

JANUARY 30/31 2021

FT Weekend Magazine

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OURSELVES

From election conspiracies to forgeries: Tim Harford on the power of wishful thinking



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WOLFGANG TILLMANS

**'Once you go past the veneer of something, you want to see the guts of it, and the only way to do that is to literally take it apart'**

Michael Landy on the art of disassembly, p26



**'Every recipe in the world is on the internet. So, you have to think, what makes my book important and worth people's money?'**

Ella Risbridger, p34



**'I'm sorry about the suffering I caused to people... but, well, there's nothing to be done about that any more'**

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Will it ever end? In November, we were celebrating the announcement that the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine seemed to be highly effective against Covid-19, followed with bewildering speed by similar claims for the Sputnik V, Moderna and Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccines. Nearly three months later, hospitals are overwhelmed and the global death toll is climbing twice as fast as in the worst days of the first wave.

At a time like this, I reach for my calculator. Without minimising the suffering so many people are enduring, I think there is potential for rapid progress very soon.

There are two reasons why these vaccines, some highly effective, have not yet done anything obvious to save lives or protect hospitals.

The first is evident: not enough people have been vaccinated so far. Israel and the United Arab Emirates are well into a remarkable mass vaccination campaign, but most major economies have given a first dose to 2 or 3 per cent of their population.

The second reason is that the vaccine takes time to work. In the UK, Margaret Keenan received a first dose of vaccine bright and early on December 8, but it needs a couple of weeks to provide much protection. She and her fellow first-day vaccinees were much safer by Christmas.

Infection takes on average five days to develop into symptoms, so there would have been little sign of any benefit before New Year's Eve. It usually takes another 10 days before there is much risk of admission to an intensive care unit, and still more before there is a risk of death. Only now are those first few vaccines, weeks ago, beginning to reduce the death toll. It is like turning around the proverbial oil tanker.

The UK had vaccinated (with first dose) about 1 per cent of its population by Christmas, but funeral directors will not notice the effect of that until Valentine's Day. It seems wretchedly slow.

So let me now share the good news: a small number of well-targeted vaccinations can have a huge effect. Covid-19 is, overwhelmingly, a disease that spares the under-sixties. According to Yifei Gong and Stuart McDonald of the Covid-19 Actuaries Response Group (ARG), 36 per cent of all Covid-19 deaths in the UK were of people who were resident in a care home – a group of 400,000 people. Another 30 per cent of deaths were



## TIM HARFORD

THE UNDERCOVER ECONOMIST



### Covid-19: how close is the light at the end of the tunnel?

among people aged 80 or more, a group of three million. (These calculations cover the first wave of the pandemic, running up to November 20.)

The same broad pattern applies in any rich country with an elderly demographic. Vaccinate the top priority groups – just a few per cent of the population – and you might reasonably hope to prevent two-thirds of the deaths.

The UK government announced on Monday that nearly 80 per cent of those aged 80 and over had received a first dose of vaccine; hardly a surprise, with more than six million doses already administered. Those people, highly vulnerable until now, will be well protected by Valentine's Day, with deaths prevented in March. The US and EU are behind, but not standing still.

We should expect painfully little to happen, until it starts to happen fast. The ARG estimates that the vaccination that has already taken place is making deaths in hospital about 5 to 10 per cent lower than they would otherwise be. That is important, but imperceptible in the roar of the second wave. In contrast, by the end of February, vaccination should reduce deaths by two-thirds; by the end

of March, they should be reduced by about 85 per cent, relative to a no-vaccine scenario.

This projection assumes very high protection and very high take-up, as well as continued acceleration of the vaccination programme. There is room for things to fall well short. But it is quite reasonable to expect dramatic progress in February.

The people who are being admitted to hospital and to intensive care units are, on average, a lot younger than the people who are dying. For this reason the vaccine will not protect hospitals as quickly as it will prevent deaths. But the story arc is the same: nothing happens for a while, and then a lot happens. By early March, hospital admissions should be down 60 per cent and ICU admissions down a third, compared to where they would be without a vaccine, according to the ARG's calculations.

Why, then, are we still talking about lockdown? Because the virus can spread very rapidly indeed. We have learnt that lesson the hard way, twice. Let's not forget. A one-third reduction in ICU admissions could be

**'Only now are the first few vaccines beginning to reduce the death toll. It is like turning around the proverbial oil tanker'**

swamped by a day or two of uncontrolled growth, and certainly by a week of carelessness.

We will be out of the worst far more quickly, with fewer deaths, if we meet the vaccine halfway by suppressing the virus with social distancing. That need not mean a draconian lockdown, but it will mean that normality is postponed.

There is another reason for hope: the vaccine may also prevent transmission of the virus. If it does, then every dose brings us closer to herd immunity. Vaccinating 10 per cent of the population won't do much for herd immunity, but vaccinating half of us will go a long way towards protecting the other half.

Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* has a character who ruefully notes that he went bankrupt gradually – and then suddenly. In countries fortunate enough to have plenty of vaccine doses, that is how this pandemic will end, too. **FT**





INVENTORY DAVE GROHL, MUSICIAN

**‘I’ve never told anyone that I want to become a really wicked tap-dancer’**

**Dave Grohl, 52, was the drummer for Nirvana before founding Foo Fighters - the group celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2020 and has won multiple awards, including 11 Grammys and five Brits.**

**What was your childhood or earliest ambition?**

To be a famous soccer player.

**Private school or state school?**

**University or straight into work?**

I was a terrible student. I was a total joker, all I wanted to do was entertain everyone - my grades were terrible. I left school at 17 to start touring, to the great dismay of my father - a conservative Republican speechwriter. My mother, who was a teacher for 35 years, knew that I wasn't an idiot, but that I wasn't going to move forward in life if I was stuck in my failure in school.

**Who was or still is your mentor?**

I was raised by a brilliant, compassionate, generous, kind single mother. Her life was devoted to raising two children on a teacher's salary. She taught me to work for the things I wanted. And when I was 12 or 13, my cousin Tracy became a punk rocker. When I saw her leather jacket, shaved head, chains and spikes, she became my first hero. She was so empowered by her individuality. I wanted that. Musically, I have a long list of people I've played with and listened to over the years.

**How physically fit are you?**

You wouldn't imagine that going on tour keeps you in shape, but it actually does. At 52, I feel pretty good. It's when I come home I get soft. I hate gyms, I hate working out, I hate yoga.

**Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?**

Ambition and drive. Talent has, unfortunately, only a little to do with it. I'm not the best drummer, I'm not the best guitar player, I'm not the best singer - but when I do any of those things, I do it like it's my first day on earth. Also being able to work with others. You have to be able to collaborate and co-operate.

**What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?**

I have never, ever been a material person - I think because I was raised with very little. What I love to collect are memories, and those I can hold for ever.

**How politically committed are you?**

I'm always up to speed with what's going on. I always vote. Voting is not only a blessing and right, it's important for everyone to feel

connected in that process. A lot of change begins locally. I try to do my best to help out. I just wish there was more compassion and connectivity in the world.

**What's your biggest extravagance?**

My family. I feel blessed to have the resources to take care of them.

**In what place are you happiest?**

With my kids - the time we spend swimming, or riding bikes, or playing video games I don't understand, or watching Harry Potter.

**What ambitions do you still have?**

My obsession that I've had for 30 years and never revealed to anyone is that I want to become a really wicked tap-dancer. I can't dance, but there's something about the rhythm and the patterns I understand. This year I got a pair of tap shoes and it's going to happen.

**What drives you on?**

I am addicted to achievement. I cannot sit down and relax. I can't turn off.

**What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?**

My kids. I'm such a dad! Each of my three daughters is a tornado, they're amazing. Musically, my proudest achievement is just survival. I've watched a lot of people I know and love not make it, in terms of staying alive. Music is a tricky road.

**What do you find most irritating in other people?**

I don't understand how someone can intentionally want someone else to hurt or to feel pain.

**If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?**

That I should have thought a little more about my choice of tattoos.

**Which object that you've lost do you wish you still had?**

None. Guitars, you play them, they become your best friend or worst enemy, then they disappear and that's OK - there's songs to remind you they existed.

**What is the greatest challenge of our time?**

Having hope. Believing in life, in love, in the goodness that's within us all.

**Do you believe in an afterlife?**

We just don't know. It's presumptuous and cocky to think we can understand the universe.

**If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?**

12½. **FT**

*Interview by Hester Lacey.*

*“Medicine at Midnight”, Foo Fighters’ 10th album, is released on February 5 on Roswell Records/ Columbia Records, [foofighters.com](http://foofighters.com)*

DANNY CLINCH





# Working together is more important than ever in the fight against COVID-19

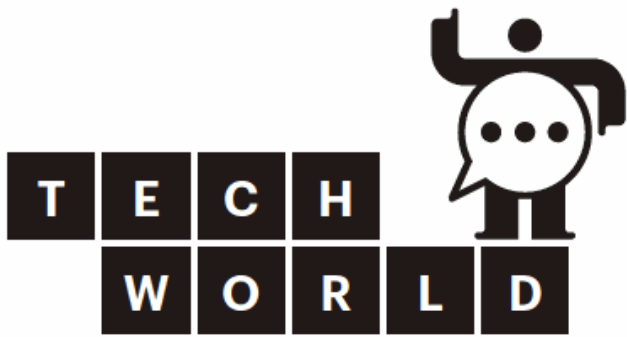
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- French and Italian epidemiologists and health experts are using Facebook technology to anticipate the viral spread of COVID-19 and identify the most at-risk communities.
- We've worked with governments across Europe to build WhatsApp chatbots that answer questions about COVID-19 quickly and accurately.

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FACEBOOK     





BY YUAN YANG IN BEIJING

## China's delivery apps put riders at risk

On a freezing Tuesday night in Beijing, it took me a few moments to realise that I was looking at a man lying face down in the road, dark blood pooling near his head.

I was waiting on my scooter for the delivery courier in front of me to move on, but when I looked past him at the obstacle, I realised I had witnessed the results of a traffic collision. "Did you call a doctor?" I asked the courier, who was wearing the fluorescent blue uniform of the Shansong ("Flash Delivery") platform. "No, no," the courier replied, mumbling excuses that the other driver was drunk.

Drunk or not, he was lying unresponsive in the road. And it crossed my mind that one of the reasons the courier was stalling might be because he was worried he would have to pay medical bills. For the first time in my five years in China, I called the ambulance hotline. Meanwhile, the courier asked a passer-by, "Where's building six?" and scarpered off on foot. After all, he had to make his delivery deadline or risk being fined by the app.

While I waited, the man lying in the road started moving and eventually stood up. The ambulance arrived. As I scooted – very slowly – home, I thought that we had been lucky: couriers get into accidents far worse than this.

Shanghai government figures show that in the first half of 2019, delivery and takeaway couriers were on average involved in 13 traffic accidents and the same number of injuries every week, leading to five deaths in those six months. No

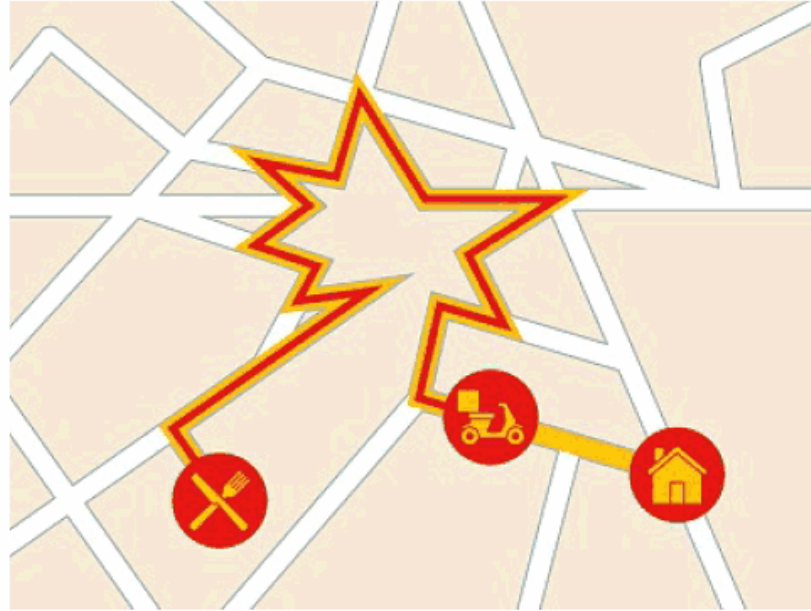


ILLUSTRATION BY PATE

wonder a Beijing News survey of more than 1,000 drivers found that 70 per cent labelled traffic safety as the biggest challenge in the job.

An investigation last September by the Chinese magazine People pointed the finger at the algorithms behind delivery apps. By setting tight delivery times, levying fines for delays and even suggesting routes in violation of traffic rules, the apps encourage couriers to speed dangerously. In practice, the platforms exchange courier safety for time. The platforms, such as Meituan or Alibaba's Ele.me, would argue their innovations save time by matching orders with drivers.

While these algorithms have garnered much academic attention, they are by no means the most important reason that China's takeaway sector has grown to be a Rmb835bn (\$130bn)

**'By levying fines for delays and even suggesting routes in violation of traffic rules, the apps encourage couriers to speed dangerously'**

industry, almost five times that of the US's. The real firepower of delivery platforms lies in the fact that they have a large, cheap pool of labour yet can evade the costs of regular employers.

Like Uber and Deliveroo in the west, China's outsourcing apps try to avoid being called employers. In December, a driver for Alibaba's Ele.me platform died suddenly while on the job, stirring a social media outcry after Alibaba denied it had a direct labour relationship with the man. (It later admitted it needed to do better, and paid his family compensation of Rmb600,000.)

The tech giants are in one way correct: the contracts that drivers sign are with third-party outsourcing agencies. These agencies are not household names, but Shanghai Peiren Enterprise Service Outsourcing Company and Tianjin Woqu Human Resources are behind the success of Alibaba's Ele.me and Meituan.

Although Ele.me and Meituan have seven million couriers between them, the sector is little regulated. Only at the start of the epidemic last year did the government add "online order delivery workers" to the list of recognised occupations, when the riders were being hailed as heroes for feeding locked-down households. The government has so far allowed tech companies to experiment and seems to see migrant workers as expendable resources.

Industry players say this may be the year for a policy shift. Strikes in the delivery sector have increased over the past two years, according to China Labour Bulletin. Earlier this month, a driver protesting unpaid wages from Alibaba set himself on fire.

There has been some progress: in legal disputes, a high level of management by the platform can be taken as evidence that it has a labour relationship with the driver. In 2018, a Shansong courier who had been injured while driving won a court ruling on this basis.

One might place some of the responsibility on the engineers who maintain the apps. But they too are victims of labour exploitation, working the infamous "996" shift of 9am-9pm, six days a week. Like delivery drivers, they have decided such an occupation is, so far, their best option. But a country that prides itself on its tech innovation and its booming economy should be able to provide better choices. **FT**

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Yuan Yang is the FT's deputy Beijing bureau chief



ELIZABETH HARROD. SOLOIST. THE ROYAL BALLET



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# ROBERT SHRIMSLEY THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

## What's the world's next Big Corporate baddie?

You don't hear so many people talking about Big Pharma these days. The pandemic has left most sane people rather in love with pharma; the bigger the better as far as we are concerned. Frankly, there is no deal we would not wave through for an extra few million Covid-19 vaccines. And even when this pandemic is pushed back, we will all be gearing up for the next one or, hopefully, focusing on the more global concern of antibiotic and antimicrobial resistance. The only objection to Big Pharma will be that it isn't Huge Pharma.

This could be the first time an industry has ever shaken off the stigma of Big-ism - or Bigma as Big Branding likes to refer to it. Sure, there will still be good reasons to grouse, not least over price gouging, but right now we are cheering it on. The poster children for Big Pharma are no longer faceless execs or hard-hearted hedge-funders such as Martin Shkreli. They are the BioNTech couple, Ugur Sahin and Ozlem Tureci, or the Oxford vaccine's Sarah Gilbert.

All of which leaves a troubling vacancy for the global industry bad guys, the new Mr Bigs. You know, the type who are always at the root of the conspiracy in a certain type of movie thriller. The friendly, suave but ultimately terrifying chief executive who had hoped we could come to some arrangement but alas...

So where might we look? Big Oil and Big Tobacco are on the way down, but Big Tech and Big Data have been competitive for a while now. They have all the key attributes: monopoly power, quite special amounts of hubris, global surveillance capacity, massive penetration into society and those early *Terminator* movies to point us in the right direction. Even so, there is no room for complacency; the Twenties should also open



ILLUSTRATION BY LUCAS VARELA

up opportunities for some new evil industries ready for the Big Branding.

**Big Meat:** This one is emerging as a really strong contender, being blamed not only for beastliness to, well, beasts but also for destroying the planet. Big Meat's most forward-thinking leaders are trying to get ahead of the science, studying lab-grown food and more sustainable farming, but these are just the low-tar cigarettes of livestock. As long as there's a Big Mac, there's a Big Meat. Big Meat's henchmen are in every high street, reeling in youngsters with cheap food and relish. And let's not forget Big Meat's partner in crime, the dairy industry or Big Cheese. With the increased attraction of veganism and the ever growing salience of climate issues, these two are definitely ones to watch in the corporate global baddie stakes.

**Big Wind:** With the rush away from fossil fuels there is clearly scope for new evil energy consortia. They may even be the same evil energy consortia, if Big Oil can switch direction in time. It is admittedly hard to see the worst in this industry. Wind power just doesn't sound evil enough to be Big. But, that is its genius. Behind the innocent green credentials there

are people threatening wildlife, deforestation and really ugly giant windmills. They are snapping up property for onshore turbines and power stations. The first Big Wind movie thriller starts with the sudden disappearance of the bird population and the murder of a twitcher who starts asking too many questions. In high-wind locations, the bad guys can be identified by their use of really powerful hair gel.

**Big Box Set:** A viciously addictive technology, also known as Big Bingewatch, which has spread virally into people's homes. Part of a global conspiracy, also linked to Big Delivery and Big PlayStation, that preyed on housebound citizens during lockdown, discouraging outdoor activity and building a dependency on meals and entertainment being brought to your door. The backlash against Big Box Set did lead to a move away from Netflix and Amazon, but these audiences were often hoovered up by foreign language film-makers known as Big Subtitle.

We can't be sure which of these will take off. But the next Big Thing is already out there. **FT**

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Re "Inside the Brexit deal: the agreement and the aftermath" (January 23/24). Astonishing achievement. A limited number of individuals, including the PM, via a mixture of bluster, half truths and outright lies have succeeded in convincing a nation that imposing economic sanctions on itself is a benefit! Let's see how much longer the pretence can be maintained. PG via FT.com

@RoryOB99 Jan 24  
A thundering article showing the long horrifying story of the Brexit deal; Ideology vs. economics.

Really wonderful piece of writing ("Covid and me: 10 days on life support", January 23/24), thank you. So important for everyone to gain some sense of how dangerous and "real" Covid-19 is, and if I may say so, this is perhaps the most vivid and moving description of what Covid-19 can do that I have read since it all began. Md8058 via FT.com

Re Simon Kuper's "Why does Davos Man get it so wrong?" (January 23/24). Rich, successful people consistently underestimate the contribution of luck and the work of others to their success, and consequently overestimate their ability to do anything outside of the narrow path they navigated. Gathering lots of leaders together in the hope that they will find solutions to world problems is just distilling a particular type of stupidity into its purest form ie hubris. Maybe via FT.com

Re Lilah Raptopoulos's "My tug-of-war with algorithms" (January 23/24). I recently walked away from social media permanently with no back-up accounts, bringing to an end a 15-year experiment in "staying connected" that has actually been the most antisocial and uncivilising force in our society. Michael Vincent via FT.com

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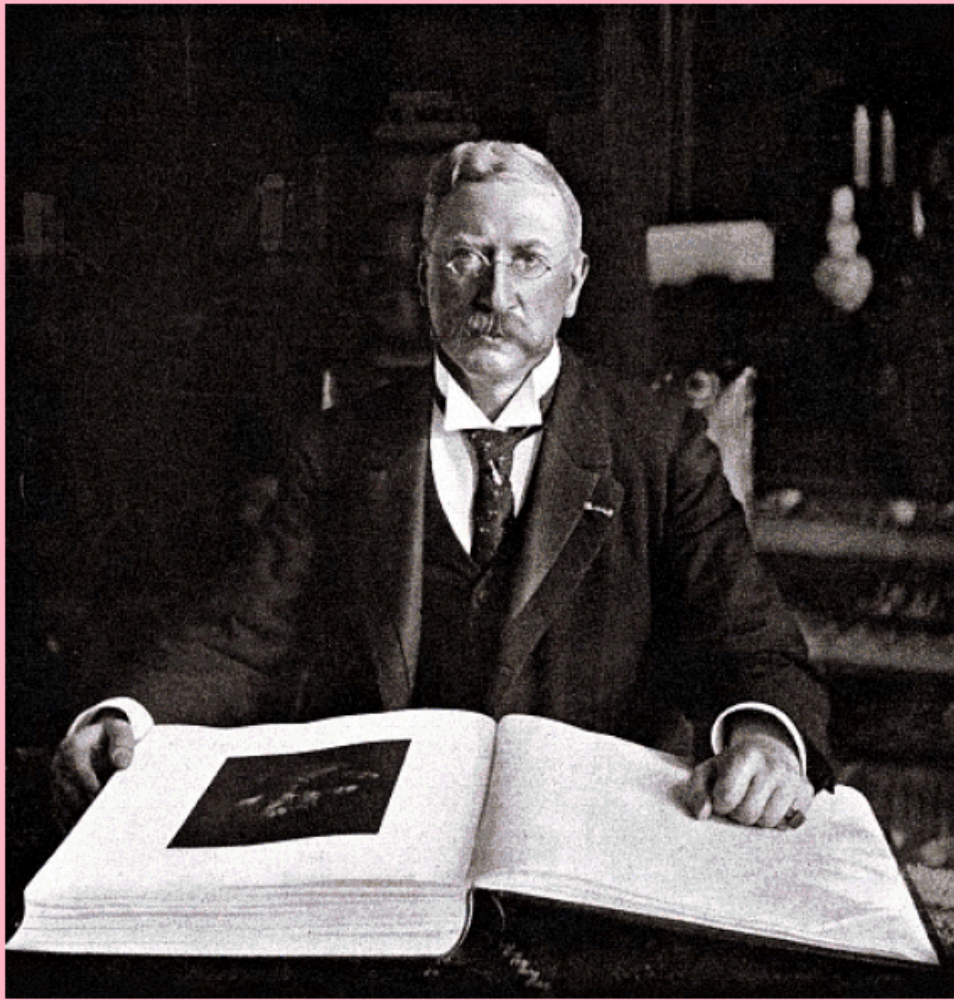




Why do we vote for politicians we can't trust? Buy things we don't need? Or believe implausible statistics? A celebrated trial involving a master forger, fake Vermeers and Hitler's right-hand man illustrates just how prone humans are to self-deception and wishful thinking. By *Tim Harford*. Illustration by *Harry Haysom*







**'Christ at Emmaus' was a rotten fraud but Bredius wasn't the only one to be fooled... Soon the entire Dutch art world was sucked in**

**T**hey called Abraham Bredius "The Pope", a nickname that poked fun at his self-importance while acknowledging his authority. Bredius was the world's leading scholar of Dutch painters and, particularly, of the mysterious Dutch master Johannes Vermeer.

When Bredius was younger, he'd made his name by spotting works wrongly attributed to Vermeer. Now, at the age of 82, he had just published a highly respected book and was enjoying a retirement swan song in Monaco.

It was at this moment in Bredius's life, in 1937, that Gerard Boon paid a visit to his villa. Boon, a former Dutch MP, was an outspoken anti-fascist. He came to Bredius on behalf of dissidents in Mussolini's Italy. They needed to raise money to fund their escape to the US, said Boon. And they had something which might be of value.

Boon unpacked the crate he had brought out of Italy. Inside it was a large canvas, still on its 17th-century wooden stretcher. The picture depicted Christ at Emmaus, when he appeared to some of his disciples after his resurrection, and in the top left-hand corner was the magical signature: IV Meer.

Johannes Vermeer himself! Was it genuine? Only Bredius had the expertise to judge.

The old man was spellbound. He delivered his verdict: "Christ at Emmaus" was not only a Vermeer, it was the Dutch master's finest work. He penned an article for *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* announcing the discovery: "We have here - I am inclined to say - the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft. Quite different from all his other paintings and yet every inch a Vermeer."

He added, "When this masterpiece was shown to me, I had difficulty controlling my emotions."

That was precisely the problem.

**"Christ at Emmaus" was a rotten fraud, of course. But** although the trickery was crude, Bredius wasn't the only one to be fooled. Boon had been lied to as well: he was the unwitting accomplice of a master forger. Soon enough, the entire Dutch art world was sucked into the con. "Christ at Emmaus" sold to the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, which was desperate to establish itself on the world stage. Bredius urged the museum on and even contributed. The total cost was 520,000 guilders - compared to the wages of the time, well over \$10m today.

"Emmaus" drew admiring crowds and rave reviews. Several other paintings in a similar style soon emerged. Once the first forgery had been accepted, it was easier to pass off these other fakes. They didn't fool everyone but, like "Emmaus", they fooled the people who mattered. Critics certified the forgeries; museums exhibited them; collectors paid vast sums for them - a total of more than \$100m in today's money. In financial terms alone, this was a monumental fraud.

It is also a puzzle. Vermeer is revered as one of the greatest painters who ever lived. He painted mostly in the 1660s, and no more than 40 of his paintings were thought to have survived. The discovery of half a dozen new Vermeers in just a few years should have strained credulity. But it did not. Why?

The paintings themselves provide no answer. If you compare a genuine Vermeer with the first forgery, it is hard to understand how anyone was fooled, let alone anyone as discerning as Bredius.

Even to the most casual art lover, Vermeer stands out as a master. Consider his "Woman Reading a Letter". She stands in the soft light of an unseen window. Is she pregnant? She



holds the letter close to her chest, eyes cast down as she reads. There's a dramatic stillness about the image - we feel that she's holding her breath as she scans the letter for news.

"Christ at Emmaus" is a drab, static image by comparison. The yellow-sleeved arm of a disciple seems more attached to a table than to his body, like a prank prosthetic. Christ's eyelids are droopy and strange - distinctive markers of the forger's style. And yet this picture fooled the world.

Why were people so gullible? And, as we gaze back through time at an entire community falling for an obvious con, is there a lesson we should learn today?

Those questions are why I find the "Emmaus" forgery so fascinating. In recent years, I have seen people believe that Donald Trump is the perfect person to clean up corruption in politics; that the British government "holds all the cards" in Brexit negotiations with the EU; that Covid-19 is no worse than flu and that if we only lifted lockdowns it would fade away. There are certain things that large numbers of people believe, despite the most straightforward evidence to the contrary. I wanted to understand why we work so hard to fool ourselves.

In 2011, Guy Mayraz, then a behavioural economist at the University of Oxford, conducted a test of wishful thinking. Mayraz showed his experimental subjects a graph of the price of wheat rising and falling over time. He asked each person to make a forecast of where the price would move next and offered them a small cash reward if their forecasts came true.

Mayraz had divided his experimental participants into two categories. Half of them were told that they were "farmers", who would be paid extra if wheat prices were high. The rest were "bakers", who would earn a bonus if wheat was cheap.

The subjects could earn two separate payments, then: the first for making an accurate forecast; the second, a random windfall if the price of wheat happened to move in their direction. Yet Mayraz found that people tended to forecast what they hoped would happen. The farmers hoped that the price of wheat would rise and they also predicted that the price of wheat would rise. The bakers both hoped and predicted the opposite. This is wishful thinking in its purest form: letting our reasoning be swayed by our dreams.

It's one of many studies demonstrating what psychologists call "motivated reasoning". Motivated reasoning is thinking through a topic with the aim of reaching a particular conclusion. Sometimes it's a conscious process, as with a lawyer in the courtroom or a candidate in a political debate. Often it is as instinctive as the sports fan's limitless capacity to blame the bias of the referee.

I could see wishful thinking in operation over and over again during the pandemic of 2020. To pick just one example, there was a moment in the summer when people started to realise that sometimes tests for Covid-19 had a false positive rate: they would flag the disease even when it wasn't there. From that dangerous little piece of knowledge came a comforting theory: as the first wave passed in Europe, perhaps the virus was gone completely. A few commentators loudly declared that there would never be a second wave. When infections ticked up again, they claimed these were just false positives. This story never really made much sense. False positives exist but why would they increase? And then hospitalisations rose too. Then deaths. A few people kept shouting about false positives. The rest of us could see the sad truth. It seems tragic and ridiculous with hindsight. But let's not feel too smug.

If the truth is painful enough, we are all capable of clutching at comforting falsehoods. Political diehards find ways to

## There are certain things that large numbers of people believe, despite the most straightforward evidence to the contrary

ignore the painful experience of electoral defeat, from Jeremy Corbyn's much-mocked claim after badly losing the 2019 general election in the UK that on many issues "we have won the arguments", to Donald Trump's far more malevolent assertion that the US presidential election was rigged. Tens of millions agree.

Wishful thinking isn't the only form of motivated reasoning, but it is a common one. A "farmer" wants to be accurate in his forecast of wheat prices but he also wants to make money, so his forecasts are swayed by his avarice. A political activist wants the politicians she supports to be smart and witty and incorruptible. She'll ignore or dismiss evidence to the contrary.

And an art critic who loves Vermeer is motivated to conclude that the painting in front of him is not a forgery but a masterpiece. It wasn't "Christ at Emmaus" that fooled the world. It was wishful thinking. And we might continue to be fooled to this day had the forger not been caught out by a combination of recklessness and bad luck. ▶

Below: Donald Trump addresses a rally in Pennsylvania in October last year. Many of Trump's supporters still believe the US presidential election was rigged

Facing page: Abraham Bredius, the world's leading scholar of Dutch painters, who, in 1937, authenticated "Christ at Emmaus" (shown) as a genuine Vermeer







## Bredius's stumble explains why we repeat statistical claims that even a moment's thought would tell us cannot be true

Above: Han van Meegeren on his way to the court of justice in Amsterdam in October 1947

Facing page: despite a heavy defeat in the 2019 general election, Jeremy Corbyn claimed that on many issues 'we have won the arguments'

**T**he unravelling began with a knock on the door. It was the evening of May 29 1945. The war in Europe was at an end. The reckoning was just beginning. The door belonged to 321 Keizersgracht, one of Amsterdam's most exclusive addresses. Outside stood two soldiers from the Allied Art Commission. The door swung open to reveal an artist and art dealer named Han van Meegeren. The Dutch had just endured the near starvation of what they called the "hunger winter" but the visiting soldiers could see that at 321 Keizersgracht there was plenty of everything.

And Van Meegeren owned more than 50 other properties scattered across the city. At 738 Keizersgracht, a 15-minute stroll away, he hosted regular orgies at which prostitutes, driven into his orbit, were offered the chance to grab a fistful of jewels in the hallway as they left. Where had the money come from for all this?

The soldiers thought they knew. A masterpiece by Johannes Vermeer, "The Woman Taken in Adultery", had been found in the possession of a German Nazi. And not just any Nazi but Hermann Goering, Hitler's right-hand man. The paper trail led back to Van Meegeren, as did several other transactions involving other Vermeer paintings. Where had he obtained these Dutch treasures?

Van Meegeren was in serious trouble: treason could carry the death penalty. He was arrested and marched at gunpoint across town to prison. After days of furious denials, he cracked.

"Idiots! You think I sold a Vermeer to that fat Goering? But it's not a Vermeer. I painted it myself."

He claimed the others, too - including "Christ at Emmaus". The confession seemed absurd, a wild attempt to escape the firing squad. How did Van Meegeren propose to prove it?

**I was just a boy when I first read about this tale. I was charmed by the idea that the despicable Goering had been duped by a master forger. I relished the irony of the situation Van Meegeren found himself in: to escape execution, he needed to prove that he'd committed a different crime.**

I am not the only one to have been fascinated. Many biographies have been written about Van Meegeren - including authoritative accounts by Edward Dolnick and by Jonathan Lopez, on which I have relied in retelling the story. There is even a recent movie, *The Last Vermeer*. Van Meegeren is box office.

But the more I studied the story, the more I found my gaze drawn instead to Abraham Bredius, the art critic who first fell for the fraud. Van Meegeren is fascinating because he seems unique. But Bredius is compelling for the opposite reason: his mistake is all too typical.



Bredius's stumble is much more than a footnote in the history of art. It can teach us why we buy things we don't need or become infatuated with the wrong kind of romantic partner. It explains why we vote for politicians who betray our trust, fall for implausible theories about the coronavirus and repeat statistical claims that even a moment's thought would tell us cannot be true.

I recently published a book about how to use numbers to think clearly about the world and had pondered what sort of technical advice I should dispense first. Then I realised I shouldn't be offering technical advice at all. Instead, I began with the case of Abraham Bredius. Bredius knew more about his chosen subject than most of us will ever know about anything – and yet he was fooled.

Recall that Bredius wrote, "I had difficulty controlling my emotions." That was a truer statement than he knew. When we are trying to interpret the world around us, we need to realise that our expertise can be drowned by our feelings.

**W**

ishful thinking enabled Bredius's seduction, but there was more to his error than the mere hope of finding one more Vermeer. He had published a number of conjectures about a mysterious gap in Vermeer's painting career. Might

Vermeer have been working on biblical paintings, perhaps? Bredius fondly speculated about a link with the Italian master Caravaggio. Van Meegeren was a forger who understood his victim all too well. He created "Emmaus" to confirm all Bredius's theories. It was on the same theme, and even echoed the same composition, as a tense and understated "Emmaus" by Caravaggio himself. When Bredius saw the picture, he didn't just see a painting. He saw proof that he had been right all along.

The French satirist Molière once wrote that "a learned fool is more foolish than an ignorant one". Modern social science suggests that Molière was right. In 2006, the political scientists Charles Taber and Milton Lodge looked at motivated reasoning about gun control and affirmative action. They asked people to evaluate various arguments for and against each position – and they found, as you might expect, that their subjects' political beliefs interfered with their ability to dissect the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments in front of them.

More surprising was that the process of reading the arguments pushed people further towards political extremes. This was because they grabbed on to arguments they liked and quickly dismissed the rest. Even more striking was that this polarising effect was stronger for people who already knew a lot about civics and politics. These well-informed people were better at cherry-picking the information they wanted. More information and more expertise produced more strongly motivated reasoning.

This effect is most apparent in views on climate change in the US: not only is there a huge gap between Democratic and Republican supporters over how concerned they are about climate change but the gap grows wider among Republicans and Democrats with higher levels of education and scientific literacy. Greater knowledge does not guarantee convergence on the truth; when coupled with motivated reasoning, it can simply provide fuel for polarisation.

From his Monaco villa in 1937, Bredius offers us the perfect warning about the dangerous combination of wishful thinking and deep expertise. Bredius noticed details about the forgery that a less skilled observer would have missed. Those details led him astray. ►

## Well-informed people were better at cherry-picking information they wanted. More expertise produced more strongly motivated reasoning





## Any of us is capable of falling for a lie. There is no guaranteed method of keeping ourselves safe – except to believe nothing at all

Below: incorrect assumptions about false positive test results have led to much wishful thinking about Covid-19

Facing page: taking the stand in court, Han van Meegeren explained that he had only forged the art to prove his worth as an artist – and to unmask the art experts as fools

◀ The bright speckles on the bread seem a bit clumsy to the untrained eye but they reminded Bredius of the highlights on a tempting loaf of bread in Vermeer’s “The Milkmaid”. Bredius noted that “Emmaus” depicted a 17th-century water jug in a biblical scene, an anachronism that spoke of authenticity. Van Meegeren, of course, was one step ahead. He had obtained a 17th-century antique and used it as a prop.

Van Meegeren had bought years’ worth of rare lapis lazuli paint from a London supplier in order to produce an authentic Vermeer blue. And he had painted over a 17th-century canvas, carefully scrubbed of its surface pigments but retaining its distinctive pattern of cracking.

Then there was the simplest test of all: was the paint soft? The challenge for anyone who wants to forge an Old Master is that oil paints take half a century to dry completely. Yet the paint on Emmaus was hard, a sign that it was centuries old. Van Meegeren had figured out a way to mix 17th-century oil paints with a very 20th-century material: phenol formaldehyde, a resin that when gently



cooked for two hours turned into Bakelite. No wonder the paint was unyielding: it was infused with industrial plastic.

Bredius had half a dozen subtle reasons to believe that “Emmaus” was a Vermeer. They were enough to dismiss one glaring reason to believe otherwise: that the picture doesn’t look like anything else Vermeer ever painted.

Think back to Bredius’s extraordinary rave review in *The Burlington Magazine*: “We have here – I am inclined to say – the masterpiece of Johannes Vermeer of Delft... quite different from all his other paintings and yet every inch a Vermeer.”

“Quite different from all his other paintings” – shouldn’t that be a warning? But the old man desperately wanted to believe that this painting was the Vermeer he’d been looking for all his life, the one that would provide the link back to Caravaggio himself. Van Meegeren set a trap into which only a true expert could stumble. Wishful thinking did the rest.

**T**he authorities responsible for bringing Van Meegeren to justice unwittingly helped make his story world-famous. Forensic chemists quickly verified that, as Van Meegeren claimed, the paintings were hardened with Bakelite and aged with India ink. But in an absurd stunt, prosecutors challenged Van Meegeren to prove that he was the forger by painting a

picture in the style of “Emmaus”. And of course he did, taking the opportunity to charm some journalists along the way. One breathless headline reported “He Paints for His Life”.

Newspapers in the Netherlands and around the world couldn’t tear their gaze away from the great showman. By the time the trial came, in 1947, the charge was forgery, not treason. When Van Meegeren himself took the stand, he explained that he had only forged the art to prove his worth as an artist and to unmask the art experts as fools.

“You sold these fakes for high prices,” admonished the judge.

“Had I sold them for low prices,” quipped Van Meegeren, “it would have been obvious they were fake.”

Peals of laughter rang out. In his closing statement, Van Meegeren claimed again that he hadn’t done it for the money, which had brought him nothing but trouble. It is a bold statement from a man who hosted wild sex parties while Amsterdam starved. But the newspapers and the public were just as spellbound as Bredius had been.

Found guilty of forgery, Van Meegeren was cheered as he left the courtroom. A Dutch opinion poll found that he was one of the most popular men in the country.

And that was the end of Van Meegeren’s adventure. A few days after being sentenced, he was admitted to hospital with heart trouble. He died shortly after, having never served a day of his prison term. For a while, there was even talk of putting up a statue.

**Any of us is capable of falling for a lie. There is no guaranteed method of keeping ourselves safe – except to believe nothing at all, a corrosive cynicism which is even worse than gullibility. But I can offer a simple habit of mind that I have found helpful. When you are asked to believe something – a newspaper headline, a statistic, a claim on social media – stop for a moment and notice your own feelings. Are you feeling defensive, vindicated, angry, smug? Whatever the emotional reaction, take note of it. Having done so, you may be thinking more clearly already.**

So what is your emotional reaction to the story of the clever forger who fooled the experts and scammed the Nazis? Van Meegeren’s early biographers fell in love with him. More recently we have learnt the truth.





Jonathan Lopez's book *The Man Who Made Vermeers* is one of few to focus on the demonstrable fact that this likeable rogue was a Nazi. The circumstantial evidence is suggestive enough. Van Meegeren had prospered mightily under Nazi occupation, buying up a portfolio of expensive properties and holding decadent parties. You don't get to act like that in German-occupied territory unless you've made friends with a few Nazis.

But it is the documentary evidence that is really telling. The most vivid is *Teekeningen 1*, a sinister and grotesque anti-Semitic book illustrated and published by Van Meegeren. (Lopez hides his copy; he doesn't want visitors to see it.) The book is packed with Nazi iconography and, despite the wartime privations of Amsterdam, lavishly produced.

No wonder, given whom Van Meegeren hoped might read it. A copy was hand-delivered to Adolf Hitler, with a handwritten dedication in artist's charcoal: "To my beloved Führer in grateful tribute - Han van Meegeren."

It was found in Adolf Hitler's library.

What would have happened if this shocking discovery had emerged before Van Meegeren's trial?

The discomfiting truth is that it did. A Dutch resistance newspaper published the news and Van Meegeren waved it away, claiming that he had signed hundreds of copies of the book and the dedication must have been added by someone else. It's a ludicrous excuse. But people wanted to believe it. Wishful thinking is a powerful thing.

Caught in a scandal, a modern-day Van Meegeren would say, "That's not my voice on the tape," or call the story "fake news". And their supporters would agree. It seems that if you show people a trickster with a sense of humour, a penchant for mocking experts and the capacity to land a few blows on a

## 'Had I sold them for low prices,' quipped Van Meegeren, 'it would have been obvious they were fake'

hated enemy, they will forgive a lot. What they cannot forgive they will find ways to ignore. Recent experience has only reinforced that lesson.

Han van Meegeren sensed that the Dutch people wanted a new story as desperately as Abraham Bredius had wanted to discover a new Vermeer. This tale would be upbeat, a lighthearted yarn of boldness and trickery in which a Dutchman had struck back against the Nazis. Han van Meegeren knew how to give people what they wanted.

In light of recent years, we shouldn't be surprised. The facts about Van Meegeren seemed obvious enough. But facts are not the only thing that shape our thinking. Abraham Bredius was right all along when he wrote, "I had difficulty controlling my emotions."

So do we all. **FT**

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*This essay draws on ideas explored in Tim Harford's book "How to Make the World Add Up" (UK)/"The Data Detective" (published this week in the US)*



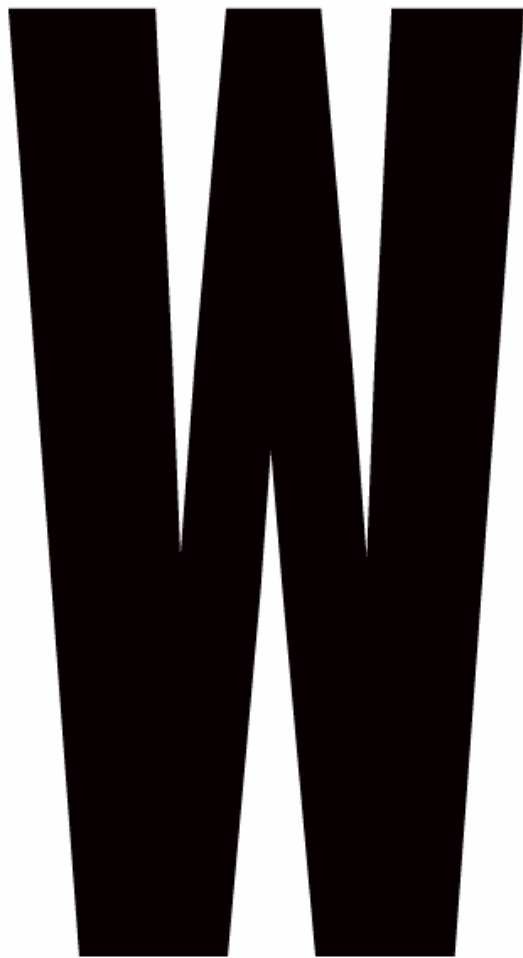
# TALES FROM A TRAITOR

George Blake, the KGB agent who served and betrayed the British establishment, died in December. *Simon Kuper* recalls his meeting with one of the last of the cold war spies









'Religion promises people, let's say, communism after their death. And communism promises people a wonderful life here on earth – and nothing came of that either'

Previous page:  
George Blake arrives  
in the UK after his  
release from captivity in  
North Korea in 1953

hen the 98-year-old double agent George Blake died in Moscow on Boxing Day, my biography of him was long since ready. Blake was a one-man Netflix series, whose life tracked many of the dramas of the 20th century. A Briton raised in the Netherlands, he was a teenage courier in the Dutch resistance, joined the British secret services, converted to communism while a prisoner in North Korea and became a spy for the KGB. He then sent dozens of agents working for Britain to their deaths. His crime so shocked Britain that when he was finally unmasked, in 1961, he was given the longest sentence in the country's modern history – only to escape in a jailbreak so spectacular that Alfred Hitchcock spent his final decade trying to turn it into a film.

One day in 2012, I spent several hours with Blake in his *dacha* outside Moscow. I had gone expecting simply to write an article. I left thinking, "That was the most interesting interview I've ever done," and eventually decided to turn it into a book that I spent years researching. I hope it elucidates Blake's life, the cold war and how he tried to find peace with himself.

The genesis of the book, published next week, was my friendship with Derk Sauer, a Dutchman who became a media mogul in post-communist Russia. (As well as founding the Moscow Times newspaper, he had the brilliant idea of starting Russian editions of *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*.) Sauer and Blake were friends. Some years their families got together to celebrate Sinterklaas, the Dutch St Nicholas's Day. Before I flew to Moscow in 2012 to speak at a conference, I asked Sauer if Blake might be willing to give me an interview.

This wasn't the sort of thing Blake did much. Like most spies, he was a secretive type. He was also careful not to speak out about Vladimir Putin. A pacifist democrat in his old age, Blake disliked his fellow KGB alumnus. However, he and his wife depended on Putin for their *dacha* and pensions.

Before Blake agreed to let me interview him, he insisted on interviewing me. I phoned him at the agreed time, from Moscow's Novodevichy cemetery, where I was looking for the graves of Chekhov and Nikita Khrushchev. Like Blake, I had grown up British in the Netherlands, and on the phone we spoke Dutch. His accent was pre-war chic. He was chatty and quick to laugh. He skirted around the topic of Putin, so finally I raised it: I promised not to ask him about contemporary Russian politics.

The other issue, he told me apologetically, was his family. His three British sons (establishment types) and his British ex-wife didn't like it when newspapers wrote about their father the traitor. I agreed to publish the interview only in a Dutch newspaper. That satisfied Blake, and he invited me to the *dacha*. I think he did it because he trusted Sauer, because he welcomed having someone new to speak Dutch with and because he wanted to reach readers in his home country after 70 years of separation. He felt more Dutch than British.

I later negotiated with Sauer that I could publish a book in English after Blake died, when his family was going to have to live with a rush of publicity whether I wrote anything or not. In part, my decision to publish was obviously selfish. But I also thought Blake owed the British an explanation.

On the appointed morning, Sauer's Russian chauffeur collected me at the Stalinist-gothic Hotel Ukraina and drove me out of town to Blake's *dacha* – his former weekend house, a gift from the

KGB, where he was living full-time in retirement. Even on a Saturday there were traffic jams but we arrived early, so I went to sit in the sun in a local park. It could have been a middle-class suburb of London. Pleasant white apartment blocks fringed a children's playground. People in western clothes passed – a girl jogging, a man pushing a pram, a boy in a baseball cap riding a bike with training wheels. With hindsight, that spring morning in 2012 – when the oil price was over \$100 a barrel, and before Putin invaded Ukraine – was about as good as Russian life has ever got.

Then I walked to the *dacha*. In a quiet wooded lane a little old man with a dog's-head cane stood waiting for me. George Blake had a straggly beard, false teeth, slippers and liver spots. His famous dapperness had gone but he retained his deceiver's charm. He opened a door into his vast garden, where we fought our way through a plague of mosquitoes.

The *dacha*'s wooden exterior was painted light green. "This house, you would not believe it, was built before the revolution," he marvelled. It was here that the Blakes entertained Kim Philby on 1970s weekends, until the two defectors fell out.

Blake's Russian wife Ida and a yapping terrier came out of the house to say hello. Blake took me into the conservatory. Many of the books on the shelves came from the library he had inherited from Donald Maclean, his soulmate and fellow British double agent in exile. There were jacketless hardbacks of Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*, HG Wells novels and *The Life and Teaching of Karl Marx*. On a windowsill stood a red-coated British Beefeater doll – perhaps a reminder of Blake's imprisonment as a traitor in London, or perhaps just a souvenir.

Ida brought us tea and salami sandwiches. The dog, Lyusha, dozing at our feet, got his own portion. Blake and I sat side by side on a sofa, close together, so that he could at least hear me. His blue eyes were bloodshot. "I cannot see you," he explained. "I see that somebody is sitting there, but who that is and what he looks like, I can't see."

That morning, he was 89 years old, the last survivor of the British KGB agents who had defected to Moscow. When he arrived there at the end of 1966, after his jailbreak, Guy Burgess was already dead. Maclean and Philby died in Moscow in the 1980s.

I asked Blake whether he wanted to speak Dutch or English. He replied, in Dutch, "When I get the chance – which happens very seldom – I find it very pleasant to talk in Dutch. Possibly that is how I feel most at home."

Settling beside him on the sofa in the conservatory, I asked him what he missed when he thought back to his Rotterdam childhood. "Well, of course, I miss my parents," he said. "In the first place my mother, to whom I was very attached and who also loved me a lot and whose character I inherited."

He was born George Behar in Rotterdam on November 11 1922. His father, Albert, a Jew from Constantinople, had served in the British army in the first world war and had become a British citizen. A month after the Armistice, Albert was posted to Rotterdam to help repatriate British prisoners of war. There he met Blake's mother Catharina, a Dutch Protestant.

Blake told me his memories of his father: "He had a little factory – gloves for the ship workers of Rotterdam – and he left early in the morning, and only came home at about eight in the evening. Then he'd come to our bedroom and tuck us in and



give us a goodnight kiss, and that was really all we saw of him. And he wasn't healthy, because he had been wounded in the war - gas poisoning. So he never played as big a role in our lives as my mother."

After Albert died in 1935, a letter arrived from his sister Zephira in Cairo, where she was married to a rich banker. Could George come and live with them? His mother, left destitute by her husband's death, agreed. George was keen on an adventure. Three years at British and French schools in Cairo turned him into a cosmopolitan.

In September 1939, he was on summer holiday in Rotterdam when war broke out. He joined the resistance but yearned for greater things. In 1942, he made a daring underground journey through Belgium, France and Spain to Britain. He told me: "I thought - and it was true - that once I had got to England and had training there, then I could do much more than what I was doing in the Netherlands. I very much wanted to be a real agent."

In Britain he joined P8, the Dutch section of the British Secret Intelligence Service (SIS, now called MI6). One of his tasks was to escort members of the Dutch resistance before they were parachuted into the occupied Netherlands. In London, George, his sisters and their mother changed their family name from Behar to the quintessentially English Blake.

A devout Calvinist, he had intended to become a pastor after the war. But posted by SIS in 1945 to the liberated Netherlands, and then to occupied Germany, he succumbed to the wine, women and song on offer to the occupying forces. Afterwards he felt he was no longer worthy of a career in the church.

Instead he found a new vocation in the booming postwar industry of espionage. In 1947, SIS sent him on a "sandwich course" at Cambridge university for a few months to learn Russian. His professor there, Elizabeth Hill, a fierce anti-communist who had grown up Russian-British in pre-revolutionary St Petersburg, imbued him with a love of her lost homeland. Blake claimed that within a couple of months of starting her course, he read *Anna Karenina* in Russian.

SIS then sent him under diplomatic cover to Seoul. In 1950 the Korean war broke out. The invading North Koreans captured Blake and two other British diplomats, and marched them off north, together with about 70 civilian detainees and 750 American prisoners of war. About half the prisoners died that winter, mostly of starvation, illness, cold or at the hands of brutal guards on a death march.

But Blake emerged from the experience more anti-American than anti-North Korean. He thought the American PoWs were quick to die because material excess had softened them. He was horrified by American Flying Fortress bombers destroying Korean villages. In one of his talks to East German Stasi officers in the 1970s - those videotapes were among my best sources - he recalled thinking: "What right do we have to come here and destroy everything? These people, who live so far from us, should decide for themselves how to organise their lives." He came to feel that he was fighting on the wrong side of the cold war.

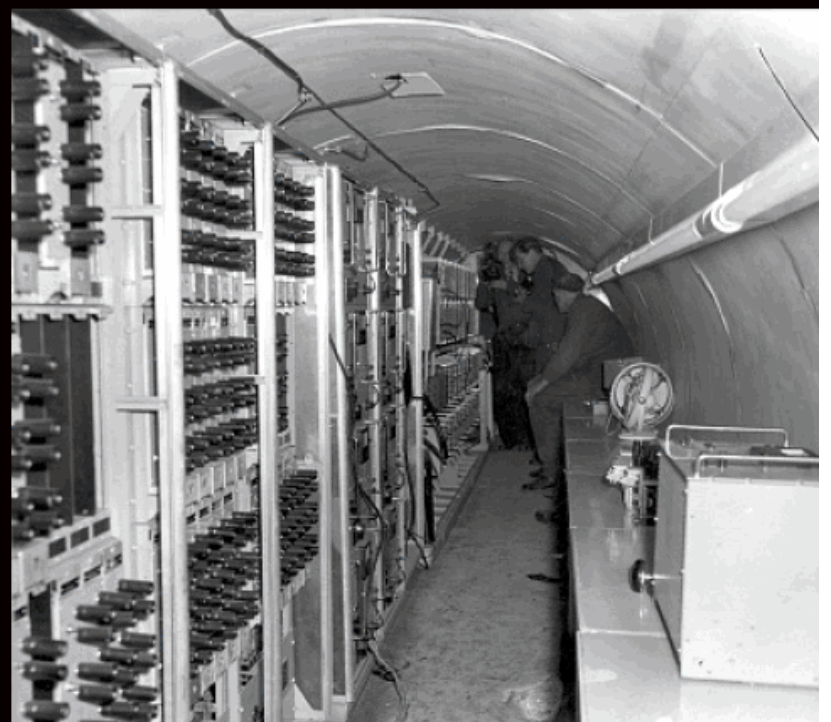
Finally, in February 1951, the horrors subsided. Blake was one of a group of 10 French and British prisoners, most of them diplomats and journalists, who were held in a quiet farmhouse near Manpo, in the north. "Our existence in that small wattle ▶



Above: Blake is met by his mother Catharina on his return to the UK in 1953. His experience of imprisonment had left him 'more anti-American than anti-North Korean'



Clockwise from above: a Daily Express front page from 1961, when the extent of the damage done by Blake's betrayal was becoming clear; the US spy tunnel in Berlin in the mid-1950s - informing the Soviets of the tunnel was Blake's biggest feat of espionage; Blake's fellow British agent in exile Donald Maclean in 1951; Vyvyan Holt, the British consul who befriended Blake during their imprisonment in North Korea and influenced his move towards communism







Left: the first picture of Blake's new life in the USSR, following his escape from Wormwood Scrubs prison in 1966  
Above: In the 1970s and 1980s, Blake was a frequent guest of the East German Stasi



Above: Blake with Kim Philby in 1975; the two men did not get on well, and Blake was scornful of his fellow exile's failure to adapt to life in the USSR  
Right: a telegram informs Blake that Sean Bourke will not stand trial for his part in Blake's escape from Wormwood Scrubs

TELEGRAFA AN PHOIST		TELEGRAM COIRIÓICHE NÓ RADIO-TELEGRAM		POST OFFICE TELEGRAPHS		FOREIGN OR RADIO-TELEGRAM	
Message Group	Location	Final Words	Table Charge	Serial No.	Time	Rate	Class
	ZCZC		OA				
	Class Code	PL	Origin Code	Origin Words			
Office of Origin	Final Words	Final Date	Final Remarks	Class, Priority, Remarks & Instructions	Rate, Service Restrictions and Indications		
To: <b>GEORGE BLAKE, POSTE RESTANTE MOSCOW CENTRAL POST OFFICE, MOSCOW, USSR</b>							
<p>DEAR GEORGE VICTORY IN IRISH HIGH COURT BEST WISHES SEAN.</p>							
<p><i>Sean Bourke</i> 36, Beach Rd. Dublin.</p>							

“hut,” he wrote in his 1990 autobiography *No Other Choice*, “was not unlike that of ten people who have to spend two years in a railway carriage, put on a siding and forgotten.”

Their suffering from then on was mostly psychological. These were intelligent people, hungry and bored out of their minds. Blake learnt that even a person with the richest set of experiences could tell his entire life story within three or four months, and would then have to start all over again.

In spring 1951, the Soviet embassy in Pyongyang sent the prisoners a package of books. Only one was in English: Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. The prisoners drew lots for the privilege of reading it first, and quickly read it to pieces. But there were also three books in Russian: Lenin’s *State and the Revolution* and two translated volumes of Marx’s *Capital*. The only Russian-speakers in the group were Blake and Vyvyan Holt, the British consul in Seoul. Holt had lost his glasses on the march, while scrambling to hide from machine-gun fire from American planes. “Then he couldn’t read any more himself,” said Blake.

“I read to him. We sat on a burial mound, and we read and discussed the books. He had been a civil servant of the English Indian government, and he was completely a servant of the English colonial system. But he was a very sensible man and he saw that it couldn’t go on, and that something would replace it, and he thought that thing would be communism. He wouldn’t want to live in a communist country, but that was his prediction. And since he was someone for whom I had a lot of respect – he was my boss, shall I say, and we had very good friendly relations – what he thought had a lot of authority for me.”

For a bright young man whose education had been interrupted by war, the readings with Holt were the university Blake never had. The two men also studied the Koran in Arabic and discussed Marx and Lenin with their fellow prisoners.

The readings were only the last in a sequence of experiences that pushed him towards communism. Blake had grown up a Calvinist who believed that everything in life was predestined; it was a small step to believing, with the communists, that history was predestined too. Although he no longer believed that Christ was the son of God, he still thought “there should be a kingdom of God with justice”. Calvinists disapproved of material display; so did communists.

I put it to him: “You swapped your religion for communism.” I expected him to demur but he said: “Yes, that’s very clear. Religion promises people, let’s say, communism after their death. Because in heaven we are all equal and we live in wonderful circumstances. And communism promises people a wonderful life here on earth – and nothing came of that either.”

Was his communism a faith, just as his religion was? “I think so,” he replied.

The one thing that didn’t push him into treachery was any hatred of Britain.

At one point in the conversation, he returned from a visit to the bathroom with a new thought:

*Blake: Yes, that’s it, I want to say it: the strange thing about my life is that I owe everything, well not everything but a lot, to English people. English people arrested and sentenced me and, eh, rightly.*



*And English people helped me escape from jail and otherwise arranged my life, to a certain degree. And that's very peculiar, if you think about it.*  
*Me: So you don't look back in anger at England?*  
*Blake: Not at all! To the contrary. I'm a great admirer of England and all that is English.*  
*Me: But a distant admirer. You don't feel any love for the country.*  
*Blake: Love?*  
*Me: Sentiment.*  
*Blake: That's true. It's more, eh - yes, but a very large admiration. Love is something different.*

Much to his regret, Blake was never able to return to Britain after 1966, where he would have been thrown straight back into jail. By law, he was a traitor to the country. At heart, he wasn't. In his words: "To betray you first have to belong. I never belonged." He didn't feel British enough to betray Britain.

It's notable that the three unwitting mentors in his conversion to communism were British establishment types: Hill at Cambridge, Holt in North Korea and RN Carew Hunt, the SIS theoretician whose handbook *The Theory and Practice of Communism* - intended to forearm British spies against the enemy doctrine - struck Blake as unintentionally persuasive.

One evening, Blake secretly handed the North Korean camp commander - "Fatso", the prisoners called him - a note in Russian, addressed to the Soviet embassy. He had crossed over.

In 1953, the prisoners were released and Blake rejoined SIS. For the next few years, in London and at his next posting in Berlin, he'd meet his KGB handlers on dark street corners and hand over thousands of documents, including, most culpably, the names of hundreds of agents working for the British behind the Iron Curtain.

Tom Bower, who for his biography of the British spy chief Dick White, *The Perfect English Spy*, was granted rare interviews with White and other SIS officials, wrote that after Blake's unmasking in 1961, "SIS officers had contacted agents and sources throughout the satellite countries [of the Soviet bloc] and had concluded that Blake's treachery had cost at least forty lives, among them a Red Army technical expert whom Blake had personally known."

Blake freely admitted betraying agents but never acknowledged that any were killed. He chose to live in denial.

When I asked him if he had any regrets, he replied without mentioning the betrayed agents:

*Blake: I'm sorry about the suffering that I caused to people in one way or another and also in my own circle, because of course I would rather not have done that, but, well, I - there's nothing to be done about that any more.*

*Me: Do you still often think about that?*

*Blake: Yes, I think about everything. When you're as old as I am, you think about everything, and then everything goes through your head again and you see all those images from past times, and I often dream about police and things, but eh - so that is really the position.*

*Me: Images go through your head? What kind of images?*

*Blake [laughs]: I think back to everything. From let's say the Calvé Delft [food] factory in Rotterdam to what I have experienced here in the last few years.*

**T**he loving husband and father of three small boys was sentenced to 42 years in jail: "A savage sentence," noted the prime minister, Harold Macmillan, in his diary. But Wormwood Scrubs in the 1960s was a leaky ship: Blake climbed over the wall in 1966, using a rope ladder thrown by the Irish ex-prisoner Sean Bourke. A little over two months later, after a spell hiding in Hampstead, aided by British anti-bomb activists, he made it to Moscow.

Blake realised on arriving in grey, ramshackle, repressive Moscow that he had given up his wife and sons for a system that didn't work. He once told his friend Sauer, with a guffaw: "After a week in Moscow, I knew that communism was the biggest disappointment of my life." But he was an adaptable man, and happily lived out the rest of his life there. He met Ida, had a son with her and in the 1980s re-established contact with his British sons. The KGB made him a colonel, and he potted about in the IMEMO think-tank with Maclean, his final mentor from the British establishment.

I remarked to Blake that it must have been difficult to adapt and find happiness. He laughed: "Why do you think it would be difficult? That depends entirely on the person. The one finds it difficult, and the other doesn't... I think many people will think that, eh - that the life that I have led, that I didn't deserve that life, but that is the way it went." At the end of our time together, he asked:

*Blake: Well, what's your judgment now? Are you astonished by everything I have told you or, eh, did you know it all beforehand, or...*

*Me: I had expected a more tragic figure.*

*Blake: Ahhhh! Yes. Hahaha. Tragic I am not.*

*Me: No, you're affable.*

*Blake: Hahaha! Tragic I am not, but had you expected that?*

*Me: Yes. You have lived through a lot.*

*Blake: Yes.*

*Me: You took very difficult decisions.*

*Blake: Yes.*

*Me: You lived in a time of life and death, in Berlin, in Korea.*

*Blake: Yes, that is true. But that is the way it went.*

His appeals to determinism had become instinctive. Human beings had no control over their own lives, their actions were mysteriously predestined, and so he wasn't going to worry.

I asked if there was anything Dutch I could send him from the west. If it were possible, he said politely, he would appreciate some Dutch herring or cheese. Blake, Ida and Lyusha came out into the lane behind the house to wave me off.

Afterwards, Blake phoned Sauer to say we had had a very enjoyable conversation. I must admit that the feeling was mutual. Colonel Blake had charmed me. I flew home to Paris and told my wife about this gentle, fascinating, cerebral, cosmopolitan and baffling old man. She pointed out that he seemed to have killed 40 people. It sounded, she said, as if he had conned me too.

When I began to research his life and write my book, his charm wore off fast. I never did send him the herring. **FT**

Simon Kuper's *"The Happy Traitor: Spies, Lies and Exile in Russia: The Extraordinary Story of George Blake"* is published by Profile Books at £14.99



Blake with his dog Lyusha in his garden in 2012. The dacha was a gift from the KGB

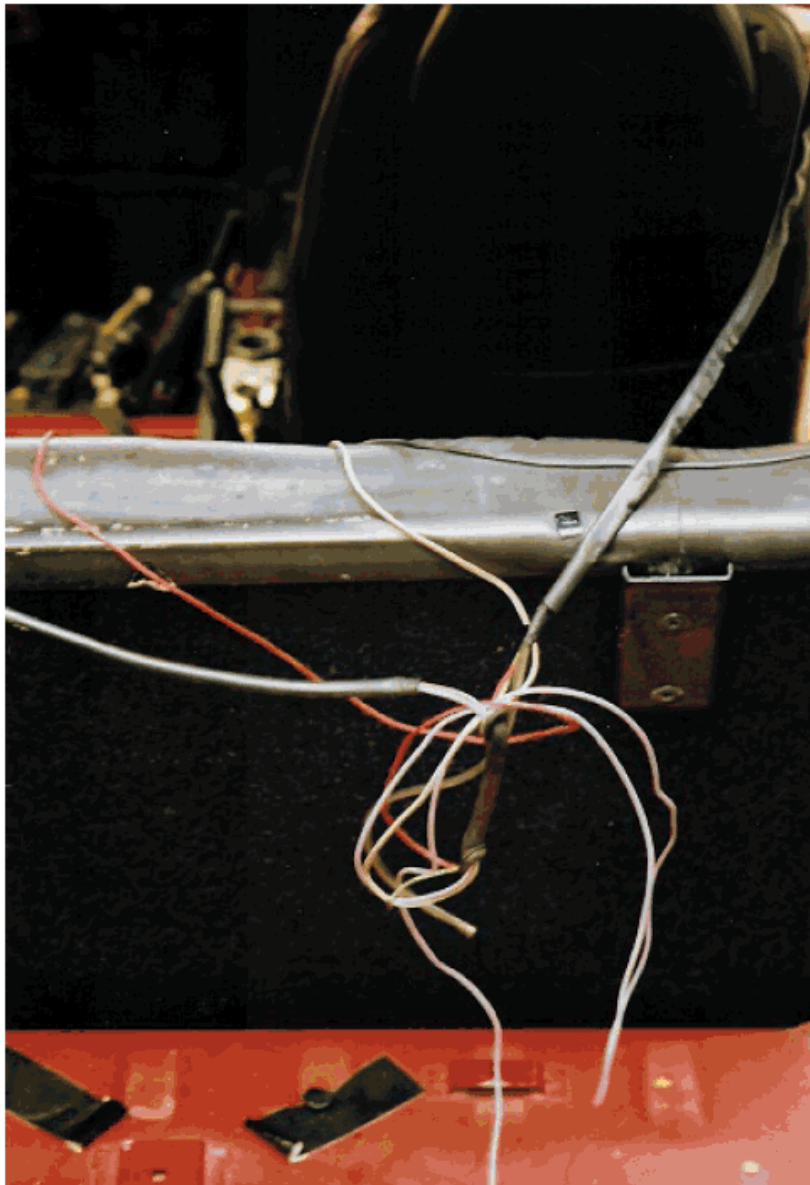
**'I'm sorry about the suffering I caused to people and also in my own circle, because of course I would rather not have done that... but, well, there's nothing to be done about that any more'**



# The disassembly line

In 2001, artist **Michael Landy** gathered all 7,227 of his possessions – from car – in a former clothes shop on Oxford Street, London’s commercial of assistants catalogued every item before taking them apart by hand tools. The nearly six tonnes of debris were sent to a landfill in Essex, just the blue boilersuit he wore during the two-week “Break Down” project.

**Wolfgang Tillmans**, who in 2000 had become the first photographer “Break Down” and soon afterwards sent his 106 photos to Landy in a box, where Magazine is publishing them here for the first time, ahead of a display a new conversation between Landy, Tillmans and FT Weekend Magazi





m paintings and love letters to his hifi and his heart, and set about destroying them. A team or with scissors, razors, hammers and power north of London, and Landy was left with only

to win the Turner Prize, documented “Break re they remained for 20 years. FT Weekend at Thomas Dane Gallery in London, along with ne’s **Josh Spero**.







Above: box of Wolfgang Tillmans' photos documenting 'Break Down'; his inscription says there are 111 photos but archivists found 106. Top right: Michael Landy. Bottom right: Tillmans

**Josh Spero:** Michael, you and your team shredded books page by page; you cut shoes' soles off; you removed every nail from chairs and every stitch from fabrics; you took the tape out of your cassettes and the wires out of your hifi; you weighed mugs and smashed them with a hammer; and then you disassembled your car and used heavy-duty tools to cut it into pieces. Tell us about how you came up with this idea.

**Michael Landy:** I was at home in Tabard Street and I had just sold "Scrapheap Services" [1995], my fictitious cleaning company, to the Tate, and things had been a real struggle. Then suddenly I was ahead financially for the first time in my life and it popped into my head as I was at the kitchen table with a blank A4 piece of paper that I would destroy all my worldly belongings. Three years later, that's what I did.

Everything had been a struggle up until that point and suddenly I had a Richard James suit, I had a Saab 900 car, I had things, and then I started to think what that struggle was about and what did that all mean. Then I started to think about how I could go about destroying all my worldly belongings and I made about 17 drawings of different ways... You can give it away, you can do all sorts of things, but my choice was to destroy all my worldly belongings in front of people.

**Wolfgang Tillmans:** It's an ultimate self-effacing gesture and at the same time it puts all the focus on to you as a person. But I'm also intrigued - catching up on you talking about it and speaking about how you enjoyed being on that platform.

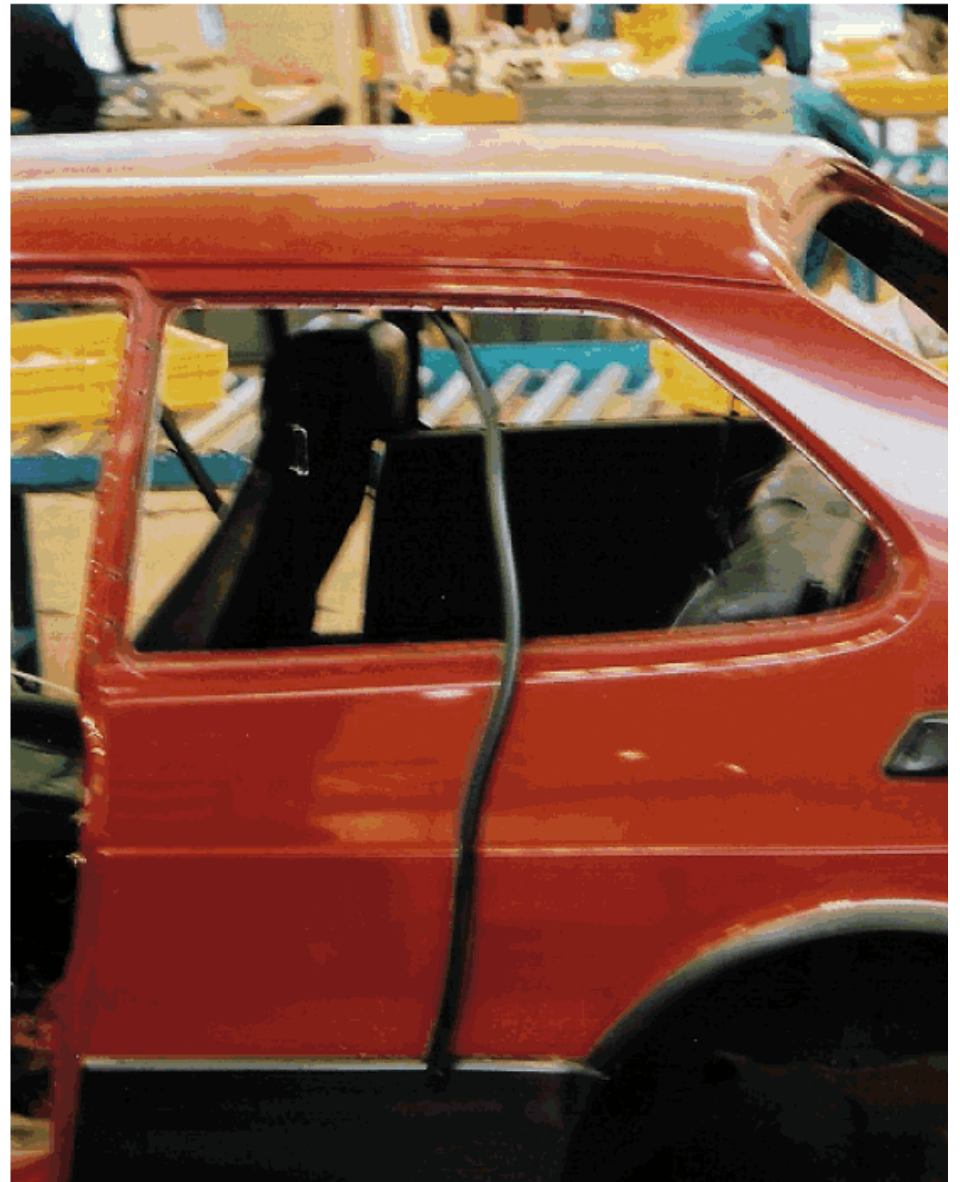
I mean, you were like a performer. I remember, it was so enigmatic.

**ML:** Ultimately, there's nothing to buy - I mean, [visitors] stole things

WOLFGANG TILLMANS. PORTRAIT BY DAN IPP. MICHAEL LANDY. PORTRAIT BY CLIVE LISSAMAN

'I spoke then about how I was witnessing my own death and also moments of elation and it being the happiest two weeks of my life'

Michael Landy





- but it's the experience. This is the experience of you watching this happen. That's the main thing I was really interested in: what people came away with. As an artist, what you really want is for people to talk about it. It's not in an art gallery, it's in C&A on Oxford Street, where people go to consume things.

People just wanted to know what motivated me to do it. I'd read a lot about consumerism beforehand so I was armed and primed to deal with that.

**JS:** How did "Break Down" work?

**ML:** We created these guidelines to break everything down, all my worldly possessions, into its material parts. It was very basic - metal, glass, ceramic. Obviously no one had done anything like this before, and we had 7,227 items to break down over a two-week period. Everything got inputted into this spreadsheet.

All that being very methodical about it was very labour- and time-intensive. After about a week, James Lingwood from Artangel [the organisation funding the project] said: "We are going to have to speed up the process because we are well behind."

**JS:** Why did you want to take such care with the objects when disassembling? In theory, you could have just put everything in a trash compactor or even just thrown everything away.

**ML:** Oh yes, it was based on a material reclamation facility. Its sole purpose is to take things of value out of the waste stream. I was interested in people seeing my worldly belongings in different states, from a whole teddy bear to a teddy bear that has been disassembled and had all its guts taken out and broken down into its material parts.

**JS:** I want to ask both of you about consumerism, because it seems to be a theme in both of your work: consumption, destruction. Do you think that consumption has changed from 20 years ago to today?

**WT:** To be honest, I really don't see "Break Down" as so much about consumption because, come on - Michael wasn't a powerful consumer.

**ML:** No, I'm not Elton John!

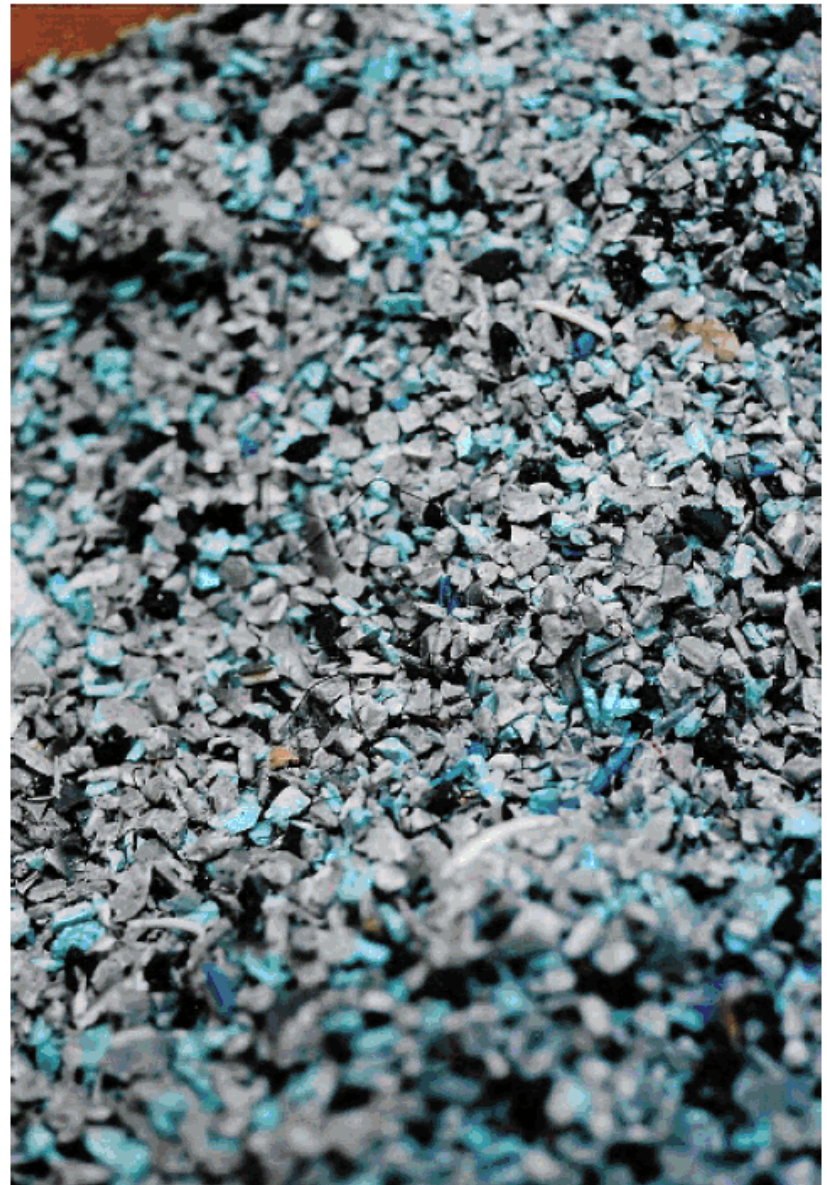
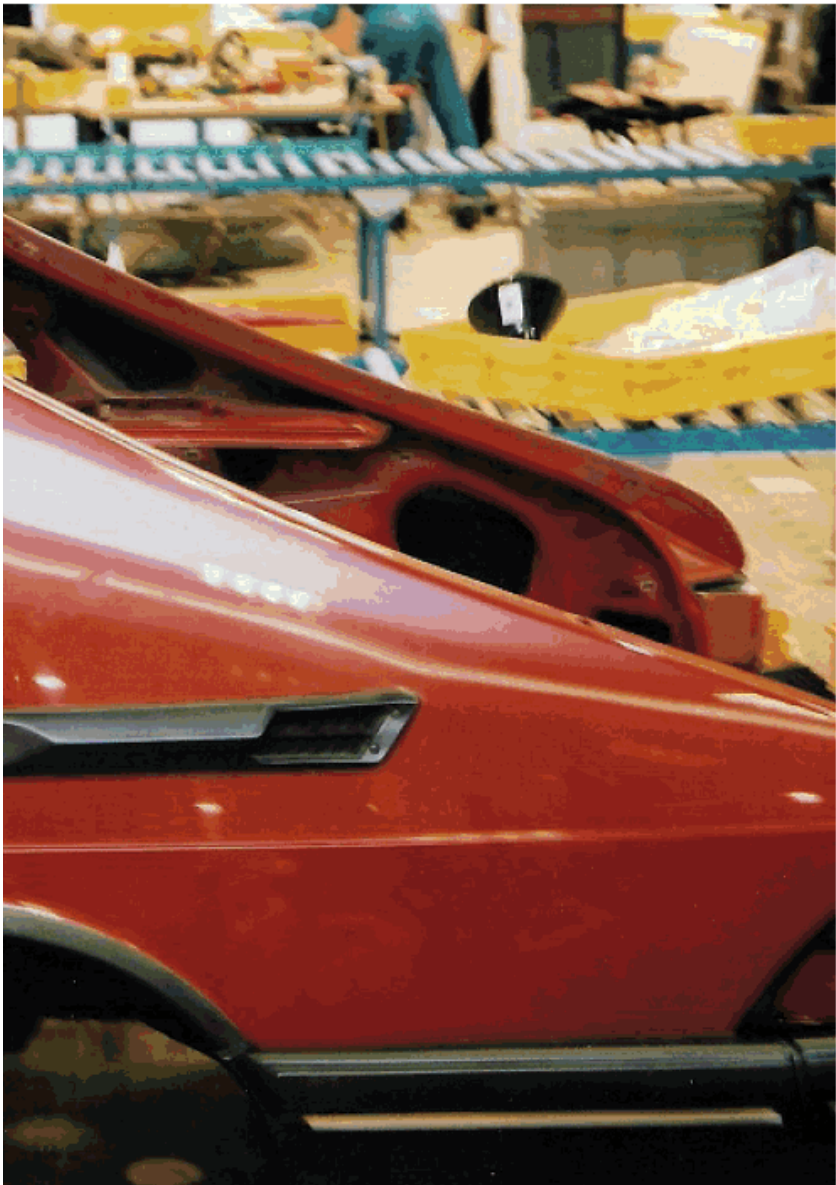
**WT:** He had a very nice car. But I thought it was much more spiritual, much more - looking at what is material. Not so much about, "Hey, I bought all these useless videocassettes." You had like 10 or 20 videocassettes, you didn't have 5,000. It wasn't about excessiveness.

**ML:** Our society judges people by how much they possess, to an extent, and obviously the more possessions one has, the more successful you are perceived to be. It was the experience that really

interested me, when people came to "Break Down" and what they witnessed and how my possessions somehow mirrored their own possessions. People would talk about their own feelings of what they would go into a burning home to save, and it wasn't normally the VCR - it was family photographs, or things of some other different value to monetary value. At the time I spoke about how I was witnessing my own death and also moments of elation and it being the happiest two weeks of my life.

**WT:** How did you feel when I gave you that box of photographs?

**ML:** I was relieved that you gave it to me afterwards, because obviously if it came into my possession during then I would have had to destroy it. It was great; people were very kind to me afterwards. People bought me things, people sent me clothes. ▶





**'I didn't have unreserved, only positive feelings about this at the time. It was a bit unsettling. It makes you question all sorts'**

Wolfgang Tillmans

◀ We had people of the cloth who came to the exhibition and gave sermons. We kind of created a forum for people to be able to talk about their feelings about ownership and self.  
JS: Wolfgang, your "Break Down" photos are an act of creation which came out of an act of destruction. What informed them when you were making them? Was there something in particular you focused on? Did you intend it to be as much documentary as philosophical?  
WT: There are different modes of motivation behind me making photographs. They can be very disparate. One of them is when I see something, experience something and when I feel a sense of beauty, wanting to preserve something - wanting to record something for history that I find valuable. That really is the origin of, for example, my nightlife photographs. It was

born out of a sense of this is such a unique setting... a rare moment, and I can record it, I have the skills to record it in a brief interaction without disturbing people. I do it.  
The same was [true] here: I witnessed this, I came as a viewer, a visitor, and I was, basically, touched. I don't want to say overwhelmed but I was totally compelled, and the number 106 [photographs taken] shows that I was fully drawn in. I didn't come with the intention to photograph but then thought, "This is all going to go and so somebody better record it!"  
ML: It was very kind of you to give me the box of photographs. I remember Gillian [Wearing, artist and Landy's partner] paid for someone to video-record it and I was very reluctant - what I'm always talking about is how people experience it and not... I didn't necessarily want any other record





of it. But obviously, in retrospect, it's a great record to have.

**JS:** In some ways the piece was extremely ahead of its time, the way that it examined possessions and ownership is very ahead of today, but at the same time, now we would never think of putting six tonnes of objects into landfill.

**ML:** No, that wasn't my original idea actually.

**JS:** What was your idea?

**ML:** To put it in a shopping centre - to put it underground in a shopping centre. To have it as some kind of monument to consumerism, with some sort of headstone, saying, "Here lies all of Michael Landy's worldly possessions" - but by the end of it I think I'd invested so much time in it - three years - that I wanted to be rid of it, to be honest.

**JS:** Thinking about the art world at the time: we'd just got past the peak of the Young British Artists, Cool

Britannia, when Britain became a massive focus for contemporary art. How do you feel about that era in retrospect? Do you think it's held up well or badly?

**WT:** At the time, in the 1990s, I found it incredibly difficult and inappropriate to throw everyone in one bag, under one label, because there were really very opposite tendencies going on. Michael and Gillian Wearing, for example, were completely opposite to other people, and this generalisation, which gave YBA a lot of audiences and a great deal of exposure around the world, was also a problem because it didn't allow people to look in a more differentiated way.

**ML:** I think everyone just got lumped in together because it was easier to package people that way and to sell it as something.

**WT:** It's not easier - that's probably not the right way to describe the

motivation, because something actually did happen in the 1990s. There really was suddenly this large activity. People were trying to describe it - they looked for ways to describe that energy.

**JS:** Do you feel that it was a useful thing to have been part of, even if you didn't feel part of it? What legacy has it had?

**WT:** I think that period, 1991 to maybe 1997, when the "Sensation" exhibition opened [with works by YBAs owned by collector Charles Saatchi] - it was a very insular phenomenon, it was British people, and by the end of the 1990s, London had fully opened up to art from all over the continent and it really was a place where you could see international art. The last 20 years were incredibly different in London because a variety of art from all over the world is represented. I guess it needed that

insular, navel-gazing moment for the first time to self-confidently say we are a proud modern art nation. Maybe we looked at these culturally enriching exchanges happening without quite noticing the storm [Brexit and its cultural backlash] that would be brewing.

**JS:** How did you feel about destroying other people's artworks, Michael, including your friends'?

**ML:** I never actually physically destroyed anything apart from maybe the Gary Hume painting. As I was destroying it - as I set the blowtorch on to the gloss paint - apart from the fumes, I did feel odd about doing that. I can't say why.

**WT:** What I find difficult, what I regret, in a way, is that the piece lends itself to trivialisation and to the more "outrageous" bits, to the anecdotal, and I find... that there's a spiritual element in trying to look at matter. ▶





**'Once you go past the veneer of something, you want to see the guts of it and you want to see what's in it, and the only way to do that is to literally take it apart'**

Michael Landy

◀ Some of the photographs zoom in on stuff that is broken-down material. I was wondering: what did you learn? Years later, I took my colour photocopier apart and I found that super interesting also to look inside. I saw you holding a Yashica camera: wasn't it hugely interesting to look inside?

**ML:** Yes. As a child, I loved taking things apart because I wanted to know the mechanics of them. Once you go past the veneer of something, you want to see the guts of it and you want to see what's in it, and the only way to do that is to literally take it apart. You're basically taking it back to where it came from - its material parts - and then you start to see how things are articulated and created. Our production line was reversed - I reversed the idea of production into a disassembly line.

**JS:** Wolfgang, were you expecting that the photos would be shown?

**WT:** No, I never personally exhibited them. I have a huge archive of pictures of exhibitions - I do photograph art I like, and it's kind of a reservoir I hope maybe will be useful... a document of art history.

I'm really happy that I made them, but they came to me as a surprise when I got your email and the picture of the box. I didn't have unreserved, only positive feelings about this at the time. It was a bit unsettling. It makes you question all sorts but it does make you go beyond the comfortable. Today I would say I feel more positive about the work - I think it really is a valuable, crazy thing.

**ML:** Yes, it is crazy!

**JS:** If you look at the way the world has changed in the past 20 years, many of us don't own a car, we use Uber; we don't cook so much, we order in; we don't own CDs, we get Spotify. If you were to make



WOLFGANG TILLMANS, 'BREAK DOWN', 2001 (111 C-PRINTS); MAUREEN PALEY





“Break Down” now, do you think you could make it in quite the same way, or do you think there are aspects of consumption that it just couldn’t take in because our lives are so digital?

**ML:** I’m not quite sure how you destroy data.

**JS:** In some ways it was the last moment before the digital revolution that one could have made such a work, where everything you had was physical.

**ML:** Yes, I don’t think I had a computer at that point apart from maybe the PC we inputted all the inventory on. I had a pay-as-you-go mobile phone. I probably had a Game Boy as well. Yes, we consumed things very differently back then, as you were saying, to how we archive things and digital data, how we can store things now.

**WT:** We are describing that time now as incredibly analogue, but

[it was] not so. It was the moment before the dotcom bubble and at the time we felt incredibly advanced, incredibly digital – wow, the internet was everywhere, and of course we had no idea that it could go faster five or 10 years later. It’s just good to remember sometimes that one always thinks one is at the vanguard now. At the time things were feeling very futuristic.

**JS:** Michael, you said: “I’m always trying to get rid of myself so that I can move on.”

**ML:** As a creative person doing “Break Down”... I didn’t know what to do afterwards, because it seemed like such a full stop, in a way. Just how to move on as a creative person I found very difficult.

**JS:** It’s broadly still your best-known work. So in some ways the act of destruction has never left you – it’s just created something new for you, is that right?


**ML:** I think other things came out of it, like I did an “Acts of Kindness” project on the London Underground, and I did think about kindness during “Break Down”. I remember thinking – how can one articulate kindness between two complete strangers?

**JS:** One final question: if you had to pick one object to destroy, today or tomorrow, what thing would it be? You can’t destroy a government or a policy such as Brexit – you have to destroy one thing.

**WT:** There’s already been a destruction – the toppling of that statue in Bristol [of Edward Colston, a 17th-18th-century merchant involved in the slave trade]. It was this one pointed moment, this particularly crude contradiction in this free-thinking town, this sore thumb – an act of destruction that felt literally positive. I normally don’t like destruction at all – I’m a

little bit phobic of it. And I’m a little bit of a hoarder – I find it incredibly difficult to even throw a daily newspaper away.

**ML:** Oh really? You’re a project, Wolfgang. Well, like I said, I destroyed my artist archive. That was the ultimate, in a sense, because a lot of things only exist as images of previous works. So I can’t think of anything to destroy. That’s a bit worrying!

[“Break Down”] was liberating, especially at the zero point, when I had nothing left. I could be anything. It was liberating in that respect. You don’t have to feel like things tie you down or weigh on top of you. 

.....  
*Thomas Dane Gallery will present materials from the “Break Down” archive at 3 Duke Street, St James’s, London when the gallery reopens after lockdown; thomasdane.com*











‘I very rarely  
cook from  
somebody  
else’s recipe –  
it’s a following-  
rules thing’

Ella Risbridger’s genre-bending approach to food and writing helped her *Midnight Chicken* become an instant hit. She talks to *Rebecca Rose* about Nigella comparisons, cross-examining her recipes and what to cook to get through this winter.  
Portraits by *Adama Jalloh*



**E**lla Risbridger does not like to cook for herself. "It's a very weird time to be a cookery writer," says the 27-year-old author over Zoom from her flat in London. "I normally cook for other people. There are usually people popping in and out all the time." But 2020 was not, on the whole, a year for feeding friends and trying out new recipes on a grateful crowd. Risbridger has largely been cooking for her flatmate or eating toast alone.

What she really wants, she says, is "to go to a lot of expensive restaurants and have people bring me a lot of little expensive plates of things. Or just to go to someone else's house or dinner."

Still, audience or no audience, cooking has long been a salve for Risbridger, a way through the darkness of anxiety and depression in her early twenties. Throughout that period, she was taught to cook by the "Tall Man", as she refers to her then partner, the writer John Underwood, who died of cancer in 2018, aged 28. She learnt to embrace it as a way of "being useful". After Underwood's diagnosis, cooking and writing about food became a lifeline. She cooked for them both, and wrote at his bedside in hospital and in a church across the road.

When Underwood died, Risbridger was just 25. In 2019, her first book - the fruits of that terrible time - *Midnight Chicken (& other recipes worth living for)* was published. A genre-bending foodie memoir, it is both a beautiful book to cook from, with a wide range of soul-soothing recipes, and one to curl up with in bed.

It was an instant hit. Risbridger has a magpie mind, collecting snippets of information and inspiration to create dishes as disparate as "Weekend Oatcakes" and an Ottolenghi-esque "Fig, Fennel, Freekeh and Cauliflower". Most of the focus is on savoury dishes and she begins a short dessert section with: "Let me start this chapter with a confession: I don't really make a lot of sweet stuff." Still, there is a decent selection of snacky puddings, from "Whisky & Rye Blondies" to "Paris Cookies".

The recipe for the latter went viral last year and is now nicknamed "Lockdown Cookies".

Recipes are prefaced with engaging entries on how and why a particular dish has saved her and when you should cook and eat it. The book begins dramatically with the eponymous midnight chicken, a recipe that helped Risbridger during an acute depressive episode. "It was dark outside, and I was lying on the hall floor, looking at the chicken through the door... And wondering if I was ever going to get up... Eventually the Tall Man came home, and he helped me up. 'Come on,' he said, and we went into the kitchen together, and I made this, late at night."

Yet there is also light to counter the darkness, a host of colourful characters and plenty of twentysomething chatter. "I met a girl at a party, and she gave me a pirate pop-gun, and a recipe for bagels, and then she was deported. All of this is true. This is her bagel recipe: she lives in Paris now." Recipes are often presented as a balm, a way to brighten one's day - "Uplifting Chilli and Lemon Spaghetti", "Glumday Porridge" - or for specific occasions: "First Night Fish Finger Sandwiches", for that tricky starter evening in a new home, "Saturday Afternoon Charred Leek Lasagne". But such playfulness conceals a rigorous approach to recipe development and testing. She tells me that on average she tested the book's recipes four or five times before they made the cut.

**Food wasn't a passion for Risbridger as a child,** growing up in a village in the English Midlands - she was more of a bookworm, going on to study comparative literature at King's College London. "My mum was an 'I have four children to feed and a job and I will get dinner on the table' sort of cook", while her father liked to be left alone to immerse himself in complicated recipes.

She had a peripatetic teenagehood, moving to Dubai at 15 for her father's work, and later taking a job in Paris as a nanny. At 19, she landed in London. "I will never be an authentic cook for any region," she says. "I didn't learn a cuisine at anybody's knee." In Dubai, she went to an international school and ate everything from burgers to Lebanese cheese bread. In Paris, she subsisted mainly on baguettes and Nutella, ▶

Recipes are prefaced with entries on how a dish has saved her and when you should eat it - 'Uplifting Chilli and Lemon Spaghetti', 'Glumday Porridge'

## (Not quite) Chao xa ga

Serves 2

- 1 x 400ml tin of coconut milk
- 200ml chicken stock (or 1 chicken stock pot/cube dissolved in 200ml boiling water)
- 2 tbs fish sauce
- 2 tbs grated ginger (about 6cm)
- 1 tbs grated garlic (about 4 cloves)
- 1 tsp brown sugar
- 2 tsp white pepper
- 2 lemongrass stalks (fresh is better, dried is fine)
- 2 limes
- 200g kale
- Bunch of coriander
- Bunch of spring onions
- 2 red bird's eye chillies
- 200g jasmine rice
- 200g cooked and peeled prawns

1 - Combine your coconut milk, chicken stock and fish sauce in a saucepan and stir to dissolve any lumps. Add the ginger, garlic, sugar and pepper. Stir again. If using fresh lemongrass, chop it into the pan with scissors; if using dried, add the stalks whole. Bring the broth to a gentle simmer over the lowest-possible heat while you zest and juice your limes. Reserve a pinch of lime zest, then add the rest to the broth, along with the juice. Inhale deeply. Feel better.

2 - Tip the kale and coriander into a colander and rinse them vigorously (both are horribly good at hiding grit). Use scissors to chop them as finely as you can manage, then set to one side. Rinse and slice the spring onions, then add most to the broth, reserving a few green shreds for garnish. Rinse, slice and deseed the chillies and do the same.

3 - This should take about 10 minutes, and by this time the house will smell beautiful and bright and green. Rinse the rice, then tip it into the broth. Cover the pan and cook for 18 minutes, stirring a couple of times to break up any clumps.

4 - Taste: the rice should be soft and sticky, with broth bubbling all around and over it. Stir through the kale and coriander and cook for two minutes more. Finally, add the prawns and cook for another two minutes.

5 - Decant into bowls: a mound of rice, studded with pink prawns and flecks of vivid green, surrounded by a moat of richly scented broth. Scatter with the reserved lime zest, loops of red chilli and hoops of green onion. Serve.

From *Midnight Chicken (& other recipes worth living for)*, published by Bloomsbury and available now in paperback, £9.99









‘Some cookbooks – by people who don’t cook domestically – have recipes that require five egg yolks. What are you supposed to do with the whites?’

◀ but she also tried Vietnamese food and sushi, which she considered the height of sophistication.

Risbridger’s easy expressiveness about cooking for her various states of mind reminds me of another debut cookery book – Nigella Lawson’s *How to Eat*. Indeed, she has been called “The New Nigella”, an enviable moniker for any young food writer, and has been praised by Lawson herself. “It’s a cookbook, but it is also a manual for living and a declaration of hope,” is a Lawson quote on the front of her paperback.

There are similarities between the two women beyond their approach to food writing. Both lost partners called John at a young age from “weird cancers”, as Risbridger puts it, and both wrote and cooked their way – often late at night – through their partners’ illnesses, producing bestselling debut books, almost exactly 20 years apart.

She is astonished by how Lawson has taken her under her wing. On speaking at a joint event last year she says: “I was very nervous when I met her, as ‘New Nigella’ suggests she is going somewhere. Which is wrong, as she is the absolute queen.”

Aside from Lawson’s Guinness cake recipe, which she says “she follows to the letter”, Risbridger describes herself as an experimental cook who starts with an ingredient and then googles what to do with it. “I very rarely cook from somebody else’s recipe – it’s a following-rules thing,” she says, laughing.

Today, Risbridger lives in the south London borough of Lewisham: “Within 20 minutes of my house there are supermarkets catering to a dozen different cultures... I can pick up one thing and something from somewhere else and wonder if they go together.”

Life as an established food writer in a vibrant, cosmopolitan city means she can afford to experiment with ingredients. But she also feels a sense of responsibility towards readers who might not be so well off or may live miles away from a Turkish grocer: “You kind of have to cross-examine yourself – are people actually going to buy this ingredient? Are these ingredients accessible to my grandparents in Staffordshire?”

She is also mindful, she says, of other people’s finances: “Every recipe in the world is on the internet. So, you have to think, what makes my book important and worth people’s money? Some people’s cookbooks – people who have never cooked domestically – have recipes that require five egg yolks. What are you supposed to do with the whites?”

I ask what recipe she is working on right now. “Something with condensed milk and coffee,” she says without hesitation. “I’m going to try muffins. I’m thinking a banana could add something...” Could a new cookbook be in the works? Not exactly, she tells me. Since the success of *Midnight Chicken*, she has released an anthology of poetry and is working on some children’s literature.

What would Risbridger prescribe for the mood in Britain this winter? Quick as a flash, she replies: “I think the best January recipe I know is Chao xa ga, a Vietnamese rice porridge. It is like a Thai risotto with lime and coriander so it feels bright and springy and like we are going somewhere. It has that very rare combination of comfort and going forward. We are going forward and we are going to be fine.”

.....  
Rebecca Rose is editor of FT Globetrotter



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# Honey & Co Recipes



## A sultry affair

Photographs by Patricia Niven

As with every love story, you remember the beginning. Ours started more than 10 years ago, in a dimly lit diner near Marunouchi station in Tokyo. We had wandered in, not sure what was on offer. There was no menu in English but with the pictures and some tableside pantomime we managed to order something.

First came beer, a promising start, then our food – lacquered trays with swirls of glistening noodles and cups of broth, one portion with BBQ duck and one with eel. The waiter showed us what to do – mix grated daikon into the broth, add wasabi and chopped spring onion to taste, dip in a few strands of noodles and inhale. Miming, he explained that we were meant to slurp noisily, splashing the sauce around as we sucked the noodles down – he pointed to the sauce-splattered wall nearby to exhibit the desired result.

We'd had soba (buckwheat) noodles before but not like this, nothing remotely as fun, exciting and delicious. By the end, we were head over heels in love. Our waiter returned with a pot of hot water – the same water the noodles had been cooked in – which somehow promised health and happiness. He filled our cups, encouraged us to swirl and drink – and we knew this would be more than just a fling.

After that, we had soba everywhere and in any way we could – in fancy hotels, roadside canteens, in the back streets of Kyoto and the mountains of Takayama. We went back to London with a suitcase full of noodles and a new passion.

Our steamy affair has since morphed into a more comfortable, loving, domestic relationship. We know that when we get home at the end of a busy day there will always be a pack of noodles waiting for us, ready in minutes for a quick one on the sofa (we buy bottled sauce). But every so often we take our soba out for a fancy dinner – best plates and candles, expensive sake, pink duck breasts in a sweet-salty marinade, citrus and silky ribbons of cucumber – to celebrate an old flame that still burns brightly. **FT**

By Itamar Srulovich. Recipe by Sarit Packer

### Duck with winter citrus and soba noodles

Light meal for four

**For the duck marinade**

- 2 duck breasts
- 60ml dark soy sauce
- 1 tbs mirin
- 1 garlic clove, peeled and crushed
- 1 tbs honey
- 20g fresh ginger cut into thin matchsticks
- 4-5 strips of orange peel

**For the salad**

- Flesh of one large orange
- Flesh of one lime
- Flesh of one blood orange or clementine
- 1 red chilli
- 4 baby cucumbers or half a large cucumber
- 1 small bunch of chives
- 1 tbs rice wine vinegar

- 1 tbs sesame oil
- 1 pack of soba noodles (300g)

1 – Start by marinating the duck. Using a sharp knife, score the skin of the breast in a crisscross pattern, without cutting the flesh. Mix the marinade ingredients together and place the scored duck into the mixture for a couple of hours, flipping it every 30 minutes.

2 – While you wait for the duck, segment the fruit over a bowl, retaining all the juice. Halve the chilli, remove the seeds and slice thinly. Create ribbons of cucumber with a peeler and chop the chives.

3 – Drain any juice from the citrus into a small bowl and add the rice wine vinegar.

4 – Cook the soba according to the instructions on the packet. Chill under running water, transfer to a bowl and dress with the sesame oil. Mix to coat and keep at room temperature.

5 – To cook the duck, set a heavy-based frying pan on a medium heat. Lift the duck out of the marinade, shaking as much as possible back into the bowl. Lay the duck breast on a sheet of kitchen paper and pat dry. Put it in the frying pan, skin-side down. Add the citrus juices and vinegar mix to the remaining marinade. Let the fat on the duck render slowly into the pan for three or four minutes – it should go a dark golden brown. Flip the breast so that the skin is facing up and fry for a further two minutes. Add all the marinade ingredients to the pan around the breast. Bring to a boil, cook for four minutes, then remove from the heat and set aside for another four minutes. Remove the breast from the liquid on to a chopping board. Add all the cooking liquid to the soba noodles and mix to coat.

6 – Add the cucumber ribbons, chives, chilli and citrus segments, toss together and divide into four plates.

7 – Thinly slice the duck breasts and serve.









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# Jancis Robinson Wine

## Red, steady, go



Most of the time I write about wines you can buy now, which means concentrating on recent vintages. But I know that some readers buy and store wine in the hope of saving money and in the expectation of nurturing it until it has developed suitable maturity and complexity.

It's true that winemakers almost everywhere are deliberately making wines that can be drunk much earlier than in the old days, when cooler summers and less sensitive winemaking resulted in tart, tough wines that absolutely had to be aged before they were drinkable.

Lately, I have been tasting 2019 burgundies and 2018 bordeaux intensively and have been amazed by how approachable and luscious many of them are already. But contemporary winemakers, while being aware of societal impatience and the costs of storing wine, also hope the wines they make will last every bit as long as their predecessors. So far, I see no evidence of modern wines maturing too fast, despite the warming globe.

There is no doubt, however, that many - particularly reds, and especially red bordeaux, top red burgundies and red wines from the Rhône, Piemonte and Tuscany - do improve with bottle age. To a certain extent, the ability to age is what those who buy wine en primeur, in extreme youth, pay for.

So, for those lucky enough to have a collection of maturing wine, here are some suggestions for which vintages to tackle now. There will always be examples, often the most expensive, that deserve even longer in bottle - just as the least expensive bottles tend to age fastest. Those of us who are not billionaires tut over the modern tendency of those few who can afford the world's most expensive wines to pull their corks too early. (If only we owned them, we'd look after them properly - or so we like to think.) But my suggested vintages apply to wines of a quality



As imagined by Leon Edler

### How and where to store wine

Consistent temperature under 20C, relative humidity of about 75 per cent and an absence of direct light, vibration and strong smells constitute ideal conditions. Wines will age faster in warm conditions.

Specific wine fridges are popular but they use up space and energy. The alternative, or complement, is a professional wine storage provider such as those listed.

**UK**  
Berry Bros & Rudd  
LCB Vlnothèque and  
LCB Dinton  
Locke-King Vaults/EHD  
Octavian  
Seckford  
The Wine Society

**US**  
Many serious wine  
collectors in the US  
build their own cellars.  
Vinfollo, CA  
Western Carriers, NJ  
Zachys, DC

**France**  
Bordeaux City Bond  
**Hong Kong**  
Crown Wine Cellars  
and many more  
**Australia**  
Wine Ark  
Pentridge Cellars

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between these two extremes, and a British palate is assumed. (In general, the French tend to drink wine younger than we Brits do, with our traditions of connoisseurship.)

Bordeaux will be a major focus of this article since it constitutes the majority of the wines bought to be cellared. The youngest red bordeaux vintage I'd be pulling out of my cellar would be 2014, a vintage often overlooked because the 2016s are so stupendous and the 2015s so tannic and potentially long-lived.

If you have any bordeaux 2013s, for heaven's sake drink them - and without much ceremony. The 2012s are generally a bit better and the 2011s better still - their only sin was

**'If you have any bordeaux 2013s, for heaven's sake drink them - and without much ceremony'**

that they followed the stellar pair of vintages 2009 and 2010, which sold at sky-high prices. If you have a fair quantity of these latter two, definitely pull the corks on most of the ripe 2009s, which are at their peak now, while waiting for the 2010s to round out and shed their tannin. That said, many a 2010 should also be starting to drink well.

If I had every other vintage of the first decade of this century of the same notional average red bordeaux in my cellar, I would drink them in this order: 2002, 2007, 2004, 2003, 2001, 2000, 2006, 2008 and then the very concentrated 2005s. For my money, the under-appreciated vintages in this line-up are 2001, which can outshine 2000, especially the Pomerols and St-Émilions, and 2004, which has been giving me great pleasure recently. The heatwave 2003 vintage is an oddball, made before human and vine got used to hot summers, meaning that many wines have ▶



◀ a sweet, raisined quality to them – not always unattractive, but certainly unusual.

Any red bordeaux grown and made in the last century is worth trying now and 1991 to 1993 inclusive should generally have been drunk quite some time ago.

As for burgundy, the overall quality of vine-growing and winemaking seems to have improved every year, so my advice is similar to what I used to give for New World wines: buy the most recent vintage.

From Burgundy itself, the early-maturing 2017 is often the vintage of choice. It has the great advantage of still being available and not too ridiculously expensive – partly because its reputation was blighted by the hoopla over the 2018 vintage.

For grand cru red burgundies that deserve bottle age, there's a sweet spot at the beginning of this century with a run of good vintages from 2000 to the extraordinarily hot (for then) 2003 vintage, which should probably be drunk now. For premier cru red burgundies, the 2006, 2007 and 2008 vintages should also be good now.

It is still probably a bit early to drink the longest-lived 2009s and 2010s of the northern Rhône but the much lighter 2011s and 2012s should provide great pleasure already; ditto the 2006s.


For the southern Rhône, I asked Vincent Avril of Clos des Papes in Châteauneuf-du-Pape for his recommendations. He's a big fan of the supple "Burgundian" 2014 and

he's beginning to open bottles from the more structured 2012 and 2013 vintages. He recommends both 2011 and 2004 as vintages whose wines have been approachable throughout their lives.

British collectors have, I hope, been following their American counterparts in adding Italian wines worth ageing to their cellars. The Italian specialist Walter Speller on JancisRobinson.com suggests that 2001 and 2004 are ideal vintages of Barolo to drink now, plus perhaps the 2015s. From neighbouring Barbaresco, go for 2004 and 2011, as well as 2014. There are likely to be bargains from this unfairly maligned year in which Barbaresco escaped much of the rain that plagued Barolo's reputation. His picks for Brunello di Montalcino are 2010 and 2012.

His Spanish counterpart Ferran Centelles recommends 2010 and 2011 as great rioja vintages, with 2004 and 2005 having already matured nicely. If you have a good 2001 rioja, count yourself lucky since they have virtually disappeared from the market.

If only more wine producers followed the example of some of Spain's more traditional producers and released wines only when they are ready to drink. But then I suppose it would put the wine storage providers out of their flourishing businesses.

I will write about white wines next week. 

.....  
*More columns at [ft.com/jancis-robinson](http://ft.com/jancis-robinson)*

## MY CLASSIC COCKTAIL

CHARLOTTE PAGE, SOMMELIER



My first love has always been wine and, being a snobbish sommelier, I used to look down on bartenders. But the truth is, I knew nothing of the skill of mixology and thought that wine and cocktails dwelt in different galaxies. How wrong I was!

I learnt about cocktails when I joined the Peninsula hotel in Paris seven years ago. The bar team were such fun and I was impressed by their talent and technical skill. They introduced me to classics such as Espresso Martinis, Moscow Mules and many more.

Then I moved to London, joined the Experimental Group – and now I love a good Ramos Gin Fizz. Nicolas Brulin, head bartender at the Henrietta Hotel, made one of the best and I often try to recreate it at home. It brings back fond memories, and holds a special place in my heart. 

.....  
*Charlotte Page is head sommelier at Le Comptoir Robuchon in London*

### Ramos Gin Fizz

- 40ml gin
- 15ml lime
- 15ml lemon
- 30ml simple syrup
- 1 egg white
- 30ml double cream
- 3 dashes orange flower water

And the secret is in the shaking...

Top with soda water

GETTY IMAGES

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**FTWeekend**





# Games



## A Round on the Links

by James Walton



All the answers here are linked in some way. Once you've spotted the link, any you didn't know the first time around should become easier.

- Who's the only male American tennis player of the professional era to have achieved a Career Grand Slam (winning all four major tournaments)?
- Which board game is a simplified version of the earlier board game Halma?
- What's the largest UK lake outside Northern Ireland?
- Who's the only person to have directed three winners of the Best Picture Oscar – the last being 1959's *Ben-Hur* (above)?
- Which country is the most recent to have joined the United Nations – in 2011?
- What, in 2010, was the first children's programme to win a British Comedy Award for best sketch show?
- Which singer was born Anna Mae Bullock and grew up in Nutbush, Tennessee?
- In popular demographics, what comes between the Greatest Generation and Generation X?
- Amy Dunne is the eponymous character in which bestselling novel of 2012 by Gillian Flynn?
- In 2017 a new statue of which Scottish folk hero was unveiled in Peterculter, Aberdeenshire?

## The Picture Round

by James Walton

Who or what do these pictures add up to?

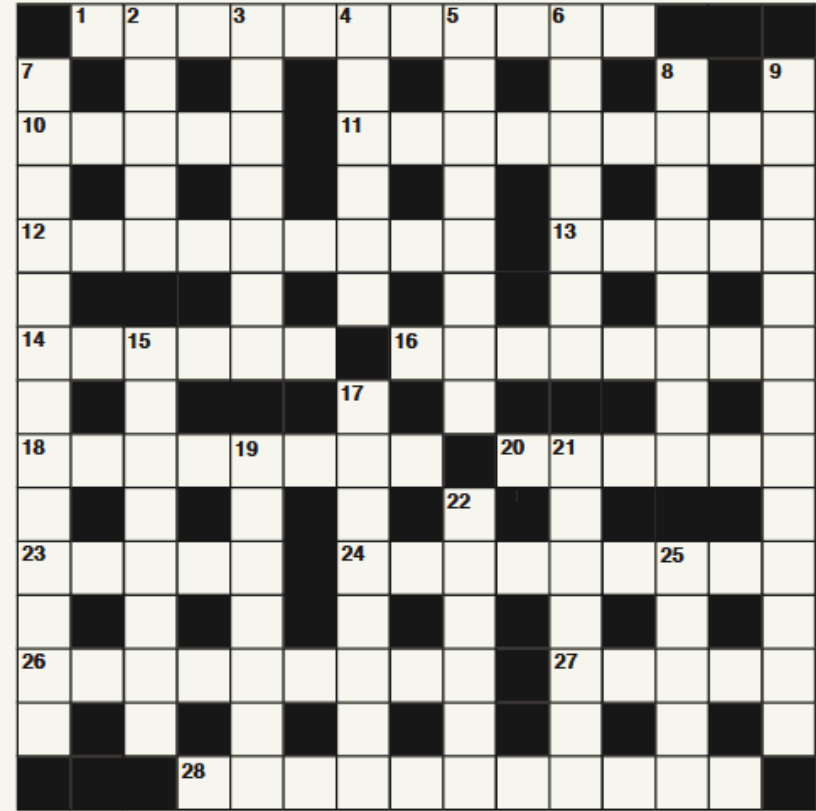


+ = ?

Answers page 10

## The Crossword

No 524. Set by Aldhelm



The Across clues are straightforward, while the Down clues are cryptic.

### ACROSS

- Looks (11)
- Overhead (5)
- Between two groups (9)
- Snack (5, 4)
- Elastic (5)
- Holiday area (6)
- Benevolence (8)
- Long race (8)
- Abdominal organ (6)
- Jockey (5)
- Sensitive, delicate (9)
- Obeeyed the rules (9)
- Cut into small cubes (5)
- Hidden, secret (11)

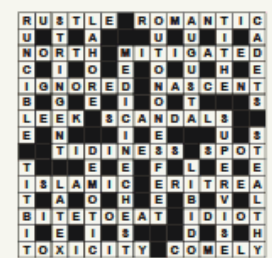
### DOWN

- Progressive takeover of new point (5)
- Old ruler's shock treatment – captured

- by character rising up (7)
- Masseur's stationery item? (6)
- Certainty of Spanish province joining old emperor (8)
- Wrapped and carried up to editor (7)
- Season for reforming sports car contest scandal (4, 4, 5)
- Important person's shout for attention begins, perhaps, outside (3, 5)
- Contrasting characters handed jelly out around Kentucky (6, 3, 4)
- Vociferous student replacing university with right one (8)

- Hospital recalculating a sum with one old doctor (8)
- Disorder of dreadful rout with military, in short (7)
- Poland's to check commendation (7)
- Partly held duchess up for an intimate embrace (6)
- Old American's where you might find beer? (5)

Solution to Crossword No 523







# GILLIAN TETT

PARTING SHOT

## Has time lost all meaning for you? Join the club



**F**or the past few weeks, a guilty secret has been lurking in my living room: a pine tree, nine feet tall, with silver and gold ornaments and a wonky star on top. Yes, our Christmas tree. Still.

In “normal” years – the pre-Covid life that now seems so distant – my family would drag it on to the sidewalk as soon as Christmas was over. I presumed not doing so would seem sloppy and incur bad luck; a new year is supposed to be a fresh and joyful start, with no clinging to the holidays required.

But when I tried to take down our tree in early January, my teenage daughters howled that they wanted to keep it and its pretty lights because “it cheers us all up” and evoked memories of the jollity that we organised on Christmas Day, even when cooped up.

We aren’t the only ones. Many windows and trees on Manhattan’s streets still twinkle with lights, and places such as Park Avenue and Madison Avenue have yet to take down all their seasonal displays. Even some restaurants (still open in New York for outdoor dining) remain festooned with holiday decorations to a degree that I can’t recall seeing in earlier – normal – years.

What’s going on? One obvious explanation is that my family, like others, is simply groping for some cheap and cheery joy in these dark and stressful times. Another is that lockdown has given us cultural permission to break convention: when no one is visiting you at home, there is no social pressure to take down the tree.

But a third, more interesting, explanation is that the shock of Covid-19 lockdowns and the regime of working from home has caused our sense of time to collapse. These days, when for many of us life is a jumble of images on a computer screen, it is hard enough to remember what day of the week it is. And since few have gone back to school or the office, the concept of a post-holiday world no longer seems so relevant.

Covid-19 is teaching us to reflect on the symbols and structures that give shape to our lives – and to recognise that, much as we appreciate them, they do not need to be set in stone. And while this is disorienting, it might yet turn out to be liberating.

One thing that most of us have realised during lockdown is how much our lives are structured around taxonomies, whether of time, space, people or things. Before Covid-19, we had reassuring rhythms such as year-end holidays and the daily commute, as well as clear distinctions between “work” and “family” spaces or “going out” and “staying in”. However, one principle that anthropologists, among others, emphasise is that there is more than one way to create these taxonomies, even in relation to factors we presume are universal, such as “time”.

Almost a century ago, for example, Benjamin Lee Whorf, a linguistic anthropologist, concluded

that the Native American Hopi language has a subtly different way of talking about time and the calendar from what he called “Standard Average European” language (SAE). The latter offers up time as something that passes from past to future; the former, he argued, did not see time as something that moves or flows in the same way.

In SAE, a season is presumed to start on a fixed date (June 1, say, for summer); in Hopi, however, a season is defined by heat. Neither is better or worse – they are different ways of looking at the same thing.

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**‘Covid-19 is teaching us that the symbols and structures that give shape to our lives do not need to be set in stone’**

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Scholars such as Steven Pinker have subsequently contested parts of Whorf’s argument. But the key point is this: what each culture assumes to be natural or inevitable – its own idea of time, for example – is not.

Similarly, while western European cultures might see time as an arrow moving in a straight line, Buddhism sees it as a wheel. Is time a commodity we control, which we can thus “save”, like money, or something imposed on us, of which we are prisoners? When does the year even start? In China, it is February; in Iran and parts of central Asia, it is in March with Nowruz.

More intriguing still is that subtle distinctions can also exist within cultures. Three decades ago, business sociologist Frank Dubinskas reviewed studies of how US professionals, supposedly united by culture, talk about time: “Time – or, better, times – means different things to each of the communities of scientists, engineers, doctors and executives that we investigate[d],” he wrote in his book *Making Time*. “No one group or culture has a monopoly on the definition of time.”

So, the next time I look at my no-longer-Christmas tree, I will try to avoid chastising myself for “sloppiness” and embrace the spirit of cultural malleability. In recent days, I finally persuaded my girls to remove the ornaments, which has enabled us to redefine our tree as a cheerful light display or an innovative piece of interior design. It could well be with us for months.

But the question that intrigues me now is this: if we have started breaking once-rigid cultural rules, what will happen when the Covid-19 crisis finally begins to ease? Will we return to a world with the immovable patterns of old? Or will we also rethink other cultural norms, such as the structure of education or the concept of the working week? Therein lies a defining uncertainty for our post-Covid age. Our experiments around dead wood are, I expect, just the start. **FT**

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