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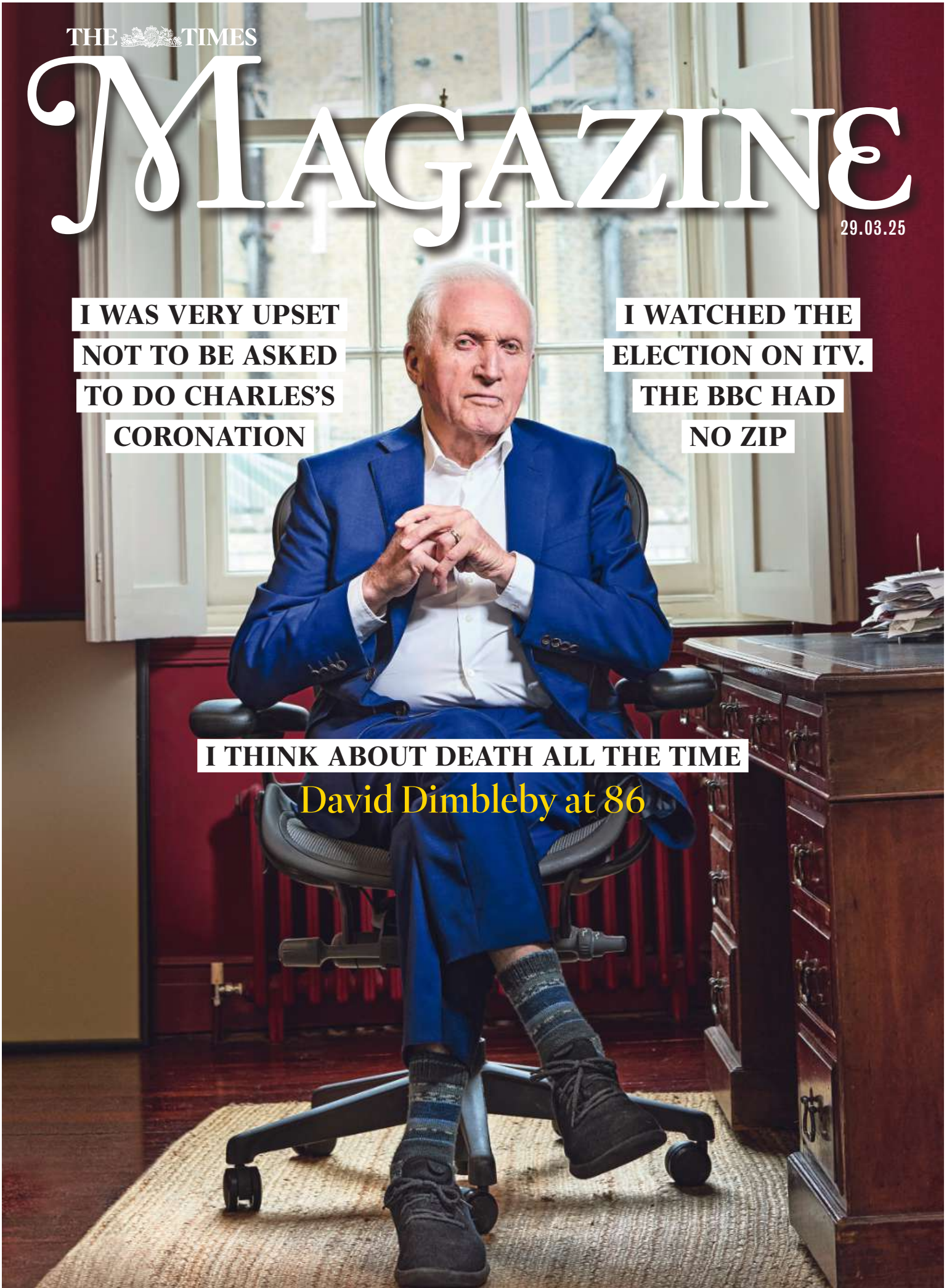
29.03.25

**I WAS VERY UPSET
NOT TO BE ASKED
TO DO CHARLES'S
CORONATION**

**I WATCHED THE
ELECTION ON ITV.
THE BBC HAD
NO ZIP**

I THINK ABOUT DEATH ALL THE TIME

David Dimbleby at 86





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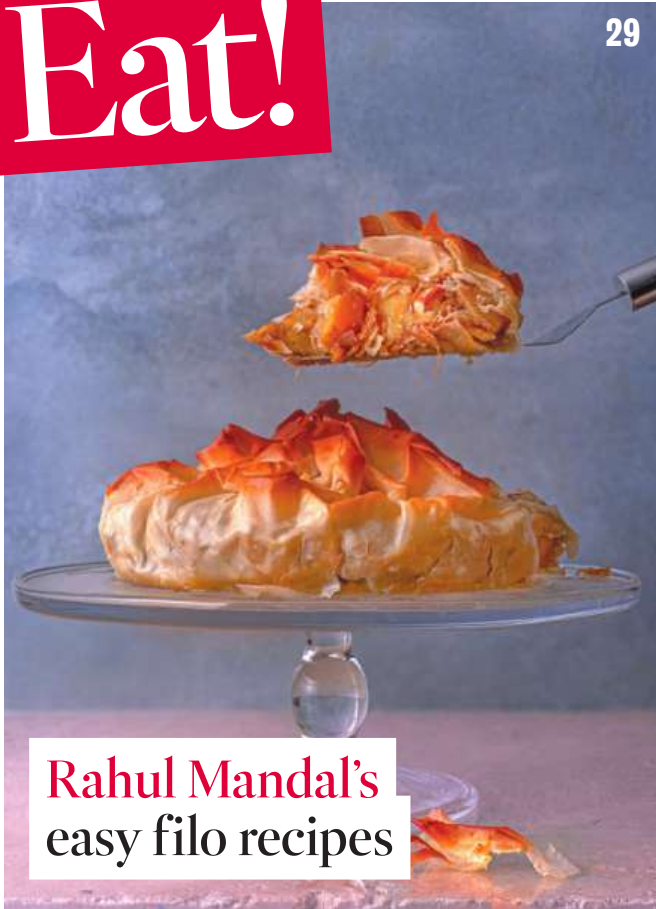
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FAB FIVE: POSH HOT CROSS BUNS



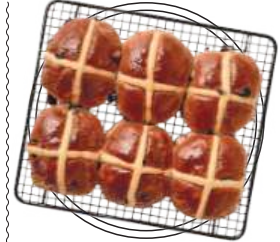
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It's not a little thing.
It's everything.

Earthy



TESCO
Every little helps

What Netflix's *Adolescence* tells us: teenage boys are not the ones in crisis. It's their dads

It is a mark of the brilliance of *Adolescence* – the Netflix drama co-written by and starring Stephen Graham, and detonated by a standout performance from 15-year-old Owen Cooper – that the conversation about the radicalisation, violence and underlying hopelessness of modern teenage boys has now gone up a gear.

It comes in the same month Sir Gareth Southgate gave the BBC's annual Richard Dimbleby Lecture on the need for new, and better, role models for teenage boys ("Too many young men are isolated... Many don't have mentors"), and widely reported interviews with pop star Sam Fender ("Young men are made to feel like they're a problem," driving them into the arms of Andrew Tate), and *Dragons' Den* investor Steven Bartlett ("We are losing a generation of young boys"), who seem truly alarmed by what is happening.

As someone who published a book on this very topic, *What About Men?*, in 2023, I've had a long time to think about all this. And while it's truly important that these famous men are talking about the crisis in teenage boys, what they're really talking about is something even more painful.

Because this isn't a crisis in teenage boys. This is a crisis in adult men. This is a crisis in these boys' fathers.

To save the predictable, vexed responses of some super-online Centrist Dads, of course there are many fathers who are parenting better now than at any other time in history. They hug, they do the school run, they talk about their emotions. On one hand, hurrah for all the good fathering! On the other hand, let me quote the comedian Chris Rock – whom Centrist Dads love – on this subject: "You're supposed to take care of your kids... What do you want, a cookie? You low-expectation-having motherf**er."

However, these exemplary fathers to one side, there are, largely, two kinds of father who have caused this teen crisis.

The first is the one we all know. He's the classic Bad Father. He's angry. He's abusive. He's violent. He's unable to talk about his emotions or give useful advice: an anxious son's confessions of fear will be met with a brisk, "Man up, kid."

In both the worst, and most common, scenario, he simply isn't there at all. The Centre for Social Justice's incendiary



Never mind 'bad' fathers. Let's talk about 'good' dads who don't spend time with their sons, while Andrew Tate is available for them 24/7

Lost Boys report published what qualifies, I think, as one of the most depressing sentences of 2025: "Boys are more likely now to own a smartphone than to live with their dad."

We know this is a bad father. What's wrong is blaming everything on him.

Because the second kind of father is far less discussed. He's a "good" dad. He's not violent, angry or abusive. He's *there*. Just... not enough.

I know one dad who's very passionate about being a good dad. He's formed a group with other dads dedicated to being good fathers. This group meets every other Saturday to discuss being a good dad – *while playing golf all day*.

Meanwhile, his exhausted wife is at home parenting their son.

This man is *so close* to being a good father. The only thing he's *not* doing is "spending Saturday with his teenage boy".

As a father, imagine how much more you need to do to make a bigger impact on your son's life than Andrew Tate. Tate is available for your son 24/7. He's posting 20 times a day. He's naming every grievance and confusion your son has and then providing a solution to them. He's telling him his future is great so long as he simply goes to the gym, invests in cryptocurrency and blames all his problems on mouthy women and "wokeness". All your son's friends at school know who Andrew Tate is. They don't know who you are. And you don't know who Tate is. But he knows every button to press in your son and, while you're at your job, he's at his. Being the furious cuckoo in the nest of your family.

Adolescence's key strength is that... there are no "bad fathers" in it. Stephen Graham is a loving father. So is the cop investigating the case, played by Ashley Walters. It's just neither of them realises that there is a war raging for who *actually* gets to bring up 21st-century boys.

"We thought he was safe, in his room," Graham's wife sobs, in the last episode. "But he was in there, alone – with his computer."

And that's the *real* crisis. Good dads who are spending less time with their sons than Andrew Tate is. Men who need to knock on the door – *right now* – go into that room, finally see what, and *whom*, their sons are spending their evenings with.

They are the only ones who can teach them to question, analyse and, ultimately, *rebel* against this... stealing of our boys. ■

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What I've learnt Sarah Beeny

Presenter Sarah Beeny, 53, grew up in Hampshire and launched a property developing business with her brother and husband in her twenties. She has hosted TV shows including Property Ladder, Beeny's Restoration Nightmare and Sarah Beeny's New Life in the Country. She was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2022, and stars in The Great Celebrity Bake Off for Stand Up to Cancer. She lives on a former dairy farm in Somerset with her husband and four sons.

My mother died when I was ten. It was much too early. When you're young, the only way you can deal with things is to move on. It made me resilient. I wouldn't change it, even though it's very sad, because my life wouldn't be where it is. I probably wouldn't be married to Graham. I might have a better husband, who knows? But I like the one I've got.

It's hard to watch someone you love in pain.

My dad was in pain. [Her late father had dementia.] I was like, this is not going to get better. This is a one-way trip. It's difficult to watch. It's the most tragic thing. Whatever you say, they don't believe you. So when you say, "I am your daughter," they're like, "No, you're not." He was really bad when his stroke happened. People react in different ways when they're fearful, but he was a little bit aggressive.

The void of positive male role models has been filled with really toxic male role models.

When did it become socially acceptable to idolise really toxic opinions? Young boys are prepared to say, "Yeah, I really like this." I don't worry about it so much with my sons, because I'm quite an opinionated mother with a lot to say.

When my dad died, I was half-relieved for him. I got the call from my stepmother, and thought, I'll let this box open. It's probably the biggest breakdown I've had. I ended up going to hospital. I said, "I might be having a stroke. But also, my dad has just died and I just had chemotherapy."

They said, "You're actually fine. You just need a cup of tea." Losing your parents is hard, but it's the natural order of things.

My sons have all got dyslexia. The school they moved to was one of the leading dyslexia schools. One of my sons has ADHD as well. I knew when he was two. He sees the world through a slightly different pair of glasses.

When we were young, everybody threw the words "I love you" around. Six minutes later, they'd split up. My husband and I laughed about it, so we never said it. Once or twice I have accidentally said it. But he teased me so much. We've been together for 35 years. The sentiment is there, just not those words. It's a standing joke between us. We say other things that are more sentimental. We're not very Hallmark Cards.



PORTRAIT Nicky Johnston

'My husband and I have been together 35 years but never said, "I love you." It's a standing joke'

INTERVIEW Georgina Roberts

The odd person on social media called my sons "entitled". It's amazing that people can extrapolate opinions out of not knowing somebody at all. They thought, if they're going to call us that, we'll call our band the Entitled Sons to shut them up. Managers said, "You need to change the name," but it got big quickly and it was a bit late to change it. I thought, own it and go for it. **I didn't die because of the research that's happened since my mother died [in 1982].**

When I had cancer, I met a few people who had terminal cancer. They had felt a lump in their breast, but didn't go to the doctor because they were scared they had cancer. That is so sad. If you think you've got something wrong, go to the doctor, because many cancers now are curable. **I was concerned by the amount of tutoring**

that goes on in London. People are pushing really young children who should be outside playing with a stick, not having maths tutoring. We moved [to Somerset] because there was much less pressure.

The farmers' tax seems to be quite a spiteful tax. We are going to drive people out of farming. This [her house, on a farm] is not a tax dodge. I'm not leaving it to my children. It is definitely not a way of getting out of paying inheritance tax.

You never get the "all clear". They never say, "You have no cancer." You go back to being the same as everyone else, which is not knowing if you've got cancer or not.

I like to sweep all the trauma of my life under a carpet. But that catches up with you every now and then. ■

The Great Celebrity Bake Off for Stand Up to Cancer is on Sundays at 7.40pm on Channel 4 and channel4.com



Official Fuel Economy Figures for the Range Rover Sport 25MY Plug-In Electric Hybrid range in mpg (l/100km) miles (kilometres) 45.7-48.9 (28.4 - 30.4). CO₂ emissions (weighted combined) in g/km: 17 - 20. Equivalent all-25MY range (excluding PHEV) in mpg (l/100km): Combined 39.4-36.1 (7.2-7.8). WLTP CO₂ Emissions 188-205 g/km. charged battery. For comparison purposes only. Real world figures may differ. CO₂, fuel economy, energy load, wheel fitment, accessories fitted, actual route and battery condition.

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A fan on the race track at Jeddah Corniche circuit



A spectator at the Jeddah Formula 1 circuit





EMILY MAITLIS

A former prime minister tells me:
**‘I have the Saudi ruler MBS’s
number. If anything goes
horribly wrong, just text me.’
Should I be alarmed?**

When the presenter and podcaster booked a last-minute minibreak to Saudi Arabia – with a tip from a friend ‘not to go full burqa’ – she wondered if she’d done the right thing. Would she be convinced that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s kingdom had changed from a brutally repressive regime to a holiday hotspot for westerners?

We are in Kuuro. It's a dimly lit, too hip to handle Peruvian-Japanese fusion bar and restaurant. The decor is Inca bamboo; the drinks arrive with dark red ice sculptures the size of tennis balls that deliver flavour as they melt. The waiting staff all speak

Spanish and enthuse about the freshness of the ceviche and the yuzu wasabi dressing on the crab salad. In one corner of our table, they place a tiny metal barbecue and show us how to crisp individual sheets of nori seaweed that we will shortly be rolling up into our own scallop temaki. The clientele is young, rich, immaculate and injected – groups of women taking selfies. The soundtrack is multilingual.

And this, this here, is my first night in Saudi Arabia.

The trip has been planned in haste. A snatched three-day visit – flying one evening through the night after work – with a son, Max, scooped up to be my male companion, after finishing his mock A-levels. It is somewhere between an adventure and an experiment. Could we get visas in time? Could we make a long weekend feel like a holiday? More critically, could I reconcile everything I thought I knew about Saudi – the regime, its treatment of journalists, women, foreign labourers – with a place I wanted to hang out?

The first conversations I have about Saudi before I leave are – bizarrely – with two former British prime ministers. Separate events. Two weeks apart. The first tells me they have never seen anything quite like the Saudi growth experiment before. “It’s a breakneck speed. The Saudis will make mistakes, inevitably, but it’s all rather impressive.” The second PM tells me the place will blow my mind, then adds, “I have MBS’s cellphone number – if anything goes horribly wrong, just text me.”

MBS is Mohammed bin Salman, crown prince and the centre, really, of the Saudi metaverse.

I can’t tell whether to find the offer alarming or reassuring.

I apply for the visas online two weeks before my flight. There are myriad websites – all commercial. I choose the second least expensive that gets the best ratings on Trustpilot and has its own app to download on your phone. I wonder if I’m being rash as I throw them data, nearly £300 and a jpeg that is very much an old publicity shot from work and not remotely a passport photo. But with comedy speed, the visas are approved that very afternoon, and pop up in the app – like a wallet on my phone. It is a far cry from my trip to Iran eight years ago,

which required an in-person trip to the unofficial embassy, an interview, a headscarf and several delays. It’s only after my flights are booked and unchangeable that I find I will be in Saudi as Ramadan begins.

There is no *Lonely Planet* guide to Saudi. Or not yet. Which is, frankly, thrilling. Instead, I book a hotel in the centre of Jeddah, the Shirvan, and the duty manager there, Anas, becomes my go-to guide and all-round guardian angel. “Can women travellers use the pool?” “Is there food available during Ramadan?” “Can I leave the hotel on my own?” “Is Medina outlawed for non-Muslims or just Mecca?” He patiently answers each question I fire off through the booking.com messaging system.

In the end, we will never even meet.

My wardrobe is chosen with inordinate precision. The tip from a friend is not to go “full burqa”. All that has now changed, they tell me, and I shouldn’t arrive there looking like a parody. Jeddah is conservative but chic – so in the end I opt for khaki tailored combats, wide Me+Em jeans, buttoned-up cream silk blouses, a Dries Van Noten floor-length coat and a wide silk headscarf in matching stone. Heels for night, trainers by day. But I also add in an *abaya* – a black, floor-length robe that covers everything except the face. And it will be a lifesaver for all those moments I want to disappear anonymously into the old city. Hair bundled behind a severe black line. It will also transport me from my hotel room to the gym pool area and back – without revealing an inch of flesh, bikini dripping innocently underneath.

The first day has been spent getting lost in Al-Balad. It’s the only bit of Jeddah left that looks like... well, like a tourist would imagine a Saudi city would look. It’s full of cobbled streets, coffee shops and the wizened faces of Saudi elders. We see entire lambs hanging in the butchers’ quarter, gold shops selling hookahs, *Aladdin*-style oil lamps and precious stones. Everyone there is traditionally dressed, head to toe. I am in my black garb, like a curled-over comma, with Max complaining he has to identify me by my Prada handbag in the sea of scuttling women. It is not until much later I will clock that no one is trying to sell us anything. We are left entirely alone. An unusual feeling in a Middle Eastern market.

**I’m in my black garb.
My son says he can
only identify me by
my Prada handbag**

Riyadh, Saudi Arabia



At 1pm there is a sudden rush of movement towards a doorway. We follow and join the line which pushes us forward into Al Basali. Without even realising it, we will end up having lunch in a Jeddah institution and the most famous seafood restaurant in the country. We queue up with the locals and point at our chosen dead fish, eyeballs and all, which is then whisked away and served up with chips and green sauce. Upstairs we see photos of the owner with Rafa Nadal and footballers Kaka, Del Piero and John Terry. I somehow doubt they had to go to the same lengths we did to find the Arabic for “grilled not fried”.

That evening, Jeddah comes to a standstill with five lanes of snarled-up traffic. It’s basically like being back in London. Uber is omnipresent. The prices identical. The Toyota Corolla takes the place of the ubiquitous Prius. We arrive late at Kuuro, greeting Saudi friends there. And it’s only when we are shown the mocktail menu that I remember we are guests in a sovereign Islamic state – where alcohol is completely banned.

There is so much to ask about the Saudi project, and it’s here, finally, with my headscarf slipping from my face, that I get to try.

“You have to understand the rules,” our host, Fadi, explains. “MBS is saying to the population of Saudi, ‘I’m going to ringfence politics. You can’t touch politics. But everything else is on the table. If it’s culture you want, you can have culture. Sports? Footballers? Formula 1? Education, contraception, liberalisation for women? Infrastructure? They are all places where change can happen.’”

What does he mean, “liberalisation



Seven years on from Khashoggi's murder, Saudi is no longer feeling apologetic

democracies that have been our European staple. But for the first time, I am beginning to see how this could be turned on its head. Would you call this a liberal autocracy, I ask. And our host nods emphatically. That's exactly what it is. The country wants to open markets and tourism, and radically change its citizens' lives. It will throw money at everything.

As long as Saudis never question who's actually in charge.

Saudi will host the Asian Winter Games in 2029 (with fake snowy mountains) and the Fifa World Cup in 2034 with unbridled levels of air conditioning. (Aramco, Saudi Arabia's national oil company, is pouring \$1.3 billion into sports deals.)

elections is a vanishingly small 6 per cent, according to a study last month by Kings College London. We still pride ourselves on our democratic institutions. But ask the question a different way – would you personally live somewhere with no free and fair elections – and the answer increasingly is yes. John Mason, the international removal company, cites a 45 per cent surge in the 12 months to March last year of UK nationals wanting to move to Dubai; over the past five years, it's a 420 per cent rise. Dubai isn't Saudi. But it almost is. An autocratic regime where the ruler is the absolute monarch and has sole executive power. Those who move to Dubai talk about the low taxes, high energy and the nice weather. Not their inability to vote.

Over the course of the next few days we will see the Jeddah Biennale – an extraordinary showcase of ancient Islamic scripture and Frieze-style contemporary art – all displayed in the Hajj terminal of the airport, where pilgrims wait, camp and pray before travelling to Mecca. We will visit the Corniche – yachts on one side, F1 track on the other – and feel like we've found Monaco with mosques. And we will return to our excellent hotel to find, every evening, ten new miniature bottles of free water, even though the tap water is (googled it) safe to drink.

Slowly I find myself caring less about my floor-length clothes (cumbersome as that makes any attempt to go running) and more about the amount of plastic filling the bins, which are only nominally for recycling. Saudi is the biggest consumer of household air conditioning – a reported 73 per cent of residents keep their AC on year-round for ten hours a day – and the fourth largest consumer of oil in the world. The traffic jams are a constant reminder there is no public transport system in Jeddah. I'm wondering if we even saw a bus the whole time.

And this is a land with no permanent rivers or lakes – desert conditions won't allow them. It has the world's largest desalination plant. But there's currently no widescale attempt to conserve water. This is what a country looks like when it's giddy on growth – a heady mix of limitless energy (both types) and wild ambition. “You want snow in 50C? I'll give you snow. You want Ronaldo? I'll bring you the actual World Cup.” You want world diplomacy? A meeting there between Trump and Vladimir Putin is on the cards. It's all happening fast. Maybe too fast.

Our last day there is Ramadan. The row of coffee shops behind our hotel falls silent. The Baker & Spice brunch spot is shut until 6pm. Religion, it seems, is perhaps the only thing that can still bring this country to a commercial full stop. I wonder if I'll be back in Saudi. And if I'll still need a headscarf next time I come. ■



A fashion event in Jeddah

for women?” “Look around [he takes my shoulder]. These women are single. They're on dating apps. They're out with friends or alone in places like this. You,” he says, “are just about the only woman in here with your head covered.”

It's something that wouldn't have been possible five years ago. Alcohol will be served in these restaurants, he believes, within a year or so. Partly to combat what the state knows is a growing drugs problem; partly because they want the tourism, and the tourism won't properly flour until the wine does.

We talk a lot in the age of Trump about “illiberal democracy” – people voting for hardline governments, like Orban in Hungary and Erdogan in Turkey – because they've decided they're more effective than the much vaunted liberal

The government has faced accusations of sportswashing, but they have mostly fallen on deaf ears. “If sportswashing is going to increase my GDP by 1 per cent, then we'll continue,” MBS told one interviewer. And this perhaps gets to the heart of it. Seven years on from the horrific murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi – who was a vocal thorn in the side of the regime – Saudi is no longer feeling apologetic. It's feeling lit. It wants the world to notice it – and invest in it. And, critically, it wants its own people to be content enough that democracy never becomes a question.

Can you buy off people from democracy, I wonder. In the UK, despite scaremongering surveys in recent months, the number of Gen Z who would actually choose a dictator over parliamentary



‘A FRIEND BET ME A
BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE
TO ASK BILL CLINTON
ABOUT ORAL SEX’

Last year the BBC veteran David Dimbleby lost his youngest brother to motor neurone disease and was himself very ill. But with a new podcast and a documentary series about the monarchy, the doyen of British broadcasting is back on form – and as opinionated as ever. Andrew Billen meets him at home in London

David Dimbleby
photographed by
Jude Edginton at his
home in London



Fig. 1

42% of marriages
end in divorce



Fig. 2

59% of Jazz drivers
buy another Jazz

You may fall out of love
but never with a Jazz



Fig. 1

Based on ONS data. '42% of marriages end in divorce by their 26th anniversary' of those reaching their anniversary in 2022.

Fig. 2

Based on Honda sales data. Of 3,291 people who purchased a new Jazz in 2024, 1,929 owned a different Jazz some time in the past.



David, right, with his father, the BBC broadcaster Richard Dimbleby, his mother and younger siblings in 1953



With his first wife, Josceline, and, from left, their children Liza, Henry and Kate, 1973



The one good thing about growing old, most agree, is that it is strikingly better than the alternative. The morning I meet David Dimbleby in his London townhouse, the BBC's greatest living current affairs presenter is, however, thinking about the alternative. This evening he will introduce

the Richard Dimbleby Lecture, named after his father, once himself the corporation's face and voice at the big occasions: Queen Elizabeth's coronation; Churchill's funeral; four of the general elections between 1950 and 1964. Sixty years ago this December, he died of cancer aged only 52. So there's that. But last year David's 77-year-old brother, the sculptor Nicholas Dimbleby, died agonisingly of motor neurone disease. Soon afterwards David also fell ill and he thought the end was nigh and made a will – although, of course, most 86-year-olds would have done so long before.

If you are David Dimbleby, however, there is one other upside to ageing: when you present a series about significant figures in modern history, you probably once interviewed most of them. This is certainly the case with *Invisible Hands*, his new six-parter for Radio 4's *The History Podcast* slot. It charts the rise in the mid-Seventies of the cult of free-market capitalism. Its most famous exponent was Margaret Thatcher, whom Dimbleby quizzed on many occasions, once drawing from her an apology for referring to the “drool and drivel” of those who lamented the high unemployment her policies initially generated. But he also lunched in Munich with Friedrich Hayek, author of *The Road to Serfdom*, the book on state tyranny that Thatcher devoured as a student, quizzed the right-wing American economist Milton Friedman “in a snowstorm in Chicago”, and interviewed Keith Joseph, Thatcher's distinctly odd,

‘I look all right now, don't I? But I had a bad summer. I did think about death, arranging things’



driven economic guru, nicknamed “the mad monk”. Was he mad?

“No, not at all mad. He was called the mad monk because he was out on a limb, outside the main Tory way of thinking of things. I think the real point is that theory is all very well, but in the end it's the energy and drive of individuals that make things happen.”

When it comes to energy and drive, Dimbleby, for all his on-air unflappability, embodies it still. We talk across his kitchen table, cluttered with notes, his mobile phone (momentarily lost under a pile), his laptop, a book about his father and printouts of *Invisible Hands* scripts. He looks, despite last year's scare, very well, and is agile. When an Amazon man arrives with two big boxes that turn out not to be for him, he bends down to lift one off the doorstep and hands it back (perhaps it was one of those grandiose Amazon parcels that contain only a toothbrush or something).

Is it work that keeps him young?

“I don't know if it's kept me young. It's kept me going. I mean, to be truthful, it

has always been the one thing that I put first in my life because I always enjoyed it. And probably above everything.”

It's good to hear, but I also wonder how his first wife of 26 years, the food writer Josceline Dimbleby, and his second, Belinda Giles, a film-maker turned therapist for whom he left Josceline, would feel reading that – or his four children, who include the food campaigner Henry and his young half-brother, Fred, forging a career at ITV News. Actually, they might disagree. Josceline was hurt by the divorce and spoke about it to the press, but in a Sunday Times Relative Values interview still called David a “wonderful father” who had made plenty of time for their children. In the same piece, Henry mentioned how tactile his father was: “All the Dimbleby men kiss and hug all the time.”

But when will Belinda, who is 66, get some quiet time with her husband?

“When she stops work too. That's the deal. And then we'll sit there saying, ‘Uh, didn't we have rather interesting lives before this? Shall we go and pick them up again?’”

His other project is three films for the BBC on the monarchy – one on its power, one on its finances and one on its image. This is an interesting commission because in *Keep Talking*, his 2022 memoir of a life in broadcasting, the man who masterfully narrated Princess Diana's funeral called the palace's relationship with the BBC “incestuous” and complained it never scrutinised the head of state. Most editors would reward such candour with the boot, but the BBC does not quite work like that.

“I saw the director-general [Tim Davie] and I said, ‘It's all very well you let things happen like the Diana interview, or the Andrew interview, which are one-offs. But you never look at the institution. ➤”

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And it's a very important institution. Why don't we do an examination of how it works, whether it's on the right track, where it's going to go?' And they said, 'All right. Do it.'

During the mourning between the late queen's death and her interment, I read an early copy of *Keep Talking* and marvelled. It was due to be published after the funeral. Had it emerged earlier, I wrote in my review for *The Times*, I thought the BBC would have had to drop him from its commentary team. Dimpleby later said on the radio I was talking rubbish. And yet, I note, he was not among the BBC coronation team the following summer. Newspapers speculated he had refused because he would not be its lead presenter. Was he offered the gig or not?

"No. I wasn't asked."

Because of what he had written?

"No. I don't think so. I was very, very conflicted about the coronation because [the 1953 one] was a great peak of my father's career. I even have the book – it's upstairs – of his commentary. I read it through and I thought, 'But how could I do it without saying these same words? It would be crazy.'"

But why didn't they ask? Did they know he was conflicted?

"I've no idea. I think one reason is that the tradition of a discrete event had given way to kind of blanket wall-to-wall coverage with reporters everywhere. And perhaps my voice and way of doing it wouldn't fit in. I don't know. But I did say to Charlotte Moore [then the BBC's chief content officer] that I was very upset about not being invited, but then I said that I didn't really want to do it."

So he was upset?

"I wasn't upset not to do it. I was glad I didn't do it. I went to Paris. I was upset not to be asked. That's different from accepting."

In 2018, shortly after his 80th birthday, Dimpleby voluntarily retired after 25 years from his main gig presenting *Question Time*. At the same time he gave up anchoring election nights – he did ten of them (1979–2017) – because he regarded his weekly outings round the country "picking up the vibes" as his homework for the big night. His successor on the 2019 general election results programme was Huw Edwards, but for reasons we all know he did not do another. For the July 2024 count the BBC used two anchors, Clive Myrie and Laura Kuenssberg. What did he think of the programme?

"Let me say it very simply. I think for an event like that, when so much is happening so fast and when you're moving from one studio to another, out to the country, back to a commentator, back to a politician, back to results, back to a scoreboard, you can only do it with one person. It's fatal to have two people.



'I've had an absolutely charmed life,' he says. 'I can't pretend to be what I'm not'



Above: with his second wife, Belinda Giles, 2019. Top: at Oxford, when editor of student magazine *The Isis*

"I mainly watched ITN. Tom Bradby. Which was fine except he had some awkward thing where he had to walk across the studio all the time, which again was weird grammar. I mean, the thing about an election and the role of the anchor is that he's always there, always on top of the story, always driving the thing. It [the BBC programme] just didn't have that kind of zip."

In fact, we were lucky to have had Dimpleby even for the 2005 election. He revealed in his memoir that in 2004, when he was 66, a senior executive lunched him in an expensive restaurant and advised him that he would be removed from his television duties and relegated to radio. Dimpleby was "not entirely happy about" that. A few weeks later he accepted an award at a Media Society event where the BBC's new director-general, Mark Thompson, spoke in his praise. Afterwards

Dimpleby thanked him, adding it was all very well but "that man over there has just sacked me".

"And so he said, 'Come and have lunch.' And he said, 'You can do it for as long as you like.' And I said, 'Great! I can choose the moment of my departure.'"

Today he names "that man" as Mark Damazer, then the deputy director of BBC News. But he has no complaint about him. He was just "the mouthpiece" for another executive, an espouser of "the cult of youth". So after our encounter I contact that executive and they absolutely deny any involvement in the attempted putsch, declaring themselves a "staunch Dimpleby fan". Damazer, when I speak to him, remembers the embarrassment of that lunch, however. He was acting on behalf of "four or five" executives who wanted Dimpleby removed in favour of a younger man. Damazer strongly disagreed – "It was thoroughly bonkers" – and finally persuaded the cabal to commission opinion research, which duly revealed Dimpleby to be one of the BBC's four best-liked presenters. A scrappy compromise emerged that would have ousted him from *Question Time* but kept him for elections. But then Thompson became DG and Dimpleby's reign on both programmes continued.

Damazer draws an interesting lesson, however: "Had David's surname been Smith he would have been better appreciated." For, of course, his detractors' original complaint, back in the Sixties, was that Dimpleby was Richard's son. The nepotism charge was unsustainable, as David was clearly a natural, but at that time the surname "Dimpleby" towed not only connotations of "posh" but of the decade's ultimate source of deprecation, "establishment". There was ammunition available. After Richard's death, David took over the running of the family's newspaper, the *Richmond & Twickenham Times*. He was hardly a press magnate but in the early Eighties, during an industrial dispute, he was boycotted by the journalists' union. He sold the title with relief in 2001 for several million pounds and "had money for the first time".

Interviewing him on the *Today* programme in 2018, John Humphrys baldly accused him of being "quite posh". Dimpleby was not going to take that and the two minutes that ensued suggested real animus between the Charterhouse alumnus and the Cardiff grammar-school boy.

"There wasn't animus at all," Dimpleby insists. "I said to him, 'I'm Welsh, like you – that's a sign of not being posh.' And afterwards, when the interview was done, I said to him, 'John, you forgot I went to Christ Church [Oxford] and I was a member of the Bullingdon. Why didn't you raise that?' and he said, 'Oh, damn it!'"

"Let's be very simple. I've absolutely had a charmed life in that way. Of course" ■

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'I think the right to die should be there. I'm a rationalist and I'm an atheist'

I have. I went to a public school. I went to Christ Church. I did belong to the Bullingdon Club. I did have a lot of fun. I did drink champagne. I did enjoy myself. And I've been blessed in all sorts of ways. I can't pretend to be what I'm not. But equally I'm not in favour of the things that might be thought to go along with that. I'm against the honours system. I've refused that."

Which honour?

"I'm not going to say it. Put it like this, I told Robin Day he shouldn't have taken a knighthood. For a very simple reason: you can't be full of yourself if you're a broadcaster. You're connecting with people. I'm speaking to probably two or three people in a room, not millions. It's a very down-to-earth business."

In 1980, when I was a student at his old college, I phoned Dimpleby for a piece about a row over his editorship of the university magazine, *The Isis*, 20 years before. The magazine's owners, Holywell Press, had parachuted him in as editor because they were sick of the extreme leftism of the outgoing incumbent, Kenith Trodd (later the playwright Dennis Potter's long-time producer). Staff who refused to write for Dimpleby sent him a copy of a rival magazine they had started with a note "from some of us who've chosen neither to forgive nor forget". "I suppose we became part of the centrist, liberal consensus," Dimpleby told me, but his editions seemed lively enough to me, with contributions from Richard Ingrams, Auberon Waugh and Peter Jay.

"I ran into Kenith Trodd only once subsequently, in the BBC at the lifts," he recalls now. "And he was completely friendly after all that, but I had a cover that I've lost, sadly, of me with a bulldozer, bulldozing the whole history of *The Isis*."

The next time I spoke to Dimpleby was more than two decades later when I was on a panel he was chairing at a documentary festival. There was a big restaurant dinner the night before. Dimpleby arrived late, having been (poshly) driven to Sheffield from his main home in East Sussex. He immediately became the loudest and most irreverent voice at the table. That day another BBC presenter had thrown an off-air tantrum and Dimpleby was among those encouraging me to phone *The Times* with the story (which sadly had by then already appeared online). Waiters were piling chairs on tables by the time we left and the next morning, when the session's producer solicitously asked whether Dimpleby wanted anything, he replied, "Only to go back to bed." But of course he chaired it brilliantly.

So I was surprised to read his claim in an interview in *The Sunday Times* two

years ago that he hardly has any friends.

"I got my comeuppance because a gratifying number of people wrote to me and said, 'What do you mean? I'm your friend!' I think it was a hangover from earlier days at Oxford and the years after, when I was very much in the London social world and used to go to parties and all that sort of thing. I don't do that at all now. I have very discreet things I like to do, like going to the opera, going to music and going to the cinema. People my generation don't give parties."

They give funerals instead?

"Memorial services," he corrects me (which you could read as an admission that his friends are posh enough to have earned them).

But how "establishment" is Dimpleby really? Commentating on the 1969 state visit to Britain by President Nixon, his bosses dressed him down for referring to "expensively hired press secretaries whose job is to disguise the truth". A question in his interview with Harold Wilson for a programme called *Yesterday's Men* so enraged the former prime minister (it was about how much he had made in serialisation rights for his new book) that the BBC's governors excised the exchange from the film and Dimpleby took his name off the credits. Much later, in 2004, he dared ask Bill Clinton about his infamous denial that he had "sexual relations" with Monica Lewinsky, who had retained the physical evidence of oral sex with him. Did, Dimpleby inquired, oral sex not count as sexual relations?

"That was a bet actually, the oral sex thing," he says.

A bet?

"Yes. A friend of mine said, 'I bet you a bottle of champagne you won't ask him about that.' And I said, 'I bet you I do.' It didn't go down too well."

Did he dread asking it?

"No, no. Not at all."

I dread it when I have a difficult question to ask an interviewee, I tell him.

"What's your difficult question?"

My difficult question is whether Dimpleby meant it when he said somewhere that he kept working because he hated thinking about death.

"Did I say that? I think about death all the time. I was quite ill last year and I began writing wills and making arrangements: 'Let us sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings.' Then I recovered and now I'm fine."

What was wrong? He shrugs. "I lost a lot of weight. I look all right now, don't I? But I had a bad summer. So, I did seriously think about death and arranging things."

And, I say, Nicholas died.

"My brother died last year. Motor neurone disease. Absolutely horrible. Hideous death. Because a) it's inevitable – you know when you get MND there's no cure for it; and b) you don't know how long it's going to be before you die. You gradually wither away. So over a period of a year he went from being able to talk, then gradually losing his voice, losing any physical control and then having to make signs. Knowing he was dying. It was terrible. And you can do nothing. There's no cure. There's no treatment."

"It was the most terrible thing. He couldn't eat because he'd choke, so he was fed through his stomach with a pump. He'd come to meals when he was still able to walk around and sit and put his phial of artificial food on the table when everybody else was eating stew and potatoes and say, 'I'm going to have this.' And then he'd feed himself through this thing. It's a hideous, hideous illness."

Their other brother, the historian Jonathan Dimpleby, said at the time he was in favour of legalising assisted dying. Is David?

"I am. I think the right to die should be there because I'm a rationalist and I'm an atheist. I believe you have the right to die, like you have the right to kill yourself through suicide. It's an absolute right. But it is difficult. I mean, my brother's case is the only one I can think of where I've known somebody who would have certainly qualified for assisted dying. But I remember seeing him about a month before he died and he was not speaking really at all. He was sitting by a window in his house – he lived in east Devon – and he looked up and he sort of pointed. I said, 'What?' and he said, 'Birds. Birds.' And what he was looking at was a wonderful flight of rooks or starlings, swirling around."

"I just wonder how many people would really go for it. I think there's nothing else. When you're dead, you're dead. Do you say, 'I want to kill myself'? Or do you say, 'But tomorrow I could see my grandchildren again?' 'I could see a sunrise...'"

I can imagine him hanging on just to find out who won that night's by-election or whether that bill passed.

"Yes," he says. "What did happen to Nigel Farage?"

He may be presenting a history podcast, but for David Dimpleby the rest is not history but what's next. Like the man himself, it is a question that can never really get old. Our morning ends with a hug. ■

The History Podcast: *Invisible Hands* is available on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Sounds

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Kayla Barnes-Lentz, 34, and
her husband, Warren, 36,
photographed by Jonas Gaida

Before their first date, biohacker Kayla Barnes, below, asked her future husband for his gut, toxin and nutrient levels. He passed. They're part of a health-obsessed generation who want to live beyond 100 – whatever it takes. Sarah Rainey reports



When Kayla Barnes met her husband-to-be, Warren Lentz, on the dating app Raya in spring 2023, the chemistry was instant.

Within a month, their relationship had progressed to flirty FaceTimes and late-night texts confessing their hopes and dreams.

But before they met face to face – she was based in Cleveland; he in California – there was one thing Kayla insisted upon: a detailed assessment of Warren's health, including checks on his gut, analysis of the toxins in his body, his nutrient levels and risk of inflammation.

It's hardly the stuff of Hollywood romance, but to Kayla, 34, this was the ultimate test of their compatibility. When Warren, 36, said yes without hesitation (and passed with flying colours), she knew he was the one.

Two years on, the pair are happily married – and leading exactly the sort of ultra-healthy lifestyle you might imagine for a couple who exchanged bodily biometrics before their first kiss.

For Barnes-Lentz, a wellness clinic CEO, has built her life around biohacking – the practice of reverse-engineering the ageing process – and spends every waking moment honing her body and mind to ensure absolute perfection.

Though the life expectancy for women in the US is about 80, Barnes-Lentz hopes to live past 120 – and even, if she's lucky, make it to 150.

"For me, health is the foundation of building an incredible life," she says. "Sure, I think we can live to 150-plus, but it's also about feeling great every day, having a sharp mindset and good focus, and being there for the people I love.

"I think that everyone deserves to get the most out of life, and to do that you have to feel good. To feel good, you have to put the work in."

By "work", she means a rigorous daily routine in which every minute is accounted for – and specifically designed to benefit her health, fitness and overall wellness.

There's no hitting "snooze" on that alarm clock; no scrolling distractedly on her phone; no biscuits, booze or Netflix binges. Instead, Barnes-Lentz's day centres around pulsed electromagnetic field therapy, hyperbaric oxygen sessions and intranasal photobiomodulation.

And in her quest for eternal youth – not to mention the dewy skin and glossy hair of a teenager – she's far from alone.

Social media abounds with routine queens, all espousing the benefits of daily scheduled health and wellness habits designed to make you feel better, look younger – and live longer.

While not all are as regimented as Barnes-Lentz, biohacking has become the

buzzword of the moment, with advocates resorting to ever more extreme measures – some of them grounded in science, others decidedly wackier – in a bid to reverse-age their cells.

Whereas once it was enough for the wellness tribe to start their day with lemon water, drink plenty of green juice and remember to exfoliate in the shower, now we should be thinking about lymphatic drainage, oxygenating the blood and detoxifying the liver – and own at least one red-light therapy device to stimulate cellular regeneration.

Take Coral Golding, 38, a mum of two and lifestyle influencer from Brighton, who starts her day before sunrise, scrapes her tongue to get rid of toxins and practises breathing meditation in front of an infrared light panel. At night, she applies mouth tape and nose strips to aid sleep and puts a rejuvenating castor oil pack around her stomach. She hosts a podcast, *Raise*, with her sister Natalie in which they discuss the benefits of using a weighted blanket and drinking raw milk.

Meanwhile Sarah Fraggis, 33, a Chicago-based skincare specialist, does all the above – as well as massaging her scalp with red light, standing on a vibrating platform for lymphatic drainage and spending 10-15 minutes walking barefoot outside to maintain her electrical connection with the earth.

Biohacking was once a very male space dominated by the likes of Bryan Johnson – the eccentric tech entrepreneur waging a one-man war against ageing – but has, of late, taken on a more feminine guise.

Served up on Instagram with glossy lips and a glimpse of toned abs in a Lululemon gym set, this is the sort of lifestyle purportedly led by successful entrepreneurial women we all wish we could be like.

"The tides are shifting and we're finally talking about longevity and women," says Barnes-Lentz, who has half a million online followers and a hugely successful podcast on "longevity optimisation".

"Some metrics are different for women – we need more sleep than men, and we experience stress at higher rates and in different ways – so it's important to take that into account when you're deciding what benefits you most on a daily basis."

She is, she insists, "somewhat flexible" when it comes to the times at which she does each activity, but never wavers from her routine, even on holidays, special occasions or birthdays. So if she lives her allotted 150 years, that's another 42,340 identical days.

Mad though it may sound to some, and impossible to others, one thing's for certain: when the year 2100 rolls around, none of the rest of us will be around to know whether it works – unless we start now.

Kayla Barnes-Lentz, 34, is a biohacking advocate, podcaster and owner of LYV The Wellness Space health spa in Cleveland. She lives with her husband, Warren, in Los Angeles (@kaylabarnes).

5.30am Most days, I wake naturally before the sunrise. I track my sleep on my Oura ring: these days I'm getting a score of 97-98, which is very high.

5.35am I start my oral health routine. I do tongue-scraping, brushing, flossing and oil-pulling – swilling oil around my mouth to reduce bacteria – with ozone oil, which has antifungal properties.

5.45am I drink a glass of filtered spring water with electrolytes – charged minerals to rehydrate me and improve muscle performance.

5.50am Mindset practice – I do this while using my PEMF (pulsed electromagnetic field therapy) machine, which emits pulses from a pad on my chair to stimulate and heal my cells.

I pray and read my Bible, do gratitude journalling or meditate. It's important to set my mind before the day sets it for me.

6.10am I go outside for 10-20 minutes of sun. This anchors my circadian rhythm, which controls the body's sleep-wake cycle. If it's still dark I just use my light therapy lamp, which mimics natural sunlight.

6.25am I make a protein coffee using half a cup of biodynamic organic coffee, a little organic coconut milk, 5g creatine (a muscle-boosting supplement), some colostrum and protein powder.

6.30am An hour at the gym. My workouts are built around longevity, so I alternate strength and cardio with mobility and stretching as well as VO₂ max, which improves the oxygen levels my body absorbs during exercise.

This involves four minutes of all-out running plus six minutes of recovery, repeated four times. Over 6 months, I took my cardiovascular age from 6 years below my actual age to 11.5 below, so it seems like it's working.

I do VO₂ max twice a week, once on a treadmill and once on a Carol bike, which uses AI-powered resistance. I optimise my workouts according to my menstrual cycle, so I dial things up in the follicular phase (days 1-14) and go easier on myself post-ovulation.

7.45am Next, I do my biometrics. I look at my sleep data and HRV (heart rate variability) for the previous day. I test my grip strength – which just hit 100 – lung health and blood pressure.

8am I jump on my Power Plate for five minutes. This uses whole-body vibrations to stimulate the muscles. It's good for my lymphatic system and helps with bone density too.

8.05am I get a delivery from an organic biodynamic farm every week, so I incorporate these ingredients into my



'My husband and I go to bed in a Faraday cage to keep out electromagnetic fields'

breakfast. It could be free-range eggs, salmon and fermented foods like sauerkraut or kimchi, as well as green vegetables with extra virgin olive oil.

I end with a coconut yoghurt with added collagen protein and blueberries. I'm aiming to eat 100g protein a day.

8.30am I shower in filtered water, turning it cold for a few minutes at the end. Twice a week I cold-plunge in my ice bath, which gives a dopamine hit and boosts my energy.

9am I structure my working day in 90-minute blocks. After each I take a break for 15-20 minutes, when I'll do some squats or jump on the vibration plate again.

10.30am I keep my biohacking gadgets at my desk so I can use them as I work. I have two red light caps – one to thicken

my hair and the other to improve focus – which I alternate. I sit on a biohacking Anthros chair, which helps my posture.

I also use intranasal photobiomodulation (i-PBMT), which is a red-light device in my nostrils to improve focus, and a NanoVi nasal cannula, which repairs cell damage.

I might look crazy sitting there with all these gadgets on, but to me it's normal.

Noon I don't snack during the day, nor do I have lunch. I drink spring water and, if I need a pick-me-up, it's loose-leaf organic green tea. I never use teabags because they contain microplastics.

2pm I take all my work calls while walking. I do at least 10,000-15,000 steps a day.

3pm Five times a week, I do a session in my hyperbaric oxygen chamber. The air

pressure inside is two to three times higher than normal, which increases oxygenation and improves blood flow. I spend an hour in there, reading or preparing for a podcast.

4pm My husband and I eat dinner together. It's early, but eating late reduces melatonin production and disrupts sleep. We get a microplastics-free fish delivery, so we usually eat seafood with vegetables or salad and lentils. A few nights a week we eat red meat or turkey.

We drink bone broth pre-dinner; it's a great additional protein for gut health.

4.40pm We spend 50 minutes walking in the Hollywood Hills, getting in more steps and catching up on our days. When we get home, we watch the sunset.

5.30pm We switch off all blue lights in our house – screens, smartphones, overhead lights – and turn on red lamps to promote better, deeper sleep.

6.30pm We have two saunas – a traditional one and a red-light one – and I spend 25 minutes in one of them each night. It aids relaxation and can reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. While in there, I do dry body brushing to help with lymphatic drainage.

7pm Time to wind down. I take a shower, cuddle my husband and we read – either separately or to one another.

8.30pm I brush my hair, do a brief skincare regime – a face wash and a few creams, including anti-ageing spermidine – before getting into bed. My husband and I sleep inside a Faraday cage, which is threaded with silver to keep out electromagnetic fields. Our home wi-fi switches off at 8pm but the neighbours' stays on, so this blocks everything.

Our sheets are organic cotton and we have blackout shades on the windows. I don't normally need sleep aids, but I might use a topical magnesium spray. Then I'm out like a light.

KAYLA BARNES-LENTZ'S £10,000 AT-HOME BIOHACKING KIT

Heavenly Heat sauna, from £5,000 (heavenlyheatsaunas.com). These have the lowest electromagnetic fields of any on the market.

Essentia organic mattress, from £900 (myessentia.com). This has improved my sleep immeasurably and comes with a 20-year warranty.

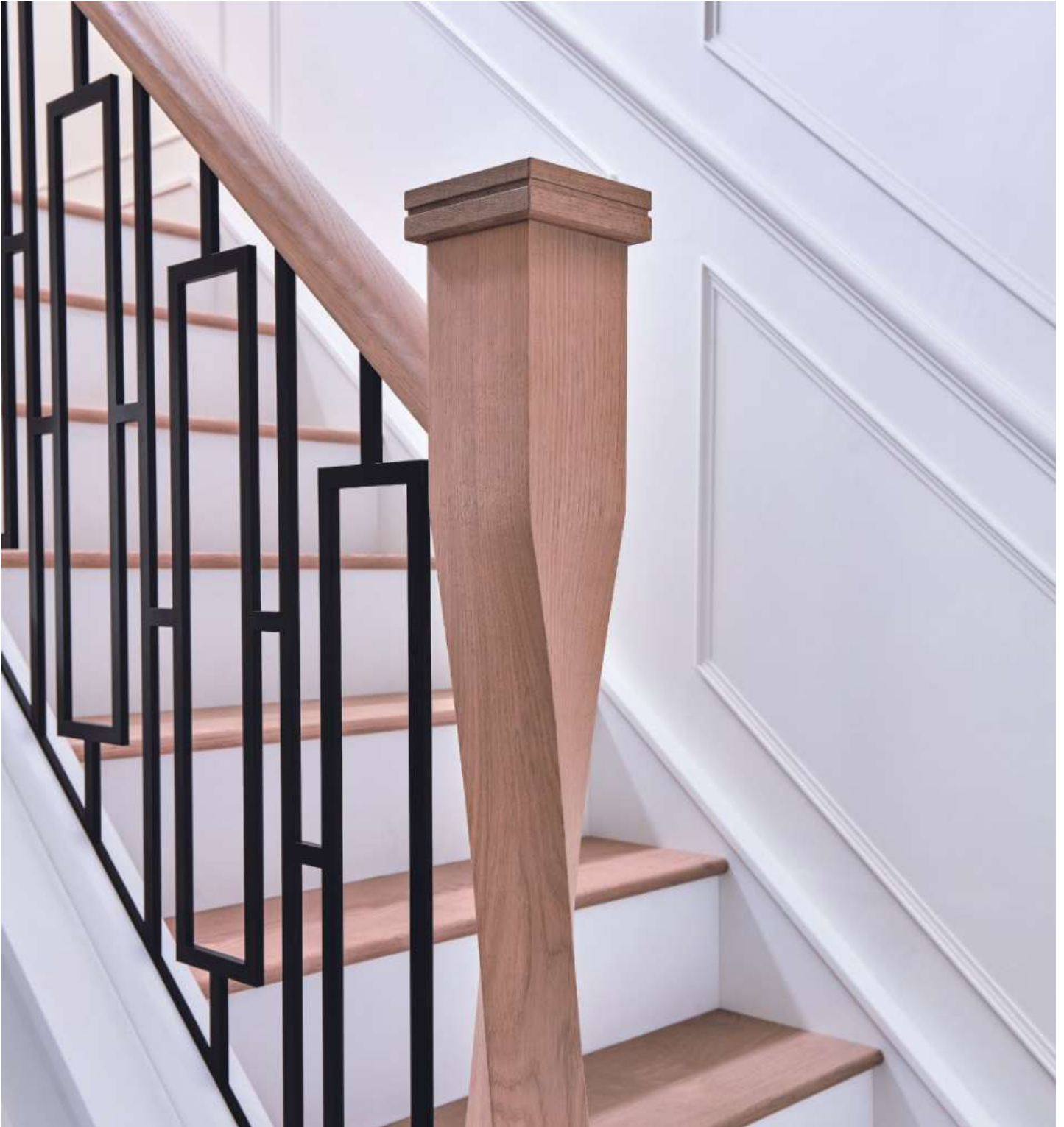
Power Plate vibration plate, £2,995 (powerplate.co.uk). Uses precision-wave technology to send tiny vibrations, up to 50 per second, through your body.

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Coral Golding, 38, is a biohacker, home schooling mum and co-host of the *Raise* podcast. She lives with her husband, Ally, and their two daughters in Brighton (@coral_pearl).

4.45am I started waking early a few years ago after reading Robin Sharma's *The 5am Club*. My husband gets up about the same time and goes to the gym.

First, I take off my mouth tape, which stops mouth-breathing and improves sleep quality. My daughters use it too.

I remove my collagen face mask, nasal strips (magnetic pads to open your nostrils) and a castor oil pack, which I wear around my stomach once or twice a week to help with detoxification.

4.50am I do a NAD+ injection (nicotinamide adenine dinucleotide), which is important for cellular rejuvenation and energising my skin.

5am I drink a glass of reverse-osmosis filtered water, kept at room temperature (20-25C). This is stripped clean of everything, so I add a few mineral drops.

5.05am I do my oral hygiene routine: brushing with probiotic hydroxyapatite toothpaste (to remineralise enamel); oil pulling with cold-pressed coconut oil for 10-20 minutes; and tongue-scraping with a copper scraper, which rids my body of toxins that have come out during the night.

While doing this, I tie a hairband around each ear – this helps with lymphatic drainage.

5.10am I dry-brush my body to improve circulation, then cold-shower for a few minutes. When I get out, I use a body gua sha, or massager, to smooth my skin.

5.30am Time for skincare. I always apply vitamin C and mineral sunscreen and I often do facial gua sha, which gets the fluids moving and gives you a glow.

5.40am Coffee must be mould and mycotoxin-free. I'll either have a bulletproof coffee, made with MCT powder – which keeps me in ketosis, a fasted state – oil and butter, or WillPowders bone broth protein, which is cacao-flavoured.

5.50am I sit in front of my infrared light panel. Sometimes I read or meditate. Or I'll use my radio-frequency facial device to tone my face. I might also use my vibration plate to help with lymphatic drainage or sit on my PEMF mat, which keeps me in tune with the earth's frequency.

6am Time-blocking my day. I write in my *Raise* journal, plan ahead and note three things I'm grateful for.

6.50am I'll make a second coffee and get some sunlight to regulate my circadian rhythm before my daughters wake at 7am. I make them a raw milk kefir smoothie before getting myself dressed and putting on my make-up.

9am When my husband gets home, I'll go for a walk – preferably uphill – for up to an hour.



Coral Golding photographed at Hart Shoreditch

'We sleep on grounding bedsheets, which keep us in harmony with the earth's frequency'

11am I home school one of my daughters – the eldest is now at secondary school – so our day depends on what we have planned. We stay outside as much as possible and often visit farm shops to pick up groceries.

1pm For lunch I eat some sort of protein, usually salmon, with courgette or butternut squash. We eat an animal-based diet: meat, raw dairy, raw honey, fruit, fish and eggs.

3pm Supplements are non-negotiable. I take vitamin C, glutathione, beef organ capsules and oyster capsules for cellular and immune health, as well as Happy Mammoth for hormone and gut health.

5pm We eat early, between 5 and 6pm, unless we're going out for dinner. It's better to go to bed on an empty stomach, so your body can detox rather than focusing on digestion.

6.30pm I do a 50-minute reformer Pilates class at a studio in Brighton. This works my muscles as well as improving mobility.

8pm I plug in my phone outside the bedroom. If I need an alarm the next day I'll set my Lumie clock, which lights the room gradually. I put on special glasses to block sleep-disrupting blue light and I have a red-light lamp next to my bed.

I drink herbal tea or lemon and ginger, and I take magnesium tablets to help me sleep.

8.30pm I take off my make-up, do my skincare and use a Waterpik flosser to give my teeth a deep clean. Then I put on my facemask, mouth tape and nasal strips.

9pm Bedtime. My husband and I sleep on grounding bedsheets, which keep us in harmony with the earth's frequency. I have a weighted blanket too, which helps calm the nervous system. If I'm still awake at 10pm, that's when I start freaking out.

CORAL GOLDING'S £550 WELLNESS GADGETS

Mini red-light therapy device, £225 (uk.boncharge.com). Targets muscle recovery and boosts energy production.

Nasal breathing strips, £34.99 (healf.com). Magnetic bands that optimise airflow through the nostrils, improving sleep quality.

Lumie sunrise alarm clock, £49.99 (healf.com). This gently wakes you 30 minutes before your alarm time.

Grounding bedsheets, £130 (groundology.co.uk). Woven with conductive silver fibres, which give the body an electrical connection to the earth.

Waterpik flosser, £119.99 (waterpik.co.uk). Brushing alone isn't enough; for proper oral hygiene, you need one of these.

Continues on page 35

New Stockport launch Overbank, Stockport Old Town

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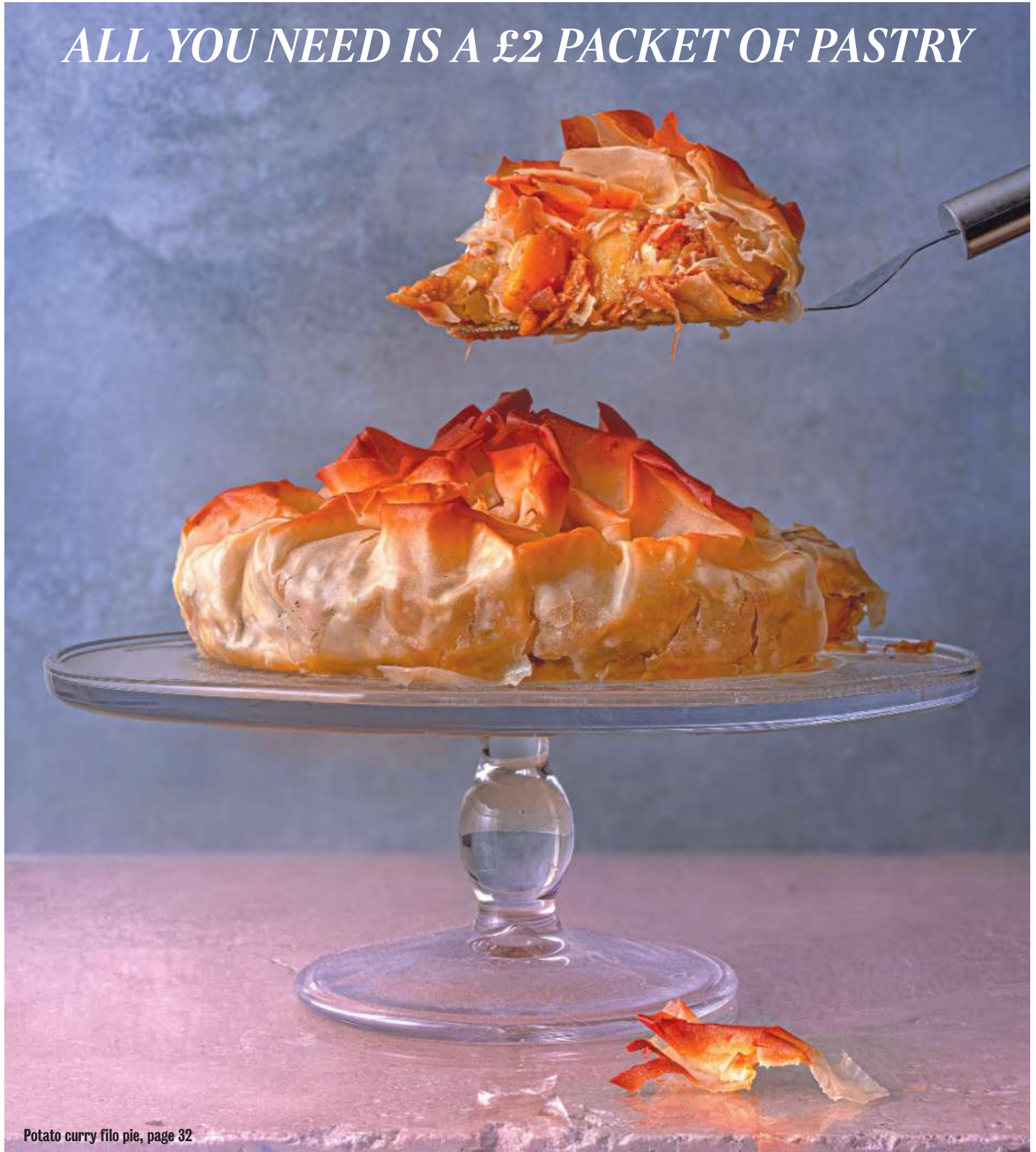
THE  TIMES

Eat!

THE EASIEST FILO RECIPES

4-PAGE
PULLOUT

ALL YOU NEED IS A £2 PACKET OF PASTRY



Potato curry fillo pie, page 32

Rahul Mandal's top six sweet and savoury bakes



Some people insist you should always make your own shortcrust pastry. Others suggest that rough puff is so simple, it should be in every home cook's repertoire. With filo there's never any suggestion you are being lazy if you use the shop-bought kind – about £2 a roll. No one makes their own.

It also happens to be one of my favourite types of pastry as it cooks quickly and is endlessly versatile. It can be baked or fried, works equally well in savoury or sweet recipes and cooks to a delicious golden crispiness, especially when you take the time to brush the leaves with melted butter.

The one rule, though, is to work quickly or it will dry out.

JAY BROOKS



Rahul Mandal

1. FILO APPLE TURNOVERS

Makes: 6
Preparation time: 5-10 minutes
Baking time: 15-20 minutes

- 2 filo pastry sheets
- 40g unsalted butter, melted

For the filling

- 200g Bramley apple, diced small
- 20g caramel
- 20g raisins or sultanas
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- Icing sugar, to dust

1. Cook half the apple pieces with the rest of the filling ingredients in a saucepan on a medium heat. Once the apple starts to disintegrate, take it off the heat. Mix in the remaining apple pieces and let the filling cool to room temperature.

2. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5. Line a baking tray with baking paper.

3. Cut each filo sheet into three pieces lengthways so that you end up with six strips of pastry.

4. To shape the turnovers, brush a filo pastry strip with melted butter. Spoon 1-2 tsp filling at one corner of the strip. Fold the corner diagonally to cover the filling. Keep folding until you use the

whole pastry strip, maintaining the triangular shape. Place the turnover on the lined baking tray. Repeat with the rest of the strips.

5. Brush the turnovers with more melted butter and bake them in a preheated oven for 15-20 minutes until they are slightly golden in colour. Serve with a dusting of icing sugar.

2. FILO TART WITH MASCARPONE, HONEY, MINT, FIGS AND POMEGRANATE

Serves: 12-15
Preparation time: 5-10 minutes
Baking time: 20-25 minutes

- 4 filo pastry sheets
- 50g unsalted butter, melted
- 25g caster sugar
- 250g mascarpone
- 150g double cream
- A selection of fruits to top the tart – such as pomegranate, figs and kiwi
- Mint sprigs, to decorate
- 50g runny honey

1. Preheat the oven to 180C fan/gas 6. Line a baking tray with baking paper.

2. Mix the melted butter with the sugar and brush it on one of the filo sheets. Place this on the baking tray. Brush the



second sheet with the butter mix and place on top of the first sheet. Repeat this process until all the sheets are used.
3. Fold 1cm from all sides of the filo stack to create a border for the final tart. Use a fork to make holes in the centre of the pastry to stop it from puffing too much.
4. Bake the pastry in the oven for about 20-25 minutes, or until golden brown in colour. Take it out of the oven and let it cool completely.
5. Once cooled, whisk together the mascarpone and cream and spread on top of the pastry, staying within the border. Top with fruits of your choice and mint sprigs and drizzle with honey.

3. FILO CUSTARD TART

Serves: 8-10
Preparation time: 5-10 minutes
Baking time: 35-45 minutes

- 6-7 filo pastry sheets
- 100g unsalted butter, melted
- 350g shop-bought custard
- 150g double cream
- Zest of 2 oranges
- 1 tsp ground cardamom
- Chopped nuts, to serve

1. Preheat the oven to 160C fan/gas 4.

Grease a 20cm round baking tin with butter and line with baking paper.
2. Brush one filo sheet with melted butter and concertina it like a fan. Place it in the lined baking tin, towards the edge. Repeat this process until you use all the filo sheets, scrunching and placing them in the tin, moving inwards.
3. Bake the pastry in the oven until light golden, about 10-15 minutes.
4. Mix the custard with the double cream, orange zest and ground cardamom. Take the tin out of the oven and slowly pour the custard mixture over the pastry. Lower the temperature to 150C fan/gas 3, return the tin to the oven and bake for a further 25-30 minutes – the custard should still be a bit wobbly when it comes out.
5. Let the tart cool in the tin for 15-20 minutes, then remove from the tin and cool to room temperature. Scatter over some chopped nuts before serving.

4. SPINACH AND CHEESE ROLLS

Makes: 6
Preparation time: 10 minutes
Baking time: 20-25 minutes

- 3 filo pastry sheets
- 40g unsalted butter, melted

For the filling

- 1 tbsp unsalted butter
- 1 tsp nigella seeds
- 2 tsp grated garlic
- 200g frozen spinach
- 100g paneer, finely cubed or crumbled
- 100g feta, crumbled
- Pinch of nutmeg

1. First make the filling. Heat the butter in a pan and add the nigella seeds, followed by the garlic. Fry on a medium heat for 30 seconds, then add the frozen spinach. Cover and let it cook for 5-10 minutes until thawed completely. Continue to cook uncovered until all the water evaporates.
2. Take the pan off the heat. Mix in the paneer, feta and nutmeg. I don't add salt as feta is quite salty, but you can sprinkle in ½ tsp salt if you think it needs it. Pour the filling onto a plate and let it cool completely before making the filo rolls.
3. Halve the filo sheets lengthways so you have 6 rectangular strips. Take one strip and brush it with melted butter. Add about 1 tbsp spinach filling at the short end of the pastry. Tuck in the edges around the filling and roll up the strip to make a roll. Repeat until you use all the pastry sheets and have 6 rolls in total.
4. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5. Line a baking tray with baking paper. Brush ➔



the rolls with melted butter and place on the baking tray. Bake in the preheated oven for 20-25 minutes until golden.

5. PINEAPPLE, GINGER AND CHILLI TART TATIN

Serves: 8-10

Preparation time: 5-10 minutes

Baking time: 25-30 minutes

- 5-6 filo pastry sheets
- 150g shop-bought caramel sauce
- 1 tsp ground ginger
- ¼ tsp chilli flakes
- 500g tin pineapple slices in juice
- 40g unsalted butter, melted

1. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5. Grease a 20cm cake tin with butter and line with baking paper.
2. Mix the caramel with the ground ginger and chilli flakes and spread in the bottom of the tin. Drain the juice from the pineapple slices and arrange the slices in a flower pattern on top of the caramel.
3. Brush each sheet of filo with melted butter and place them on top of the pineapple pattern. Fold in the overhanging pastry on itself. Repeat until you have used all the filo sheets.
4. Brush the top with melted butter and

bake in the oven for 25-30 minutes. The pastry will be light golden in colour.

5. Take the tart out of the oven and let it cool in the tin for 5-10 minutes, then carefully flip it out onto a serving dish. Enjoy warm or at room temperature.

6. POTATO CURRY FILO PIE

Serves: 8-10

Preparation time: 15-20 minutes

Baking and cooking time: 60-70 minutes

- 7-8 filo pastry sheets
- 100g unsalted butter, melted

For the filling

- 2 tbsp sunflower oil
- 1 medium onion, roughly chopped
- 1 tsp ginger paste
- 1 tsp garlic paste
- 750g potatoes, peeled and cut into 1.5-2cm chunks
- 1 tbsp medium curry powder
- 2 medium tomatoes, chopped
- Handful of chopped coriander leaves
- Salt, to taste

1. Make the filling. Heat the oil in a saucepan and fry the onion on a medium heat until translucent. This will take about 5-7 minutes. Add the ginger and garlic

paste followed by the potato chunks, curry powder, chopped tomatoes, coriander and about 1½ tsp salt. Mix well and cook for another 5-10 minutes. Pour in about 200ml water, cover the pan and simmer until the potatoes are fully cooked. Take off the lid and keep cooking until the water evaporates and the potatoes start to break down slightly.

2. Remove the pan from the heat and let the curry cool completely. Once cooled, you can start assembling the pie.
3. Preheat the oven to 170C fan/gas 5. Grease a 20cm baking tin with butter and line with baking paper.
4. Brush a filo sheet with butter and place at the base of the tin. There will be a good amount of overhang, which will be used to cover the filling. Use another 3-4 buttered sheets to line the base of the tin.
5. Spoon all the filling inside the pastry. Use the pastry overhang to cover the filling.
6. Brush the rest of the filo sheets with melted butter, scrunch them up and place on top to make sure none of the filling is uncovered. Brush or drizzle more melted butter over the top.
7. Bake in the oven for 30-35 minutes or until the pastry is golden brown.
8. Once baked, take the pie out of the oven and let it cool completely in the tin before transferring to a plate to serve. ■



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Contribution revolution

Handy app does away with piles of pensions paperwork and makes financial planning easy

Each year, people up and down the country are greeted with a weighty envelope through the letterbox from their pension provider. The annual pension statement is a hefty document with plenty of pages, most of which get popped straight into a drawer, never to be read.

“I’ve been in meetings where people have pondered ‘What can we do to make the paper statements simpler?’ The truth is that they’re asking the wrong question,” says Stephen Watson, director of policy and research at NatWest Cushon. “People don’t want paper and they shouldn’t have to wait a whole year before getting updates. They can get them in real time, every day with our app – delivered in a way that’s easy to digest.”

This is just one of many ways that workplace pension provider NatWest Cushon is harnessing technology to respond to the needs of customers. The app doesn’t look like something from the pensions world – it’s clean, colourful and intuitive. “It looks like something worth engaging with,” adds Watson.

“Engagement” is the magic word. According to the Financial Conduct Authority, 51 per cent of contributing adults in 2022 were found to have a low or very low level of pension engagement. With employee pensions one of the most expensive lines on company income statements, ensuring staff have better awareness about them pays dividends for employers.

Some of the most effective actions are the simplest. Each month, when the employer pays its member contributions into people’s pots, they get a message through with the amount. “It’s really nice to have visibility of getting more money from their company,” explains Watson. “That figure is usually buried on a payslip that never gets looked at.”

If people want, they can also play around with a forward projection tool which enables them to see their likely pension payout if they add more (or less) each month.

NatWest Cushon also captures attention by aligning its investments



ILLUSTRATION: ADRIÀ VOITA

PENSIONS TO BE 'APPY ABOUT

Traditionally, pensions are an underappreciated and expensive employee benefit – but it doesn’t have to be that way.

By taking a more colourful and engaging approach, the NatWest Cushon app can get employees excited about their pensions, empowered about their financial futures and saving more.

- The app boosts visibility of investments, encourages proactivity and supports better understanding and knowledge of the saving landscape.
- Employees receive clear, regular communication on the value of their pension relative to their current financial priorities.
- The platform is easily tailored to each individual’s goals, for today as well as tomorrow.

The value of investments can go down as well as up which means pension members may get back less than they put in.



**NatWest
cushon**

[cushon.co.uk/
workplace-
pensions-
to-celebrate](https://cushon.co.uk/workplace-pensions-to-celebrate)

with the things that people care about – climate-focused initiatives that do good for the world as well as their nest eggs. The app enables people to explore where their pensions are invested and read case studies, like that of the pepper farm in Suffolk that’s powered by waste water. People can also get push notifications if the companies they’re invested in are voting on ESG initiatives and have their say with their own vote on their phones.

The NatWest Cushon app also supports other types of savings and investments, from Lifetime ISAs to stocks and shares ISAs. Users can see these all in one place and easily plan their financial futures on the go.

Sarah Fraggis, 33, is a skincare specialist and founder of the Filterless Era skincare range. She lives with her husband and two children in Chicago (@filterless_era).

5am I start with my “morning shed”: taking off my mouth tape, castor oil pack and overnight collagen mask, which hydrates and improves skin elasticity.

I oil-pull with coconut oil to remove toxins then whiten my teeth, followed by tongue-scraping and toothbrushing.

5.10am I cleanse with a balm containing glutathione to brighten and even my skin tone.

5.15am Dry body brushing, which improves circulation and exfoliates dead skin.

5.30am I do all-over body gua sha to reduce cellulite and sculpt my body, before drinking water with added electrolytes – such as sea salt or lemon – to rehydrate.

Next, I get some natural light, by opening a window or going outside, and do box breathing – inhaling and exhaling slowly and evenly while picturing the four sides of a square – to wake up my body.

5.45am Time for cold exposure, either splashing cold water on my face or taking a cold shower. While showering I use armpit detox cream, which removes toxins and supports lymphatic drainage.

5.50am I spend a few minutes on my vibrational plate to improve circulation and support muscle recovery before doing facial cupping – a traditional Chinese medicine technique – to lift, sculpt and reduce puffiness.

6am I take a range of vitamins and supplements. These include Celtic salt to balance electrolytes, multivitamins for overall health, colostrum to strengthen gut health, sea moss to boost immunity and a collagen drink to support skin elasticity.

6.05am I journal, pray or do a short meditation or visualisation to prepare me for the day ahead. If there’s time, I’ll do 5-10 minutes of red-light therapy.

6.30am My workouts vary by day. Some days I do Pilates to improve core strength; other days it’s 45 minutes on the treadmill or light weights to build muscle and enhance my metabolism.

7.15am I sit in my home sauna to support detoxification, reduce inflammation and promote relaxation. I’ll also do 15 minutes in a red-light therapy mask to stimulate cellular regeneration.

7.30am I start work in a fasted state, which boosts my productivity. I’ll sip black coffee or green tea for mental clarity.

9am Time for a break. I work in Pomodoro productivity cycles, which entail 90-minute sessions of focused work with short breaks.

I might do some stretching or go for a walk, getting 10-15 minutes of natural sunlight to boost my vitamin D and aid my circadian rhythm.

10am Breakfast time. I’ll have eggs,



Sarah Fraggis

‘At 7.15am I sit in my home sauna to detoxify. At 7.30 I start work – in a fasted state’

avocado and berries or a shake with added collagen, colostrum and protein.

11am I take smart supplements, such as NAD+, magnesium, omega-3 and adaptogens, to help my productivity.

Noon I walk outside, barefoot, for 10-15 minutes. It is important to stay grounded and maintain our electrical connection with the earth.

12.30pm Nutrient-dense lunch, containing plenty of protein, healthy fats and fibre to avoid energy crashes later in the afternoon.

3pm If needed, I’ll take more smart supplements – lion’s mane, L-theanine or adaptogens – to sustain my focus.

5.30pm Strength training, Pilates or another high-intensity workout, followed by a stint in the infrared sauna or a plunge in my ice bath to aid muscle recovery.

6.30pm I eat dinner, usually lean protein with complex carbs, early to optimise sleep. Afterwards I’ll bathe in Epsom salts to relax my muscles.

8pm All screens go off and I wear blue light-blocking glasses to protect my eyes from light that could disrupt sleep. I read, journal and reflect on my day before doing a light meditation.

9.30pm I prepare my room for sleep – it must be pitch black and cold (about 18C) – and take a sleep-aiding supplement such

as magnesium, glycine or ashwagandha. I massage my scalp with red light and scalp oil to stimulate hair growth, spray magnesium on my feet to relax my muscles and put a castor oil pack on my stomach to support digestion while I sleep.

I wash my face, do my skincare and put on my collagen mask and mouth tape. I then add a chin strap, which contours my face and prevents sagging skin.

SARAH FRAGGIS’S £250 DAILY ESSENTIALS

Stainless steel gua sha facial tool, £23 (filterlessera.com). This drains lymph fluids from the face and reduces tension in the head and neck.

Castor oil wrap pack, £32.99 (amazon.co.uk). Worn overnight, this improves the lymphatic system and aids digestion, as well as reducing inflammation.

LED facial mask, £195 (filterlessera.com). Equipped with seven colours of light therapy, this has proven anti-ageing properties.

Chin strap, from £8 (amazon.co.uk). Made from silk and graphene, this V-shaped strap supports your skin as you sleep.

365 Organic Unrefined virgin coconut oil, from £7.50 (wholefoodsmarket.co.uk). Use this in oil-pulling to improve oral hygiene and naturally whiten teeth. ■

I FEARED I WAS LOSING MY UNBORN BABY – BUT NO ONE WAS LISTENING



Clare and Marion in the neonatal intensive care unit at the end of March 2023

Last year's birth trauma inquiry highlighted a crisis in Britain's maternity care. Clare Conway was 27 weeks pregnant when she developed a condition she suspected was threatening her baby's life – but none of the doctors and nurses took her seriously. She reveals the nightmare of the next 76 days



Clare Conway and her
daughter, Marion,
photographed by Jude Edginton

It's hard to look back on the year I almost lost my unborn baby. I've felt a mixture of things – anger, relief and, honestly, embarrassment that I was being overly dramatic all along. I look at my chubby, scowling daughter now – her gap-toothed smile, the way she clings to me like I'm the last chance she has for survival, always demanding, “Up, up, up,” into my arms – and I think I've got to put it all behind me.

It worked out. Over 76 days, I was taken to the brink of emergency surgery twice, confined to wards, to my bed or the couch (the soundtrack to my days was reality TV and the beep of foetal heart-rate monitors). My legs and arms were full of collapsed veins from needles – blood tests to check for infection and to confirm, then reconfirm, my blood type for a transfusion – as my pregnant body leaked, bled and showed signs of imminent danger: placenta abruption, umbilical prolapse, chorioamnionitis, oligohydramnios. Those strange medical terms all of a sudden applied to us.

Last year, an all-parliamentary group report, the birth trauma inquiry, took in 1,300 submissions from mothers, and found devastating accounts of mistakes, birth injuries, neonatal death and women being denied basic pain relief. Most felt they weren't listened to.

That wasn't what happened to me, exactly. For the months I was a spectre on NHS wards (spectre-ish, not least with my anaemic, bloodless pallor), I was shown plenty of compassion and kindness. But was I listened to? No, not really. At first no one seemed to believe there was anything wrong with me.

In February 2023, I was 27 weeks pregnant. I was 36 years old, an editor on a glossy magazine, and the pregnancy, while being IVF, had been routine and uncomplicated. My husband, Dan, also a journalist, was away for work and I had gone to my parents' house that evening, looking – predictably – for childcare help with my son.

At 1am, exactly one hour into my third trimester, I woke up in my bed to the sensation of warm fluid escaping from me. I lurched to the bathroom, expecting to see blood. Instead, the fluid was clear. Yet I knew something was wrong.

I woke my parents, shrieking that I needed an ambulance, that my waters had broken. They stared back, startled, blankly. I threw my hands up in teenage-style exasperation, then rang 999 on my mobile and shrieked at the call handler instead. There were no ambulances. Go to the nearest maternity hospital, they said.

My mum drove me along the dark country lanes to the hospital as I felt more fluid pooling, bringing with it

One hour into my third trimester, I woke up feeling warm fluid escaping from me



Clare with her son, Con, and Marion

waves of panic. Yet at the hospital the swab to detect amniotic fluid and confirm my amniotic seal had broken was negative. A scan showed my daughter was alive and surrounded by fluid.

It's incontinence, declared a consultant who arrived in triage. A midwife stood behind her mumbling something in protest, but the consultant fixed me with an impish grin. “Leapt out of bed, did you?” I was sent away, feeling foolish.

Over the next week the fluid didn't go away, but took on a pinkish tinge. At home in London, I went most days to my registered hospital triage department. I was swabbed again: no amniotic fluid found. I tried to make my case, debating weakly with doctors about whether or not I'd wet myself, only to find I was on the losing end of the argument.

At home I read news stories about babies who had died after their mothers' waters had broken early and it had not been detected (otherwise known as PPROM, the preterm prelabour rupture of membranes). Mothers who were dismissed as incontinent. Once the amniotic seal is gone, I read, bacteria gets into the womb, which is warm, dark, damp and provides the perfect conditions for an infection to take hold. Soon sepsis becomes a possibility. I worried so much I ordered DIY amniotic fluid detection tests on Amazon and stared at the instructions – in Chinese only. “We're going back to hospital,” said my husband.

On my fifth visit I brought along my pyjama bottoms, tinged pink from the fluid, to show the doctor. She agreed that I could stay in for observation overnight on the labour ward (despite another failed swab) on the grounds I showed “a good

history”. Of hypochondria? Persistence? It didn't matter: it was a huge relief to feel like I wasn't shouting into the wind.

On the bustling labour ward the beds were partitioned by paper curtains with a pastel Battenberg cake pattern of elephants. Feeling comfortable, chipper even, I messaged Dan: if something bad happens now I will always remember these curtains. I'll close my eyes and see the elephants. And I'll be declared insane.

At 2am, I pressed the call bell after another surge of fluid and the doctor did a swab test. Together we watched the litmus paper change colour. Finally. Now that it was agreed my waters had broken I had to prepare myself for what was to come.

Doctors appeared by the bedside light, with kind introductions. “I'm from the paediatric team. I'm going to explain what a child born at 28 weeks looks like, what support they'll need.”

I'd been down that Google wormhole in the days before: I knew that nine out of ten babies born before thirty weeks will live. That they are at risk of blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, more likely to have breathing issues and chronic lung disease.

I felt numb, mutely accepting what was being said. One consultant told me that she was a premature baby. Adding that girls fare better born early than boys, though I couldn't understand why.

A midwife came in with a steroid injection, a shot in my bum to help the baby's unformed lungs ahead of her imminent arrival. A nurse took my blood to work out whether I already had a bacterial infection. Another nurse ordered me to pick my breakfast, lunch and dinner from the menu. “Orange juice or apple juice?” she wanted to know.

PPROM is a factor in roughly 3 per cent of pregnancies in the UK. Most women go into spontaneous labour within a week of it happening. Only 10 per cent will stay pregnant. Yet that's what happened: I became a minority within a minority statistic. After two days with no signs of foetal distress or signs I was going into labour, I went home, a human time bomb.

I bulk bought incontinence pads. I lay down on the couch and tried to move as little as possible. I got bored and walked down the hill to the shops, freezing as the awful sensation of leaking returned. I shuffled back up the hill. I lay down. Every few days I went to hospital for blood tests to check for an infection in my womb, to listen to her heartbeat, do a kick count and give a urine sample, with Dan beside me in the waiting room balancing

his laptop on his knees so he could work.

Before long, blood started appearing in the leaking amniotic fluid. When I pointed this out in monitoring appointments, the midwife said she wasn't concerned. When I told another midwife, she said I was having a bloody show in preparation for labour, but that didn't seem right.

Sometimes I was kept in hospital for a few days for other issues, bounced around wards depending on the space available: early labour ward, active labour ward, repeat. I would pad around in my gown with a maternity file heaving with records of scans and test results looking like a mad conspiracy theorist.

My two-year-old, Con, began to refer to me as "hospital mummy", and since children are not allowed on labour wards I'd meet him in the car park and hand over chocolate coins to say sorry for not being around. My parents and mother-in-law put their lives on hold to help out. And, of course, I was distracted; even when I was at home I'd spend hours lying flat, reading academic papers online and assessing my own case.

I began to suspect I had a placenta abruption. This occurs when the placenta separates from the uterus before birth, starving the baby of oxygen, a serious, potentially fatal condition. It's more likely to happen in cases of PPROM. A telltale sign is bleeding. But no one was listening. "You don't have an abruption. If you did, you'd be in pain," said a registrar who palpated my stomach during monitoring to make her point. "See, no pain."

Two days later, I bled heavily at home. Dan got me into the car and I yelled most of the way to hospital, afraid I was losing our daughter. At the maternity front desk, I shouted at the receptionist who wanted me to write down my name, the date and the ward I was visiting. By the time I reached triage, I tried to shout the word "Help!" into the middle of the waiting room, but felt ridiculous in front of the queue of bored, expectant mothers and so it came out as a whisper: "Help?"

It was enough for someone to notice and press a button, then a team of medics in scrubs was around me, ushering me into a room, changing me into a surgery gown and putting an IV line into my hand, while Dan was still parking the car. "Suspected placenta abruption," said one of them.

I was prepped for surgery, yet the bleeding slowed and stopped. The placenta was likely coming away in stages, rather than all at once, said the consultant. The pregnancy remained viable, but was now riskier than ever. Added to which, a scan showed my daughter's umbilical cord was resting on my cervix. Should I go into spontaneous labour, which could happen as the pregnancy was unstable, the cord

would fall out first, strangling her.

My world got smaller and stranger. "Pop yourself up on the bed, Mum," said the midwives who searched for veins on my arms and legs that hadn't been punctured by previous needles. They'd check my heart rate – always too high – and, "Are you drinking enough water?" they would ask. I drank one plastic cup's worth after another, thinking the water could somehow replenish the lost amniotic fluid and surround my daughter again.

One day the doctor who'd prepped me for surgery passed me in triage and wanted to know how I was doing. She smiled and said, "This baby will be fine." I nodded gratefully, on my way into daily monitoring where a new midwife put the blue and pink band sensors on my stomach and couldn't find my daughter's heartbeat. "I'm going to get someone," she said after a while. Another nurse wheeled in a bedside scanner. She ran the probe over my stomach and couldn't find a heartbeat either. At last, there was a thumping sound on the sensor, but it was

Another nurse wheeled in a scanner. She couldn't find a heartbeat either

only my heart, racing at 125bpm. I could hear the blood pumping in my ears when they said they were getting a doctor. I stared at Dan as the doctor came in, rolled the scanning probe on my stomach and pointed to the screen: "Here are the chambers of her heart. It's beating." She was in an awkward position. "You scared us, Mum!" shouted the midwife.

I didn't know how much more I could take. As it turned out, it would be another week. Marion was delivered by emergency c-section, after a big bleed, on March 29, in the 32nd week of my pregnancy.

I couldn't see her but I could hear her and I cried out to her – a strangled noise that was love, relief and longing. But after Marion's initial squall, her oxygen levels dropped. An oxygen mask was dialled all the way up but wasn't enough, so she was intubated and taken away on a ventilator to intensive care.

I didn't know what to feel. I was flooded with happiness hormones despite what was happening. I was proud I'd kept her safe as long as I could, but also scared for her. Placenta abruption was confirmed in the delivery. I needed blood transfusions and was in no state to answer questions. The consultant went through birth forms with Dan. She read the first question:

"Gender of mother." She looked at the form again. "Gender of mother?!"

Marion now had her own hospital tag and space on the ward. The neonatal intensive care unit was like stepping onto the mothership. The rooms were dark, warm and there was a constant beeping and flashing of monitors. Her cot was the first incubator on the left. Baby Conway. Wires all over her wrinkled body illuminated blue by a light to treat jaundice, her face covered by breathing apparatus. At first I was too scared to put my hands into the portholes of her incubator to touch her in case I hurt her. When I did, I found myself in tears.

She had a suspected heart murmur that would mean a referral to Great Ormond Street, but the main issue was her lungs were weak from a sustained lack of amniotic fluid and she couldn't breathe without help. She had chronic lung disease and turned blue twice.

Most days the world stayed outside the window. Friends sent WhatsApps asking for updates, but I couldn't think of what to write back. I didn't want to say I felt angry and helpless, so I'd say, "I'm OK." Some dropped food to our door so we didn't need to cook. One woman I knew from my son's NCT class met me on lunch breaks from hospital. Friends who'd had a premature baby lent us bags of tiny clothes. But it was a lonely time.

The wires Marion was attached to would sound an alarm what seemed like constantly, as she veered out of the acceptable limits for heart rate, oxygen saturation, respiration rate. "You'll drive yourself crazy. Stop watching," said one nurse, resting her hand on my shoulder. I was afraid if I wasn't watching the monitor she would die. Irrational. Instead, Marion got better and better. That's because those nurses minded her so well. And perhaps a tiny bit – I say with hindsight – because Marion is so bloody-minded.

She came off oxygen and came home. It was May 6 – the bank holiday weekend of King Charles's coronation, a still and sunny morning. A banner hung in the neonatal corridor. A nurse looked at it. "I thought he already was king," she said. I smiled to myself. It had taken 76 days to get here, from the night my waters broke. She was safe. The frustration of not being listened to was overtaken by this fact.

Dan held Marion aloft in her car seat in the hospital corridor. For a moment the nurses stopped what they were doing. As is customary for their long-haul patients, they would wave us through. I considered doing an ironic royal wave. Then I was hit by such a surge of emotion: gratitude to all the nurses, midwives and doctors, love for my daughter and happiness for the spring day that was waiting for us. ■

Alexander Lukashenko with Vladimir Putin in Moscow in March



THE WOMAN FIGHTING TWO DICTATORS I HAVEN'T SEEN MY HUSBAND IN TWO YEARS. I DON'T KNOW IF I EVER WILL AGAIN

When Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's husband, Sergei, launched a campaign against Alexander Lukashenko, the Putin ally in the war with Ukraine who has ruled Belarus for 30 years, he was put in prison. Sviatlana took up the challenge, and looked set to win the 2020 election until the regime claimed victory. Now she doesn't know if her husband is dead or alive. Interview by Hilary Rose



Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, 42,
with a picture of her husband



Five years ago almost to the day, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was a housewife and mother in Belarus. Her days revolved around her husband, Sergei, and their young son and daughter.

“My previous life was the life of an ordinary person,” she says, “taking care of my family with my wonderful

husband. After 2020, the course of my life changed radically.”

I am talking to Tsikhanouskaya on Zoom in Lithuania, where she is now in exile and her husband is in prison. His crime was to defy Alexander Lukashenko, the dictator who has controlled Belarus for more than 30 years. Sergei campaigned for political reform, travelling the country and posting videos about corruption and bureaucracy on social media. He planned to stand against Lukashenko in presidential elections. Instead, he was arrested and imprisoned on trumped-up charges of organising mass unrest. At first he was allowed access to lawyers. Then, two years ago, he vanished. Nothing has been heard of him since.

“He just disappeared somewhere in prison,” says Tsikhanouskaya, 42, from Vilnius, where she lives with their children. “He is kept incommunicado. Human rights defenders call it a forced disappearance. I want to believe that he is still alive, but for two years we have heard nothing: no letter, no lawyers allowed to see him. We don’t know where he is or what state he is in. We don’t know if he is alive.”

After Sergei’s arrest, Tsikhanouskaya could have just kept her head down. Instead, she decided to run against Lukashenko herself. Lukashenko didn’t bother arresting her, like he had her husband, because he thought nobody would vote for a woman. But by the time of the election, in summer 2020, Tsikhanouskaya was on course to win and claims she secured between 60 and 70 per cent of the vote. The election was widely condemned as rigged, with the regime claiming that it won 80 per cent of the vote. The announcement was met with the biggest protests in the history of Belarus, which Lukashenko crushed using detention, torture and murder.

Tsikhanouskaya fled across the border to Lithuania with her children and the clothes they stood up in. She had a backpack holding the medical documents she needed for her son, who has special needs, but that was it. No photos, no toys, no books, nothing.

Now she tours Europe drumming up support and planning for a hoped-for future as a member of the EU. She says again and again that as long as Minsk is in hock to Moscow, Europe will not be safe and any peace in Ukraine isn’t worth the

Sergei during his trial, December 2021



‘WE DON’T KNOW WHERE HE IS OR WHAT STATE HE’S IN – OR EVEN IF HE’S ALIVE’

paper it’s written on. She echoes the words of President Zelensky, who told the Munich Security Conference last month that the eastern border of Europe has to be the eastern border of Belarus.

“If not,” she says, “it will give Putin another 1,000km of border with the European Union. Without a free and democratic Belarus, there will be constant threats and blackmails to European stability and security. People think Ukraine and Belarus are two different issues, but they’re not.”

Her children are now 14 and 9, and she doesn’t sugarcoat what happened. She tells them everything that’s going on in Belarus and Ukraine, where their father has gone and why.

“I tell them that their daddy is a hero for fighting a dictator and a tyrant. Of course, on a personal level, as children, they feel grief, especially my younger daughter. She was only five years old when she saw her daddy for the last time. Now, she’s almost ten. My son is older; he is becoming the man. He’s taking care of ‘his girls’ instead of Daddy. It’s painful.”

One released Belarusian political prisoner told Tsikhanouskaya that the guards sometimes dangle letters from home in front of detainees, then rip them to shreds. At weekends, Tsikhanouskaya and the children watch home videos of Sergei, to hear his voice, see his mannerisms and watch the way he speaks to people, to keep his memory alive. She tries not to let the children see her own sadness. As far as the children are concerned, the videos are of happy family trips and she wants them to have happy memories of their father. “It’s my task,” she adds, “for them

not to forget about their daddy.”

Her daughter writes him letters in prison, but they don’t know if he gets them. Once, she scribbled something slapdash and told her mother to send it. Tsikhanouskaya was having none of it.

“I told her, ‘Look, your daddy is sitting in a very small cell. There are no colours. He doesn’t see sky; he doesn’t see green leaves. So you have to draw the most colourful picture you can for him to remember how the colours look. You can even scent your letter for him, because there is nothing for him to smell.’ She was crying during these conversations but, although it’s painful, now she can understand his sacrifice. I explain that he’s doing this for her and her brother, and for the millions of other children living in a country where people are afraid of the government and the police, and of speaking out and living.”

Will they ever be reunited as a family? “Absolutely. Absolutely I believe that. Regimes sometimes seem invincible, until they suddenly collapse.”

She brushes away the question of whether she regrets making herself a target by standing against Lukashenko. That’s a fantasy, she says; you can’t change the past. And besides, the point isn’t her own personal situation – it’s all the other people who’ve been shot, imprisoned or forced into exile by the regime.

“Fighting for democracy sounds very brave and courageous,” she says in her excellent English. “But it is paved with tears and pain and suffering and lives ruined. This fight is disgusting.”

No one knows how long the regime’s arms are when it comes to reprisals, but

Tsikhaneuskaya
campaigning ahead of
the election, July 2020

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With Keir Starmer at the
Labour Party conference, 2022

she doesn't have time to worry about her own safety or that of her children. If she thought about it, she'd be too terrified to get on with her life. Thoughtful and forceful, her anger is nevertheless visceral about the plight of Belarus: the fact that its identity is being subsumed by Russia, on Lukashenko's nod; the fact that speaking Belarusian is officially frowned upon (Tsikhaneuskaya claims that it's "a crime"); the fact that it's being used as a staging post for Putin's war against Ukraine. From Vilnius, Tsikhaneuskaya is therefore trying to construct and head up a viable Belarusian government in waiting, the Coordination Council, ready for the day when – not if, she insists – Lukashenko's regime collapses.

"People are not immortal," she says. "As with Stalin, so with Lukashenko or Putin. It's just a person and when the person disappears, everything crumbles."

Her job is to make sure that Belarusians are ready. In the past five years she thinks they have become much more interested in politics, more aware that there might be an alternative to Lukashenko, although the regime cracks down brutally on dissent. Getting accurate information is difficult and dangerous, but 15 to 20 people are estimated to be arrested every day, she claims. The president, she says derisively, is afraid of his own people.

I ask her about President Trump's

**'PEOPLE THINK
UKRAINE AND
BELARUS ARE TWO
DIFFERENT ISSUES.
THEY'RE NOT'**

attempts to broker a peace deal. The problem, as Tsikhaneuskaya sees it, is that Putin doesn't want peace. He is playing for time to rearm and regroup, trying to weaken western unity. Dictators are pathological liars, she says bitterly: "Any dialogue with him must be based on respect for international law and accountability for war crimes."

Her problem is that neither of those things appear to matter very much, at least in public, to the White House. Trump boasted on the campaign trail that he could achieve peace in 24 hours, which she says was just an exaggeration, a sign of how much he wants to end the war.

"Everybody wants to end this war. But the peace must be just and long-lasting."

The EU's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, has accused Trump of appeasement and said the free world needs a new leader. Tsikhaneuskaya phrases it slightly differently – the world needs a leader who defends democratic values, and it's up to the American people to decide if their leader is doing so.

"Democracy is easy to lose. The policy of the new administration is more pragmatic, transactional, America first, and that is maybe like a cold shower for the EU. But what about democratic values? It's vital that Europe makes decisions that are values-orientated, not business-orientated. If we lose our moral principles, we'll lose everything."

She's met Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of Alexei Navalny, and smiles at the idea that Putin and Lukashenko might be irritated by the fact that two of their fiercest critics are women.

"Of course they are! They're old-style dictators who think that women's place is in the kitchen, in church and with children. It was an awful shock to them that women can be leaders. In Belarus,

women were absolutely underestimated."

Tsikhaneuskaya even underestimated herself: she suffered for a long time from impostor syndrome, thrust into a high-profile political position for which she had neither training nor ambition. There was a "traditional" family, she says, in which Sergei was the man and she was the woman. She trained as an English teacher, but gave up her job to stay at home and support her son after he was born with special needs. It's been a steep learning curve to the polished politician of today.

"I have to fulfil duties I never thought about or dreamt about. I have to speak on behalf of the Belarusian people, persuade the world why Belarus is important."

I wonder what her husband would make of what she's doing. I expect her to say that he would be proud, and she does, but then she looks hesitant.

"It really worries me, because he knew me in 2020 when I was absolutely different. When he's released, I will be another person. But our love remains the same. I think he understands that I am doing everything that I can in the situation. The thing is, I love him more than I did in 2020.

"These hardships are a test of our feelings, of our devotion to each other. Our marriage was based on love. It's not about positions; it's personalities. We have children, we have family. What's important for me is that, at the moment of his release, I can say, look, this burden is now yours. I've worked enough." She says this with a smile, half-joking.

She has no personal ambition for high office, vowing to stay until there are free and fair elections in which she would not stand. Would she like Sergei to stand?

"I would like him to, but political prisoners who have been released say that you are so exhausted physically and emotionally, you don't want to do anything. But my husband is an extremely strong and brave person. This wasn't like a political career to him. It was like his soul needed this. He really wanted to make people's lives better."

Tsikhaneuskaya said in 2022 that she was confident that Ukraine would win the war, but that dream now seems dead. She scoffs at this idea and says of course it isn't. But unless and until it does win, and unless and until Lukashenko is toppled or dies or is otherwise disposed of by Moscow, Tsikhaneuskaya remains in exile, a grateful guest of Lithuania, which recognises her as the legitimate head of the state of Belarus.

The concept of exile can be hard to understand, she says, if you can travel the world but always go home. "We cannot visit the graves of our grandmothers or the house where we grew up," she says. "It doesn't get any easier. We miss home." ■

With Liz Hurley in Marrakesh, 2019



REHAB, PSYCHEDELICS AND SHOES: HOW PATRICK COX GOT HIS MOJO BACK

The celebrity shoe designer **Patrick Cox's** clients included Madonna and Liz Hurley. But when his business collapsed, he struggled with drugs and depression. Now he's making a comeback – all thanks to a psychedelic substance derived from toads. Harriet Walker meets him





Patrick Cox, 62, at home on Ibiza with his dog, Titus. Photograph by Karl Grant

When shoe designer to the A-list Patrick Cox arrived in rehab in 2018, having travelled there on Sir Elton John's private jet, he had a unique way of introducing himself at group sessions. "Hello, I'm Patrick," he'd say. "You don't need to meet me, because I'm a stupid faggot and a failure."

"I could self-flagellate on a level that was stratospheric," he tells me with an impish grin that barely dims no matter how dark our conversation becomes. "I had such impostor syndrome that when I lost my company I thought, 'They've finally seen through you. You deserve all this because you're nothing.'"

"I can take a compliment now," he says, laughing. "But I can remember everything bad that anyone has ever said to me. The joyous moments, like winning the British accessories designer of the year award twice? No memory of that."

Patrick Cox's name was once stamped into the British consciousness just as it was inside the bestselling chunky Wannabe loafers that became the must-have shoe of the New Labour Nineties. Three pairs reside in the V&A's archive. Oasis wore them, as did Paul Weller. Michael Hutchence kicked back on *The Big Breakfast* bed in a pair for that interview with Paula Yates. Jamie Oliver got married in them and they were Michael Jackson's dancing shoes for a time.

"They were f***ing comfortable," Cox says. "They might have gone out [of fashion], but people kept wearing them. Before the sneaker invasion, you weren't allowed in clubs [in trainers], but you were in your Wannabes."

Yet the designer lost the line in 2003 when the factory making them went bust. He then subsequently lost his company and even the right to use his name after a string of poor decisions made by the investment groups that owned the licences. Battling drugs and depression, he moved in 2007 to an isolated spot on Ibiza with his beloved dogs (whose names are tattooed on each wrist), having not had to stock his fridge or do his own banking for a decade or more.

"I didn't know how to use a computer because I'd have emails printed out and then dictate my response. I'm glad I did it, but I underestimated the shock of going from my London life to living in a field – when I got hungry, nobody was going to bring me something to eat."

When we meet at the Notting Hill townhouse Cox is staying at while in London for Elton John's birthday party (and his own – he's now 62), the slight, silver-haired Canadian stands out against the tasteful neutrals of the interiors guru Peter Mikic's home. I have done

Cox in his studio in the early Nineties



'I MOVED FROM LONDON TO A FIELD IN IBIZA. IT WAS A SHOCK'

interviews before where several pairs of eyes have met mine on entering the room, yet none where the gaze of so many of them has emanated from only one person.

"My sweatshirt is called All Over Eyes," Cox says, gesturing at the peepers borrowed from Fifties make-up manuals, Sixties Biba designs, masonic lore and the occult staring out from across his torso. "It was the first piece I designed for the range."

He turns round and bends over to show me another veritable window to the, er, soul on his trousers – and one more on the back of his gilet, this time peering out of the palm of a hand with the motto "Mysterium tremendum" below.

"It's from the German religious philosopher Rudolf Otto: the moment

of religious ecstasy when you come face to face with God. In the psychedelic sphere, it's the moment you realise there's something bigger than us and we are all connected to it."

Cox's clothing line is called Doors of Perception, after Aldous Huxley's text on his experience of taking mescaline, and is, as he terms it, "entheogenic apparel".

"The word 'psychedelic' has a lot of baggage – people think of hippies throwing themselves out of windows. The new word, especially in the American legalisation movement, is 'entheogen', which means 'the god within'."

A pause. "It's pretty esoteric."

And yet we are in a moment of psychedelic renaissance, with a new wave of clinical research proving the efficacy of LSD, psilocybin (found in magic mushrooms, which also feature prominently in Cox's designs) and ketamine to treat PTSD and depression, and renewed interest in recreational use too as wellness culture turns people off booze and coke towards "natural", less aggressive highs.



With Boy George in Canada, 1987



Showing off his new Four Eyes sandal



With Liz Hurley and Kylie Minogue

They all remain illegal drugs, largely class A substances in most countries, of course. But given the widespread consumption of mushroom chocolate by middle-class hipsters, not to mention the increasing take-up of Silicon Valley-style microdosing for concentration and emotional regulation, you'd be forgiven for not realising. The market for psychedelic healing, as it is known, is expected to hit £10 billion by 2027.

That isn't the reason for Patrick Cox's pivot. Psychedelics saved his life. After that rehab stint – during which he claims he didn't sleep for 28 days and was pushed towards taking antidepressants he didn't want – Cox tried a substance known as “bufo” or toad on the advice of a friend.

The molecule 5-meO-DMT is found in the poison of the Sonoran Desert toad but can also be synthesised in labs, and is usually smoked. According to Imperial College London research, “DMT can produce altered states of consciousness... and similarities with near-death experiences”, as well as “significant improvements in scores of depression 1-2 weeks” after taking it.

“I was completely clean,” Cox tells me, “then signed up for this ceremony and it changed my life in one sitting. Before, I was actively planning my suicide. I like myself now.”

Above all the unblinking embroidered eyes, his own are beginning to swim a little. “That was six years ago and I've never looked back.”

He has since become what is known as a “facilitator” of toad ceremonies: someone who sits with those using it and – therapy-speak klaxon – “holds space” to reassure and keep them safe. He was encouraged in this by his own toad “master”, Cesar Reyes, to whom he was an apprentice before his death in 2021.



At a reception with the Queen, 2004

“I said to him, ‘I can't do that – I'm a white gay shoe designer.’ But he told me I'd never be truly happy until I connected with my creativity again.”

That is how Patrick Cox finds himself at the vanguard of a trend once more.

Cox's career began in the Eighties, designing for his clubbing pal John Galiano, for whose 1986 *Fallen Angels* collection he created knackered-looking urchin boots with pokey toe holes and worn-out heels. In 2023, a pair sold at auction for £5,200. Next, he worked with Vivienne Westwood – it was a pair of his platforms that Naomi Campbell fell off in 1993.

During the Nineties, Cox's Wannabe brand – and his more expensive eponymous line, as worn by Madonna, Cate Blanchett and his long-term friend Elizabeth Hurley, who was once a face in the adverts – became so popular that stores required a doorman to manage

‘BEFORE, I WAS ACTIVELY PLANNING MY SUICIDE. I LIKE MYSELF NOW’

the queues. Peak-hype, Cox sold one million pairs of Wannabes a year. Later that decade, *Sex and the City* made household names of “shoe-turiers” Manolo Blahnik and Jimmy Choo, but it was Patrick Cox who first offered cult status for fashionable feet.

Today, 40 years after graduating from Cordwainers – the footwear design course, now part of London College of Fashion, still supported by one of the City of London's original “worshipful” guilds – and ten years after he designed his last shoe, Cox is once again “dipping a toe”, as he puts it coyly.

“I had to order a run of 144 pairs,” he tells me. “One hundred and forty four! In the old days, that was a Saturday afternoon. Now it's a big investment.”

The shoe in question is a £165 two-strapped, cork-soled sandal about which he makes a legally compromising pun, involving a famous German shoe brand and his own surname. Its official name is Four Eyes, a joke on the specs Cox has always worn, but also in reference to the elliptical shape of the gold buckles on the leather straps: yet more eyes staring up at me, batting their lashes.

“I don't believe in vegan leather – to me, they're just plastic. These are made by craftsmen in Italy.”

Was it hard to return to the sort of factories that he used to speak to every week, which once ran his brands – and his life?

“My Spanish is bad, but I've learnt just enough of it to f*** up my Italian,” he says, laughing.

“But yes, it was emotional. The flashbacks kept hitting. I made so many vows that I would never put myself in this situation again. But I think it's part of my journey: rediscovering what was valid in the old Patrick Cox and throwing out what I don't want.” ■



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With Doors of Perception, he has deliberately avoided the traditional fashion system: small runs of product with little fanfare, made and embroidered locally on Ibiza and sold only through his own website, the odd WII-centric pop-up and one per cent earth mother boutiques on the island that cater to a similarly enlightened and elite trippy crowd. Liz Hurley regularly features as a model on the brand's Instagram page – in a £256 gilet, say, or £285 army jacket – as does her son, Damian.

"I pick and pack everything, then drive to the DHL office," Cox says – and, just as proudly, "I don't even know the name of the editor of Vogue. I left that world behind long, long ago."

That he was dropped not only from its pages but from its guest lists at parties when his company collapsed clearly remains a source of hurt. So too the fairly bald "reinterpretation" of his zipped-tongue Wannabe loafer design in a 2023 Burberry show under the designer Daniel Lee. The heritage brand has made a virtue of the Britpop look in recent years, and I suspect it stings that his contribution to that era was neither acknowledged nor his talents brought on board.

"Fashion fed my demons," Cox admits. "Pop stars always have their greatest hits; movie stars have their oeuvre. But as a

fashion designer, you're only as good as your last collection."

Born in Alberta, Canada, Cox travelled as a child with his linguist father's job to postings in Nigeria, Chad and Cameroon, before his parents split when he was eight. His father cut off all financial aid to his mother, transforming Cox's early life from one of comfort to constant worry.

"At 13, I found weed. At 14, I found speed. At 15, I found acid. At 16, I found coke – and the rest is history. I went into fashion because I was constantly searching for the validation I didn't get as a child."

Eventually, he found it in what the psychedelic crowd refer to as "ego death", the moment a person's sense of self dissolves, and which researchers have described variously as "pure awareness" and "ecstatic freedom".

"It's the moment you go offline and come back online. It's very, very hard to explain – you either see pure white light or are suspended in nothingness. That moment when someone opens their eyes and you know their entire life has changed is so beautiful."

Toad is rare among psychedelics: it almost always produces this moment (where others require very high doses to reach it) and a "trip" lasts only around 20 minutes (as opposed to 8 hours). That means real-life applications could – in

theory at least – fit the slot of a traditional talking-therapy session. Cox is working with Professor David Nutt from Imperial College London on further research around toad and on a documentary, focusing on his own journey, with a working title that he is very proud of: *The Road to Toad*. He does it every New Year's Day.

"You don't do toad for fun. You can't do it alone. It's not like tripping at Glastonbury. You're not 'getting high'; you're 'doing healing work'. It's not a drug; it's a medicine. And the goal of doing it is never to do it again.

"Antidepressants just mask sadness – they don't help you find joy. And you're on them for life, because as soon as you come off them, you want to kill yourself.

"When I first moved to Ibiza I used to think, 'If one more hippy uses the word energy, I'll stab someone,'" he says, guffawing. "I was like Christopher Hitchens: I could make religious people cry. Now I'm all love, peace and universal consciousness."

It is the perfect happy ever after for a fairytale that runs from late-night shoe elf to master cobbler to kissing a few toads to find the prince within. ■

The Four Eyes sandal launches on May 1 but can be ordered now at doorsofperception-ibiza.com. Find Cordwainers courses at arts.ac.uk

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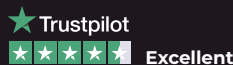
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MY 8 TOP HAIR TREATMENTS

Beauty expert Lesley Thomas tests products to find the ones that really work



1 THE CLASSIC FOR HEALTHIER HAIR
Philip Kingsley Elasticizer Deep-Conditioning Treatment (£38; philipkingsley.co.uk)

This moisturising hair treatment is the one I always recommend. The original was created by the Philip Kingsley, the world-renowned trichologist, for Audrey Hepburn, who wanted to get some oomph back into her hair after constant styling on film sets. It adds hydration, strength, shine and resilience, leaving your hair looking healthier and bouncier. It's a pre-shampoo treatment, but putting it on overnight and washing out in the morning gives superb results. It comes in different scents now and again – Honey Nectar & Peach, £41, above, is rather nice.

2 THE BRILLIANT BARGAIN
Beauty Pie Super Healthy Hair Elastic Repair Treatment (£20, or £12 for members; beautypie.com)

Beauty Pie makes some of my favourite skincare and make-up products, so I didn't pay much attention to its hair offerings – my logic is that a brand can't be good at everything. Then I noticed giant bottles of Beauty Pie shampoos and conditioners at one of the best and most trusted hair salons in the land – Hershesons – and did an about-turn. This powerful weekly treatment will soften brittle hair, smooth split ends and help give colour longevity. Apply and leave in for a few minutes before rinsing.



3 THE ORIGINAL BOND-BUILDING TREATMENT

Olaplex No 3 Hair Perfector (£28; olaplex.com)
There are dozens of bonding products on the shelves, but this is the original and the one the experts swear by. The idea is that it strengthens and rebuilds bonds that have been damaged by colouring or heat styling. But you don't need to have dyed or damaged hair to use it. If you just want your hair to feel stronger, this pre-shampoo treatment is the one. The brand claims it will triple hair strength if you leave it on for 3-10 minutes. I'm not sure how you'd measure that but my own hair has certainly been fortified by it – even after the first use.



ROBERT WILSON



'I'm a big fan of Beyoncé's brand. This rinse is a faff to use but, boy, it's worth it'

4 FOR EXTREMELY DAMAGED HAIR
K18 Leave-in Molecular Repair Hair Mask (from £30; k18hair.co.uk)

This clever, lightweight leave-in treatment, powered by the brand's patented peptide, aims to reverse damage caused by bleach or other chemicals. I don't know about reversing damage, but my hair has been fully restored after periods of trauma (sun, sea, straighteners) by this mask. You apply it, quite sparingly, after



shampooing (use it without your regular conditioner for it to work effectively) and leave in for four minutes before applying any styling products. It brings back the bounce to sad hair and doesn't remotely weigh it down.

5 THE ONE FOR FRAGILE HAIR
Cécred Fermented Rice & Rose Protein Ritual (£49; cecred.com)

Beyoncé's hair brand, Cécred, is made for all types, with a focus on optimum health, and I am a big fan. But, boy, there's no getting around the fact that this offering is a bit of a palaver. That said, when I can be bothered my hair is very glad I've done it.



Lengthy rice treatments have long been used in Asia and this is Beyoncé's version. You mix a fine rice powder that also contains biotin, honey, rose and amino acids in a giant bottle to create a hair rinse, then follow with the Silk Rinse conditioner. Honestly, my hair felt brilliantly luscious. You might have better things to do on a Sunday. But when you don't, try this.

6 THE FLAKY SCALP SAVIOUR
Charlotte Mensah Manketti Oil Salt Scrub (£30; charlottemensah.com)

It's as wise to get rid of the dead or dry skin on your scalp as it is on your face and body. This gentle pre-shampoo salt scrub, created by the celebrity stylist Charlotte Mensah, promises to remove dead skin cells, itchiness, excess oil and any styling product lingering on your scalp. Giving attention to the state of your scalp pays off – the condition of your hair will gradually improve. This might not have the quick-win appeal of an excellent hair mask, but play the long game and your follicles will reward you.



7 THE ALL-ROUNDER FOR TEXTURED/AFRO HAIR
The Steam Bar The Scalp Saviour Mask (£40; selfridges.com)

This contains a very gentle chemical exfoliant (gluconolactone) that will boost scalp health and promote healthy growth without the need for scrubbing. It's applied after shampooing. Slather it all over – it contains hydrating, nourishing avocado and castor oils as well as shea butter. Rinse out after 30 minutes and rejoice in the softness.



8 FOR THINNING HAIR
Oribe Serene Scalp Densifying Treatment Spray (£70; oribe.com)

This brand was designed by the famous stylist Oribe Canales in partnership with a trichologist. Thinning is one of the biggest hair concerns, and there are many products designed to address it. This one offers a double whammy. First it gives the appearance of fullness with a polymer that adds density to each hair for fast gratification. Second, and more long term, there are phytonutrients that slow hair fall so that the thinning is effectively reduced. Use after washing and leave in. There's also a shampoo and conditioner if you want to splash out. ■



Eating out

Giles Coren



TOM JACKSON

‘The food at Mr Ji is extraordinary – huge effort, wild thinking, some triumphs, some failures. A thrill’

Mr Ji

If you get a restaurant recommendation from one of London’s most eminent criminal barristers, arguably the preeminent criminal silk of his age, a fellow of about 60, an Old Etonian, a master of fives and real tennis, a man of culture and music, theatre and history, a man of letters, a... Well, you know what sort of place to expect, right?

Yup, a bare plaster and concrete hipster cocktail bar with a progressive pan-Asian kitchen and deafening soundtrack, run by a sparky Irish bloke in a bucket hat in hell’s very own arsehole, Camden Town.

Now, to be fair, my learned friend does live in these parts, in a big house on one of the only two posh streets for many miles around, so the location was not that much of a surprise, but when Blankety Blank KC (he disapproves of the “popular presses” and I shan’t besmirch his great name by including it here) said that I really ought to try Mr Ji, I confess I expected a certain... decorousness. Chandeliers, perhaps. Carpets at the very least. A thick, vellum-bound wine list heavy on the bordeaux and burgundy. A reverent hush. A cheese trolley. But there were no such things.

“Evening, guys,” said this Irish feller,

Brendan, very warmly, over the musical din. “I’ve got a table for you here. You can hang your coats on the pegs. Can I get you water, beer, a cocktail? Here’s a menu; there’s specials on the blackboard. I recommend the mackerel and coppa wontons, but we haven’t got the char siu pork.”

“That’s a shame,” I said. “The big sign on the pavement outside says you have got it.”

“Does it now?” he said with a frown. “Sorry about that. I suppose I just put the sign out without reading it. We haven’t got any char siu have we, Brandy?” he said, turning towards the kitchen where a young woman was plating up at the pass – she had one helper that I could see, no more – and she shook her head. “No, we haven’t. I’m sorry,” Brendan went on. “But there’s plenty of other fantastic stuff. There’s the smashed duck, the merguez...”

“Merguez!” shouted Sam, who loves merguez.

“There’s gorgeous mussels just in from...”

“Mussels!” shouted Sam, who loves mussels.

Mussels and merguez? I had thought this was a Chinese restaurant.

“Pan-Asian, really,” said Brendan. “You know, fusion. But there’s no rules. We’ve got the Taiwanese fried chicken and...”

“Fried chicken!” shouted Sam, who really, really loves fried chicken.

We huddled into our dark nook with



its round table tucked under the coat hooks, opposite the bright kitchen hatch. To my left, cages of liquor bottles and small tables led to the main door onto Parkway; to my right, larger tables, a few diners, and a bar from which came ice-cold (really very cold) Sapporo in a frosted glass (such an important touch), and a terrifyingly purple margarita for Esther, with a reddish salt rim (which may have involved sumac), which she sipped, sighed and said, “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

And the food was extraordinary. A rollercoaster of highs and lows, huge effort, wild thinking, dayboat fish, biodynamic vegetables, UK meat, some triumphs, some failures. An absolute thrill.

Steamed and grilled shiitake and radish cake was an unctuous, pungent parallelogram, smooth and tangy, positively belaboured with garlic, soy paste and sesame seeds, terrifying to look at but yielding to the fork, gentle and chocolatey in the mouth. To come back from which, you need the “Bloomed cabbage”, which is cool, fresh and raw, shredded fine, with ginger, garlic and chilli oil. Maybe a little bowl of cleansing kimchi. Definitely a dish of the fantastic smacked cucumber. And perhaps the mental sesame prawn toast, pumped up with bechamel to a staggering heft, like a steroid-era Schwarzenegger. The toast is brioche, there’s sweetcorn in there too, and it’s covered in a blizzard of finely grated parmesan. Obviously.

That prawn toast is not for the traditionalist. But since sesame prawn toast was invented in British Hong Kong only in the late 1960s, well, balls to tradition. My lot found it too rich and fluffy, but many will love it. Less so the vegetable spring rolls, which were ordinary at best, flat, deflated, flavourless. The little bowls of salt and pepper squid were better than that, but still humdrum.

Whereas crispy, blistered wontons served with a very fresh sea trout crudo were bonkersly terrific and the mussels, stir-fried with ‘nduja, garlic and rice wine, were terrifically bonkers. Key to all this is that Sam and Kitty were Hoovering this stuff down, eyes ablaze. So while some of it may sound a little alarming, if a pair of fussy tweenagers can dig it, so will you.

Best of the mains, for me, was a “smashed” confit duck leg, slathered with chilli honey, black vinegar, five spice and sesame seeds but still plump and juicy and full of its own flavour. That was perfect with a bowl of beef dripping fried rice (you’ll want to skip your Ozempic jab the week you go), full of peas and egg and fermented daikon, with a splash of oyster sauce and loads of shaved spring onion. Just like your own last-night’s-takeaway lunchtime stir-fry.

The Taiwanese chicken is good too, dredged in orange panko and deep-fried, then served with a pale yellow dip that is slick but mustardy,

kind of oniony in a distant way, aromatic and herbal, faintly mysterious...

“Piccalilli mayo,” says Brendan with an eyeroll like it’s blindingly bloody obvious what it is.

I’m conflating a pair of visits here, for maximum narrative efficiency, which is how I am about to describe the char siu pork that they didn’t have. Because they had it when we went back a few weeks later. A bit dry, if I’m honest. A bit chewy. But this place is going to have its ups and downs. It’s not a chain, it’s not fancy, it’s full of ideas, it’s in bloody Camden Town. And also the head chef hasn’t been here the two times we’ve visited. Brendan says it’s a coincidence and that the chef is gutted. I think he’s running scared. And the fact is Brandy can more than handle it. They were two fantastic banquets with a couple of duds each time to keep everyone on their toes. El Bulli was the same. The Fat Duck too. If there’s no grit, there ain’t no pearl.

And the biggest pearl of all was the cheesecake. They call it “burnt” and “to share”. And it does indeed come blackened on the top, as many of the great cheesecakes do, but then beneath that is a middle of perfect puffiness and heft, plenty of air, good lactic tanginess, and then, deeper into the cake, a growing moistness until you hit a centre as wet as the middle of a very ripe Rollright or Vacherin Mont d’Or. And they aren’t kidding about the sharing. It is huge, enough for four, and with a little restraint could cater a small wedding. For only £14. Arguably the best cheesecake in the world.

It’s not your usual, common or garden local Chinese, this Mr Ji. It’s a wild ride through the foodie backstreets of an imaginary EuroTaiwanese wonderland that somehow starts in Camden Town. But whether you’re an 11-year-old boy with a fried chicken thing or a legal heavyweight in the prime of life, with Brendan as your indulgent bus conductor, you’re certain to enjoy the trip. ■

Mr Ji
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(mrji.co.uk)
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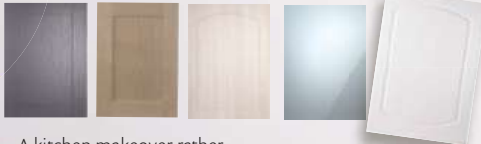
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So, if it works well the way it is, why change it? It's the aesthetic elements of the kitchen that tend to bear the brunt of everyday life and suffer the most wear and tear. This means that in most cases, whilst your doors and drawer fronts may be showing their age, your units more than likely have many years of life left in them!

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Beta male

Robert Crampton

'Here I am, explaining to a crowd of young women in their underwear when St George's Day is'



DAN KENNEDY

I monitored the intergenerational (millennials versus Zedders) spat over exercise clothing with interest. The Millies (basically in their thirties or early forties) are said to favour "tight-on-tight" gym and running gear: leggings, crop tops, contour-hugging vests. The much maligned Gen Zed (or Zee if you're American), in their teens and twenties, prefer baggier, less showy-offy stuff. What we in the fashion biz call "a looser silhouette", if you will.

Where, I ask myself, at 60, born as the baby boom gave way to Generation X (although it is important to remind ourselves that these categories are entirely made up), does this divide leave me? Uncomfortable, is my instant answer. At my gym, whose patrons are three-quarters women in their twenties and thirties,

I often feel as if I've wandered into the girls' changing room by mistake. The tank tops and sports bras far outnumber the yoga pants and ballet cardigans.

Were I a pervy old goat, it'd be happy days. But I'm not a pervy old goat; I'm a respectable married father of two, with a daughter similar in age, 26, to many of the youngsters sharing the space. I'm acutely aware that young women working out get hit on, relentlessly, sometimes threateningly, by men. To avoid even the possibility of anyone thinking I am one of those guys, and because however honourable you may be, a room full of women in their underwear is still distracting, I stay in the corner and look out of the window.

It helps that, while the women in their underwear tend to do classes (circuits, skipping, spin, a session called *Booty Camp* on Saturday and Sunday mornings), I left all that tiring cardio nonsense behind long ago, and mostly lift weights.

Clothing? Neither baggy nor tight, but definitely Adidas, that brand's face-off with Nike being the binary gym kit conflict of my youth. Having plumped for the three stripes early doors, I like to advertise having chosen the right side of sportswear history.

I lift a poundage well within my capability, partly to avoid injury, mostly to avoid grunting. I am supercareful about grunting. I went to a grunty, weights-based gym once 30 years ago. It was 100 per cent men, most of them with arms as thick as my legs. I should have left as soon as I saw the score, but pride forced me to stay and endure one of the most intimidating, grunt-heavy hours of my life. Lesson learnt.

My gym sells itself as female-friendly and the few guys who go there (gays,

creatives, eccentrics) want to keep it that way. If you've seen *Dodgeball* with Ben Stiller and Vince Vaughn, we're Average Joes, not corporate, not narcissistic, not even especially committed to exercise. Occasionally, jock types will turn up, whip off their tops, strap on their heart-rate monitors and strut around. We soon run them out of town, usually by discussing the new *White Lotus* episode in admiring tones.

Those chaps tend to resurface, incidentally, between April and October, at the pull-up bars at the south end of London Fields. Shirts off, music blasting, major posing. It's quite a show if you're in the area.

As I say, I'm careful to limit my interaction with the ranks of women-in-their-underwear. Occasionally, though, ego takes over. The other Sunday morning, I arrived at the gym having just watched the impressive Finland president Alexander Stubb on the telly, telling Laura Kuennsberg the facts of life about living next door to Russia. There was a young Finnish woman in the class just ending... Long story short, I found myself powerless to resist pontificating about her homeland. The Winter War, the Mannerheim Line, Sibelius, you know the drill.

She yawned. Total tumbleweed moment. Or total tundra moment, indeed. Ha-ha.

The following day I was at it again. It was St Patrick's Day, and I gatecrashed a post-class discussion of how everyone loves Ireland's national saint's day and yet hardly anyone knows when England's, Scotland's or Wales's equivalents fall.

Unforgivably, to an audience of palpably uninterested 28-year-olds, mostly women in their underwear, I ran through the dates of St David's Day, St George's Day and finally St Andrew's Day. It was nerdy; it was boastful; it was boring; it was kind of jingoistic. But I couldn't help myself.

After *Booty Camp* on Saturday mornings, the gym owner, my pal Sapan, asks the class about their plans for the evening. Here's a selection of the answers from the last time I joined in. "I'm going to a Judith Butler lecture at the South Bank." "A kimchi taste test with friends." "A new Iranian movie at the Rio." "Out to a hot vegan place in Walthamstow."

And this one: "I'll be cleaning out the recycling bins, under sufferance, with my wife. Then probably reading yet another book about the Second World War."

Not exactly down with the kids, right? ■

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