinking outside with your friends. Prepare, therefore, for lots of Duke of Edinburgh's Award chic: fleeces, hiking socks, cagoules, base layers, everything. Come December, Anna Wintour is going to be front row at the Millets catwalk show, peering over her sunglasses approvingly at a pair of blue Peter Storm men's waterproof trousers (£25). The alternative, if you don't want to come across like an alcoholic scout leader, is to be one of those people who invest in outdoor patio heaters. But prepare to be judged. Not only by the conspiracy theorists who insist that Covid-19 is just a hoax invented by the powerful Patio Heater Industrial Complex, but also by those who'll point out, quite rightly, that from an environmental perspective, you might as well be warming your patio with the burning remains of an Amazonian child's home. Still... Toasty!

### 5 EXERCISE

There was a point during lockdown earlier this year when I seriously considered trying to adopt everyone on my football team just so that we could play, all under the guise of a (perfectly legal) outdoor family get-together. Outdoor team sports are now permitted, even in Tier 3 locations, although we did receive an official memo from the Football Association informing us that, due to Covid, “mass altercations” are now banned, which I suppose is just common sense. Anyway, from reviewing all the info we have, it looks as though, under Tier 2, indoor sports and exercise classes follow broadly the same rules as pubs, which is to say, you can hang out at the gym with your partner, children and perhaps an elderly relative in your support bubble, but not with your friends. So, if you want your mother-in-law to spot you while you do bench presses as your nuclear family watch on, then that's totally fine. As with so many of these rules, if you find yourself in what feels like a David Lynch film, then it's probably allowed. ■

*Robert Crampton is away*



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