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Kate
Beckinsale

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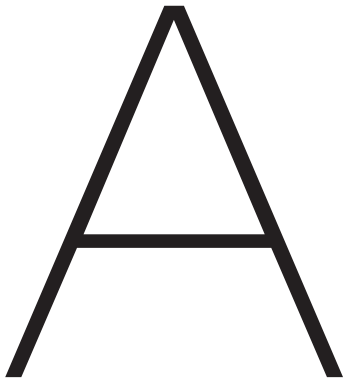
Kate Beckinsale is homesick for Britain – but Hollywood wants her more than ever. She talks to Helena de Bertodano about being the odd one out at Oxford and dating after divorce

Photographed by THOMAS WHITESIDE *Styled by* SOPHIE PERA

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t Oxford, Kate Beckinsale was voted 'sixth most boring person' at her college. 'I didn't like drinking vodka out of a welly,' she explains, laughing. 'In fact, I didn't drink at all, which meant there was no real chance of getting into my knickers – so what was the point of me? I was deeply unpopular.'

The point of Kate Beckinsale: where does one begin? One of the most versatile actresses in Holly-

wood, with more than two million Instagram followers as testament to her popularity, Beckinsale, 45, has come a long way from her undergraduate days. Today she is at the centre of a photoshoot at a rose-pink Bel Air mansion, wearing an elaborate black feather boa, four-inch glittering silver heels and not much else. Quipping about her 'feathered knickers' and chatting to *Tatler's* Fashion Director Sophie Pera in fluent French, boring is not the word that springs to mind.

Yet the college anecdote is telling. First, of course, it is a tribute to her self-deprecating sense of humour that she tells it at all. Second, it hints at the drive and self-control that characterises Beckinsale: she knows her own mind and does not give in to pressure. To get through Oxford in the early Nineties without drinking vodka out of a welly was a lot harder than getting a first. It is a steeliness that has also protected her from Hollywood predators – Beckinsale was one of the first women to come forward in the Harvey Weinstein scandal, having rejected his advances as a 17-year-old. Like so many others, she was summoned to a meeting in his hotel room,

where he opened the door wearing a bathrobe. 'After declining alcohol and announcing that I had school in the morning I left, uneasy but unscathed,' she wrote last year. 'A few years later he asked me if he had tried anything with me... I realised he couldn't remember if he had assaulted me or not.'

Post-shoot in the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel – the hallowed environs of Holly-

wood's A list – Beckinsale marvels at her journey. 'I wasn't someone who felt defined by what I looked like,' she chuckles. 'I'm glad I wasn't thinking I was hot shit back then, it makes for a tiresome person.'

Even now, she says, she finds being photographed quite daunting. 'I can't help feeling everybody would rather have a model. Almost every photoshoot I did before the age of 25 I would at some point be crying in the bathroom. It wasn't until my late twenties that I started feeling a bit more confident. In films I'd look all right, but in my personal life, I was literally in pyjamas and cutting my hair with nail scissors.' Certainly, she did not exude the glamour she does now.

Beckinsale has changed into a white silk camisole, Fendi trousers with a geometric pattern and white stilettos. Relaxed and warm, she is easy company. 'Do you smell weed?' she whispers conspiratorially, looking around the restaurant. We conclude it must be coming from behind the bushes surrounding the patio, not from the well-heeled clientele picking at their lobster risottos and salads. She is funny, too – especially about the culture shock she experienced when she first moved to LA 15 years ago. 'It didn't occur to me that you had to change your handbag to fit your outfit until I was deep into my thirties. That's not how British people operated.' Nor had she ever set foot in a gym. 'There were maybe four people in Britain going to the gym at that time, and we were highly suspicious of them all.'

Now, of course, she has a personal trainer and confidently strides the red carpet in jaw-dropping outfits, matching clutch and all. Since moving to LA, Beckinsale has alternated big blockbusters – most notably

Underworld and its sequels, in which she plays Selene, an action-hero vampire in tight leather trousers – with smaller indies, such as *Love & Friendship*, based on a Jane Austen novella: her role as the quick-witted, scheming anti-heroine won her British Actress of the Year 2017 from the London Film Critics' Circle. Her latest film is *Farming*, directed by Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje, based on his experience as a young Nigerian boy 'farmed out' to a white working-class family in Tilbury, Essex, who adapted to his racist surroundings by joining a gang of white supremacist skinheads. Superb as his abusive, neglectful foster mother, Beckinsale is almost unrecognisable in the role. 'My make-up artist was very excited to paint my teeth brown and put wrinkles on me. What I liked so much about the character is that even though she did some [questionable] things, it is still a love story between a boy and his mother.'

Beckinsale has not shrugged off her roots. Although her friends these days include people like Leslie Mann and the Beckhams – 'our kids used to play together' – she is still closest to the friends she grew up with. 'My best friend is from my first year of secondary school. She is a child psychoanalyst and probably the funniest person I know.'

She first appeared on TV as a precocious four-year-old when her father, Richard Beckinsale, a beloved Seventies comedy actor of *Porridge* sitcom fame, was honoured on *This Is Your Life*. 'Hello, Daddy,' she says, bouncing on screen in a green pinafore dress. 'I've kept a secret all day.' Her father glows with pride and later scoops her up lovingly in his arms. Her mother, Judy, also an actress, tells the audience that Richard is a 'smashing father. As time goes on they're less like father and daughter and more like partners in crime, they're kids together.'

Richard Beckinsale was only 30 at the time of the broadcast but within two years he was dead, having suffered a heart attack in his sleep. Doctors

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later found he had a congenital heart defect. For Beckinsale, an only child, and her mother, his death was overwhelming. 'It was such a big loss and so shocking,' she tells me. 'I'm very grateful I remember him because if I'd been a couple of years younger, I would just draw a blank.'

Her most vivid memory, she says, is of playing the board game Mouse Trap with him the Christmas before he died, and being upset that his mouse was trapped. 'I was inconsolable, just sobbing.' She also remembers his 'cunning' leniency. When she demanded chips with ice cream for dinner, 'my mother would give me 10 reasons why I couldn't [have them together], but my dad would go, "All right." It was a disgusting combination.' She never asked for it again.

A few years after Richard's death, Beckinsale's mother moved in with television director Roy Battersby and his four sons and daughter. Beckinsale, who is now very close to her stepfamily, says the move was a shock. 'I couldn't think of anything worse: these red-headed loud, terrifying, farting boys. I was very against boys at the time.' She adds, with classic comic timing: 'I'm still a bit on the fence, to be honest.'

In retrospect, though, she says it was good for her, breaking her out of her cocoon. 'I'd come from this little Catholic school in Sunningdale and they were in quite a rough state school in Kilburn.' Battersby was an ardent Trotskyist and Beckinsale helped him to sell *The News Line*, a Trotskyist newspaper: his links to the Workers Revolutionary Party led to him being blacklisted by the BBC. 'Intellectually he was quite an imposing force, but he treated me as an intellectual equal. I'm very lucky with the parents I got.' Beckinsale struggled with anxiety as a child, then later ▷



Wool tuxedo jacket, £1,870, by **RALPH LAUREN COLLECTION**. Silk trousers, £590, by **GIORGIO ARMANI**. White-gold, sapphire and diamond necklace, POA; white-gold, sapphire and diamond ring, both by **CARTIER**. White-gold and diamond earrings, POA, by **CHOPARD**

Previous page, metallic raffia swimsuit, £253, by **MARIE FRANCE VAN DAMME**. Marabou feather coat, POA, by **ADRIENNE LANDAU**. Diamond and white-gold ring, £27,200; diamond and white-gold necklace, POA, both by **PIAGET**. Diamond and platinum earrings, POA, by **HARRY WINSTON**

◁ anorexia, and her mother took her to therapists. ‘I was in Freudian analysis from the age of nine.’ These days she says she prefers meditation. ‘I tip more towards anxiety than depression. Meditation has been amazing. It affects your body immediately: you feel your blood pressure coming down.’

Beckinsale went to Godolphin and Latymer School, then to New College to read French and Russian literature, but did not stay for the full four years. ‘My first day I was mortified because somebody from Nigel Dempster’s column turned up and I let them in to my room so other people on the staircase wouldn’t see, and that was a terrible mistake because they got these hilarious photos of me looking compromised. I was made to feel like such an arse, everyone in my year was like, “What the f**k is wrong with you?”’

After spending her third year in Paris, she decided not to return to Oxford. ‘The thought of going back felt so bleak.’ Does she regret not graduating? ‘Maybe that’s a later in life thing. I’ll be that old lady doing my degree.’ By the time she dropped out, she had already made her first film: Kenneth Branagh’s adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing*. She then fought hard for John Schlesinger’s *Cold Comfort Farm*. After a couple of auditions, he decided she was too young, so she wrote him an essay as a letter, finding every example in the book that supported her character’s equivalent youth. ‘It was quite a stern letter. I figured out where he lived and poked it under the door of his flat. Luckily he was quite tickled.’

She got the part, and later that year did a stage production of *The Seagull*, where she met and fell in love with the Welsh actor Michael Sheen. They had a baby, Lily Mo, when Beckinsale was 25, and moved first to New York, where Sheen was starring in a play, then Los Angeles. She has a very close relationship with her daughter, now 19, who recently left for college in New York. Would she consider having another child?

‘After a divorce, everyone waits to see where you land. It’s nice to have a bit of Virginia Woolf time’

‘I definitely would,’ she says enthusiastically. ‘But then I think, “Oh God, I annihilated my twenties and I suddenly get a taste of freedom and annihilate myself again?” But I am open to seeing what happens...’

Sheen and Beckinsale split in 2003 and she married her *Underworld* director Len Wiseman the following year; they divorced in 2016 citing ‘irreconcilable differences’. She remains on great terms with Sheen: ‘I think we are trendsetters, now it seems a lot of people go the extra mile, going on holiday with their exes. At first people thought we must still be in a relationship. But we’re family and we still find each other funny and have good banter. And we’ve got a child together. It may be that somebody you meet when you’re 21 might not be the person you should be with 20 years later. But it’s also significant to have known someone that long.’

Is she still in touch with Wiseman? ‘We don’t have a child together. It’s a whole different thing.’ I think that counts as a no. As for Matt Rife, the 23-year-old comedian with whom she has been linked over the last year, she says simply, ‘We’re friends.’ Recently grainy photos appeared of her and comedian Jack Whitehall kissing at a karaoke bar in Hollywood. People went wild; newspaper column inches were devoted to the alleged hook-up, eagle-eyed fans claimed they had spotted Whitehall’s feet beneath a curtain in the background of one of her Instagram posts, while the resounding sentiment expressed on Twitter was one of shock that Whitehall might be dating someone as beautiful as her. ‘When you get divorced, everybody waits to see where you land. But I might not land anywhere for a bit. I’m really quite happy: it’s quite nice to have a bit of Virginia Woolf time.’

‘The thing I could do without,’ she continues, that steeliness appearing, ‘is photographers hiding in cars outside my house and suddenly you hear a noise and it’s *click, click, click* and you’re ambushed. It tends to ratchet up if they’ve decided you’re dating someone that you’re not.’

She says she has always taken care not to project a starlet image. ‘I wore steel toe cap Doc Martens and was a bit militant. I came in with a “try and mess with me and I’ll have you” attitude and I’m sure that made me less of a hot prospect for certain producers. It definitely had an effect on my professional life, being somebody who wasn’t malleable like that.’ As a result, says Beckinsale, a story took hold that she was tricky to work with. ‘All it used to take was somebody to say you were difficult or crazy. Not just me, other people too. There are some people who are a nightmare, who keep everyone waiting for five hours and suddenly decide they need to have a llama on set or they can’t come. But the ones I know who pull that kind of behaviour are men.’ Quite often, she says, she finds she is the only female on set, which can be lonely. ‘It’s not every guy you can become platonic friends with – some people’s girlfriends aren’t really into that, or sometimes there might be a weird vibe.’

I wonder if she minds the constant emphasis on her looks: ‘It’s not annoying if somebody pays a nice compliment, but if people think that my looks are all that’s going on, it’s a bit tiresome. It’s also nothing to do with me.’ She sweeps a hand away from her face dismissively. ‘This is what my parents made, I can’t take any credit for any of it.’ Her youthful looks, she says, are down to good genes. ‘My mum looks amazing, she looks 30 years younger than she is. And I haven’t ever been a drink-and-drugs person – all my friends are extremely bacchanalian, but I have no tolerance whatsoever [to alcohol] so I’ve never made it through a whole drink. But I also think that expecting people to just physically fall apart after the age of 37 is nonsense. So I don’t pay any attention to that.’ She eats healthily, avoiding gluten, but says she is not ‘some sort of health freak’. Indeed, she punctuates the day with several cigarettes.

Beckinsale recently returned from Cape Town where she was shooting *The Widow*, an eight-episode series for Amazon and ITV, and is about to start work on two films: first, *El Tonto* with John Malkovich, about a mute simpleton who gets off a bus in LA, becomes a celebrity, and loses it all. Then she will shoot *Toff Guys* in London, a crime drama directed by Guy Ritchie, also starring Matthew McConaughey.

She returns to the UK as much as she can, often staying at her mother’s house in Chiswick: ‘I sleep in the same room I slept in as a child.’ Most of all she misses ‘M&S and parks and black cabs’. And she admits to a pang of homesickness when she watched Harry and Meghan’s wedding. ‘I’m an absolute sucker for him and I love a rousing “Jerusalem”. You don’t get much of that here.’ One day, she says, she will return to live in Britain. ‘As soon as I stop getting work here, I’ll just slope home.’

It seems unlikely that will happen any time soon. Although she works in an industry notorious for discarding women as they age, Beckinsale has never been busier. She insists that she does not worry about the passage of time. ‘On the contrary. I think you get more confident and it’s only the myth that everything is going to be shit that freaks you out. It actually hasn’t been my experience at all. I have my moments of abject existential terror as much as anybody else. But I’m more resilient than I ever thought I would be.’

She gives me a goodbye hug, then threads her way through the Polo Lounge, tapping earnestly on her phone. A short while later I see she has updated her Instagram with a revealing shot of her backside during the photoshoot and the suggestive caption: ‘@mollyrsten [the make-up artist] was so excited to find somewhere to park her bike at last.’ Cara Delvingne playfully responds, ‘I should be there.’ It may not be the image that graces the cover of *Tatler* but for a behind-the-scenes glimpse of not just her bottom, but also her character, it is spot on. □