

Meeting my boyfriend at the grand old age of 43 was perfect

Hannah Betts

My mind often wanders back to the (fat, drunk, halitosis-ridden, unfaithful) married man who, when I was 40, informed (single, drunk, goddess-breathed) me that I would “only ever find someone broken now — a divorcé or some sort of failure”. Both sounded pretty hot in comparison.

Three years later I inadvertently bagged a life partner so impeccable that I have written articles about what it was like to be sleeping with someone so much hotter, saner and altogether better than me.

So baggage-free was he that a friend continues to refers to him as “the Unicorn”. There was some consternation from co-dependents who had convinced themselves that pair-bonding at 24 had shielded them from the dearth of middle-aged options to follow.

Still, they felt they retained one trump card. “I bet you wish you’d met when you were younger?” said one complete f***ing lunatic of my acquaintance. “Are you insane?” I retorted. Mythological beast or no, I would not have wanted to cross paths with my beloved a second earlier than the grand old age of 43 and three quarters. For as the old adage goes: “Old love is cool, young love is bollocks.”

More fool Kim Kardashian, who, in a magazine interview with — er — her husband, declares that she wished she had hooked up with him years earlier instead of “wasting time”. Lady, there is no time wasted in delaying the onset of the One, only flaws ironed out, notches scored into the bedpost and essential insight gained.

The young have too much energy, much of it demonic. Give me an emotional situation in my twenties and I would infinitely overthink it. Now I choose not to think at all. Middle-aged lovers will be too exhausted to bicker or even act, making ours the ultimate in Wysiwyg relationships. Many of us find ourselves easygoing for the first time in our not-so young existences and, if that’s because we no longer care whether we live or die, then so be it.

Mid-flight horror and hysterics

The story of the off-duty aviator who staged an emergency landing after the scheduled

pilot collapsed, reminded me of the most hysterical I have yet been — with horror, yes, but also with laughter.

On a crack-of-dawn economy flight my friend and I were discussing our sex lives when the man next to us coughed, vomited

Not only will we be more likeable, we’ll also be better-looking. My boyfriend was so ridiculously pretty when he was younger that one might have had to punch him. Now he’s the rugged side of fwoar. Even if one doesn’t find mid-lifers more attractive, there’s a certain advantage to the wheels having already fallen off the bus.

One doesn’t have to worry about losing one’s looks, they’re MIA; great legs supplanted by “a knee”. Fancy me at 48 and 68 won’t hold many surprises. Not that this is merely about appearance; that’s kind of the point. After 40 you know who you are and you’re 4,000 times more compelling than you were a couple of decades earlier.

Middle-aged lovers boast a facilitating gratitude, ready to appreciate small kindnesses such as being made a cup of tea after a lifetime’s lone adventuring. This sits in contrast to “lifers”, who tend to be at the mutual-allergy stage whereby every time their other half so much as cracks a knuckle the tendency is to nuke them.

The older love object is, in short, what the hot saint himself refers to as a “steadied ship”. (This reminds me that he has covered our tiny abode in ship — pronounced “shit” — pictures in the manner of a provincial undertakers. However, after 24 hours of attempting to top myself I stopped caring; see “no energy” above.) The antique admirer is attracted not by your potential, but what is actual: who you are, not who you might go on to be. And I, for one, find that genuinely

and died. My pal, who grew up amid the Troubles, proceeded to punch him back to life, thumping his chest until he drew a hideous breath.

The chap’s wife excelled herself, declaring: “He always sits by the pretty girls — it’ll be the death of

I can show kids how to be lazy

A hoo-ha has erupted over how nine out of ten British teenagers don’t get enough sleep or exercise, according to a study by clean-living Canadians. Well, duh. Lying about doing nothing apart from when one is supposed to be lying about doing something is the very essence of adolescence — and I say this as someone who was really spectacularly good at it.

As reptile brains go, mine was unrivalled. I hit puberty young, embracing full hormonal maniac mode from the age of eight. I then spent a decade rebelling — in as supine a manner as possible — sleeping only when drunk or during the day. This weekend I will be showing my 14-year-old niece how it’s done. Our only exercise will be to apply make-up, order junk food and try on sunglasses at TK Maxx. The only difference is that I may aromatherapise us both to score some zeds.

him,” “I’ll kill him for making a fuss,” and “My son’s at the front, but I won’t get him over, this is a surprise”. Add shock and the slapstick school-leavers supposedly in charge and I earned a reputation for being the bitch who couldn’t stop weeping with mirth.

I’m organising

When William Cash decided to host a weekend of literary talks at his family’s stately home, he had no idea how difficult it would be to pull off

‘S o how’s your falconry looking?’ my wife asked with a tone of sarcasm a few weeks ago as she sat in her millinery studio, went on to the website of our home, Upton Cressett Hall, and clicked on “Events”. “I’m on to them,” I said, unconvincingly. Laura was referring to the mention of medieval hawking, as well as “Elizabethan costume dancing, live music and a ‘speakers’ dinner” at our inaugural Upton Cressett History and Literary Festival on Saturday, September 7.

“And how many tickets have we actually sold?” she asked. The box “Buy Tickets” informed us there were 248 tickets in stock. Of 250. “The festival opens in three weeks. Are you sure you want to go ahead? What music have you booked? This could be event suicide.”

The book festival calendar, it transpires, is very crowded. According to Kevin Parker, who runs the website Literary Festivals UK, there are more than 350 in Britain, with “hardly a week going by” without a new village, town or stately home opening one; or, he adds ominously, another closing without trace. A decade ago there were just 40. A glance through Parker’s records over ten years revealed that more than 130 festivals have folded, many being “smaller village-style events” depending on a solo entrepreneur. “Organiser burnout is rife given the challenges of pulling an event together,” Parker tells me. “To survive past year one, you need to employ a dedicated director and hands-on committee.”

Therein lay our first challenge. Not only did we have no sponsors or any budget, but unlike big festivals such as Hay (dreamt up in 1987 in the kitchen of the producer Norman Florence’s house in Wales) or Cheltenham (dating back to 1949), we had no “director”, team or committee as such.

We do, however, have a pedigree of distinguished writers and politicians in our visitors book kept over the past 50 years, including the playwright John Osborne (who lived in Clun), the novelist Sebastian Faulks (who once came to stay to, bizarrely, play in a cricket match against Gary Sobers XI), the historian Andrew Roberts and my great friend the novelist Philip Kerr.

At the festival we will be announcing a Philip Kerr Fellowship award for a crime or thriller writer to stay in our gatehouse which doubles as a writers’ retreat. Holiday-let guests can even stay in the Thatcher Bedroom, where Margaret Thatcher stayed in 1994.

Our team, though, was just myself, a journalist-turned-publisher in London much of the week, my wife, Laura, our gardener-turned-butler, Darren (in

charge of our Bosworth Field Tent) and two young Bridgnorth-based students, David Lee and his brother Gareth, who were responsible for putting festival posters in local shops and on village noticeboards. That, and 500 fliers, was our entire marketing.

The only other “committee” member was my glamorous Italian neighbour Speronella Marsh, who had lent us her resident cook, Kim Somauroo, for the festival dinner on Saturday night. Kim works the food festival circuit alongside celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver. When I told him that cooking facilities were limited to the hob of our family kitchen cooker, he took a look. “Did you say that one of the dinner guests is William Sitwell, the restaurant critic?” he asked, anxiety in his voice. “Yes,” I replied. “He’ll be talking about his adventures as a foodie critic and how he has had to go into hiding twice recently — once from vegans, the other time from a disgruntled chef to whom he gave a bad review.”

I could see Laura scowling at me. “I think we’ll do a gourmet barbecue,” said Kim after a tour of our kitchen. “I’ll bring all the equipment. I’ll come up with the menu. How about shoulder of lamb with spicy chimichurri sauce and salsa verde?”

It sounded delicious, but would any punters show up? Our line-up promised “big names and TV stars”, as the *Shropshire Star* had put it. That included the art detective Philip

The tent had blown over and collapsed in a heap

Mould, the co-host of *Fake or Fortune?*, the bestselling 1930s detective novelist Jane Thynne (the widow of Kerr); the former Radio 1 *Breakfast Show* host Mike Read; the *Oldie* editor Harry Mount; our house muralist, Adam Dant (described by the *Guardian* as the “Hogarth of our age”); and the architectural historian Clive Aslet. But would they be playing to an empty house, or rather the 12th-century Norman church in our grounds, which was our sole venue?

When I mentioned that I was launching a festival to my friend Patrick Keogh, the founder of the Curious Arts Festival (which regularly sells all of its 5,000 tickets), he warned: “Don’t do it. Anything that can go wrong will. I have sleepless nights about ticket sales. You are scrambling for tickets until the last hour. If you are mad enough to go ahead, my advice is hold your nerve and don’t overcharge in your first year.”

a book festival. Am I mad?



CIRCE HAMILTON FOR THE TIMES.

He knew the perils of hosting a festival in a historic house because he founded the Voewood Festival in Norfolk, now deceased (partly because of neighbours complaining). He recalled one disastrous episode when a child turned off the water supply and it cost thousands to get an emergency supply pumped in.

We were lucky on one count. By using the Norman church — with electricity supplied from the house, 100 yards away, via a cable threaded through a window — we weren’t having to erect huge flapping tents, rented at great expense. We would, though, be serving Pimm’s, sandwiches and scones in our Bosworth Field Tent, a replica of the sort of knightly pavilion used at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485. It would cost us nothing because we already used it for serving our tea-and-tour punters, for whom I act as head tour guide.

Any smugness, however, vanished when I looked out of the window after the recent storms to see the tent had blown over and resembled a circus tent that had collapsed in a heap. I began praying for clement weather.

There was another reason why we couldn’t cancel. One of the reasons I had dreamt up the festival was that the inevitable chaos might make for a good opening episode for a TV reality show. A television company had put



From top: William and Laura Cash; Elizabeth Hurley and guests at an event at Upton Cressett

Instagram: @williamrp cash For festival tickets go to uptoncressethall.co.uk/events/upton-cressett-literary-and-history-festival/

Sophia Money-Coutts, who will be top billing next year (I promise!) as the “Jackie Collins of the upper-class” romp-buster reading set.

But when Laura suggested we cancel the festival, I replied: “What if this Fawltly Turrets show is commissioned? We won’t have a first episode!”

And so we decided to throw ourselves into flogging tickets. When David, my marine biology student helper, went on to the Hay site and said they had Bill Clinton and Tony Blair as guests, I replied: “Huh. We’ve had two prime ministers to stay — Thatcher, Boris, and young King Edward V, aged 12, on route from Ludlow to the Tower in April 1483.”

Flouting your policial pedigree, though, can be dangerous, which I learnt after including my high-profile politician father and the b-word on the programme. The lit-fest brigade who don new wellies in Hay are often metropolitan Remainers for whom a literary festival in a field is — along with Glasto — their only experience of the countryside all year. After I sent out an email to our Upton Cressett Friends (which involved spending two days typing up the several thousand hand-scrawled emails in our visitors book) that mentioned my father, Sir Bill Cash MP, in conversation with Mount on Boris and Brexit, I got several irate responses, including one from a woman who wrote: “You should be ashamed of what you are doing to our country with Brexit. Take me off your list immediately.”

Nevertheless, our historical and political pedigree seems to have been what has saved us. Although local advertising failed to generate many sales, an email to the Heart of England regional members of Historic Houses generated a small frenzy of buying, which has continued at a lively trot.

I was also helped by an encounter at Glorious Goodwood with Adam Drew, the co-founder of the satirical musical cabaret act Bounder & Cad which resulted in his duet solving my small problem of musical entertainment.

“Where have you played?” I said. “Cameron booked us for 10 Downing Street.”

“Upton Cressett will be a step up, then. You’re hired!” Things were also helped when the novelist and V&A chairman Nicholas Coleridge, who lives 50 minutes away in Worcestershire, agreed to join a talk called “A Life Exposed!” on the perils of writing one’s life story. It will also include me talking about my “restora-a-wreck” memoir, *Restoration Heart*.

Alas, the TV company that was due to film our PG Wodehouse theatrics has gone ominously silent. This may have been down to another all-too-typical disaster. The pilot episode was meant to have featured the arrival — by wildfowl courier — of a pair of new white peacocks after Mr Fox sadly ate our beloved York and Catherine for breakfast. However, the peacocks failed to turn up in time for the shoot, arriving at 11pm in a van driven by an 82-year-old who had been in a motorway accident and then got “badly lost”. I am glad to report that the white peacocks will be on festival parade, and I’m still working on finding some falcons.

Barack Obama’s summer playlist

Barack Obama may no longer be the leader of the free world, but with his and Michelle’s annual summer playlist he has proven himself to be very much still in the game. The emerging artists Lizzo and Maggie Rogers are represented on the 44-strong list, alongside such greats as Steely Dan and Charles Mingus; genres from indie rock to hip-hop are catered to; and the whole list is tasteful, informed and joyful. Put it this way, you can’t imagine President Trump coming up with something similar. Here’s my pick of the 20 best.

Juice Lizzo

Reelin’ in the Years Steely Dan

Don’t You Worry ‘Bout a Thing Stevie Wonder

Seventeen Sharon Van Etten

Doo Wop (That Thing) Lauryn Hill

Old Town Road Lil Nas X ft Billy Ray Cyrus

Happy The Rolling Stones

Con Altura Rosalia & J Balvin

I Love You More Than You’ll Ever Know Donny Hathaway

Burning Maggie Rogers

Señorita Camila Cabello and Shawn Mendes

Go The Black Keys

II BS Charles Mingus

How High the Moon Ella Fitzgerald

I’ll Be Around The Spinners

Go Gina SZA

54-46 Was My Number Toots and the Maytals

Believe Q-Tip ft D’Angelo

100 Yard Dash Raphael Saadiq

Can I Kick It? A Tribe Called Quest Will Hodgkinson

