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Goodbye to Breaking Bad. Hello to Bear Grylls and my action-hero ambitions

The actor RJ Mitte has spent his life proving his cerebral palsy won't hold him back. He tells **Helena de Bertodano** about his latest break — his foot

There are five of us standing at the edge of a busy Los Angeles street: the actor RJ Mitte, a photographer, a stylist, a publicist and me. The traffic is hurtling past in both directions and we need to cross: the publicist suggests we go to the pedestrian crossing, a hundred yards away. "F*** that," Mitte says as he launches himself into the road, a crutch under each arm and one leg in a cast. "RJ, no!" the publicist shouts. But he has judged it perfectly. There is just time to get over, all of us scuttling nervously behind as Mitte swings himself deftly to the other side.

Fearless is one word that might be used to describe him. Perhaps also foolhardy. Usually he walks unaided, but his leg is in a cast because he has just broken his heel jumping into a shallow river. "I knew it was shallow — but not that shallow," he says, laughing. "I'm always breaking something: I've broken all my toes, I've broken three fingers on each hand, I've broken my ribs, I've fractured both my legs, I've had concussions..."

He suffers from mild cerebral palsy and had to exaggerate his disability in his most famous role, as the son of Walter White in the American crime drama series *Breaking Bad*. Mitte plays the sensible son, deeply disturbed by



his father's metamorphosis from a mild-mannered chemistry teacher into a drugs criminal. Appearing in 53 episodes, Mitte started the show at the age of 14, finishing seven years later.

Much as he loved the role, he has spent the past four years trying to prove he is not just Walter White Jr. He played the lead in the indie film *Who's Driving Doug* and also acted in the teen drama *Switched at Birth*. He works for a number of disability charities and last year presented Paralympics coverage on Channel 4, a position he hopes to resume at the Winter Paralympics. He is now

RJ Mitte, right, on *Breaking Bad* with Anna Gunn and Bryan Cranston

working on three movies, all in early stages of production. And he models — for Vivienne Westwood, Gap and Kenneth Cole.

Not that he is anything but grateful to the show that made his name. "It gave me a career," he says. "I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing today if it wasn't for *Breaking Bad*... But I want to do more action stuff."

“I play it down, but as a kid I went through a lot of pain

To that end he agreed to take part in *Celebrity Island* with *Bear Grylls*, a tough survival show in which a group of celebrities are dropped on a remote island and left to figure out how to find water and food and to create their own shelter.

He was more than capable of all of the physical challenges and says that although there were tensions between some of the participants — who include the Olympic runner Iwan Thomas and the *Towie* star Lucy Mecklenburgh — they have remained friends. "A few people were very highly stressed, but there was

no bad blood," he says. "We have a WhatsApp group and when I go to London we'll all grab a pint."

Now 25, Mitte was born in Louisiana and adopted a few weeks later by a couple who separated soon afterwards. His adoptive mother, Dyna, raised him alone. It was not until he was three, when he clearly had difficulties walking, that he was diagnosed with cerebral palsy (CP).

"When I found out, I cried and cried," Dyna tells me later. "My aunt told me not to cry in front of him. She said, 'Take a hot bath, have a glass of wine and tomorrow when you wake up all your tears had better be shed.' So that's what I did. I never raised him to look at his disability as a problem. One day he came home crying from school because they had picked sides for football teams and [left him out] because of his hand-eye co-ordination. So we bought a football and every day he would practise catching the ball until he mastered it."

After years of physical, occupational and speech therapy he became so fit that he no longer had to wear leg braces. His speech is barely slurred these days, although he speaks predominantly out of the right side of the mouth. "With CP, everything I do is a conscious effort. Sometimes I think, 'Do I want to talk today or do I want to be physical?' I have to pick one or the other. I play my CP down, but as a kid I went through a lot of pain and suffering."

At 11 he faced another huge challenge. His mother, who had just given birth to his younger sister, Lacie, had a car crash that left her paralysed for several years. "I couldn't do anything," Dyna says. "RJ said, 'I can cook, I can clean, I can change diapers.' And he did. He stepped up to the plate and never once complained."

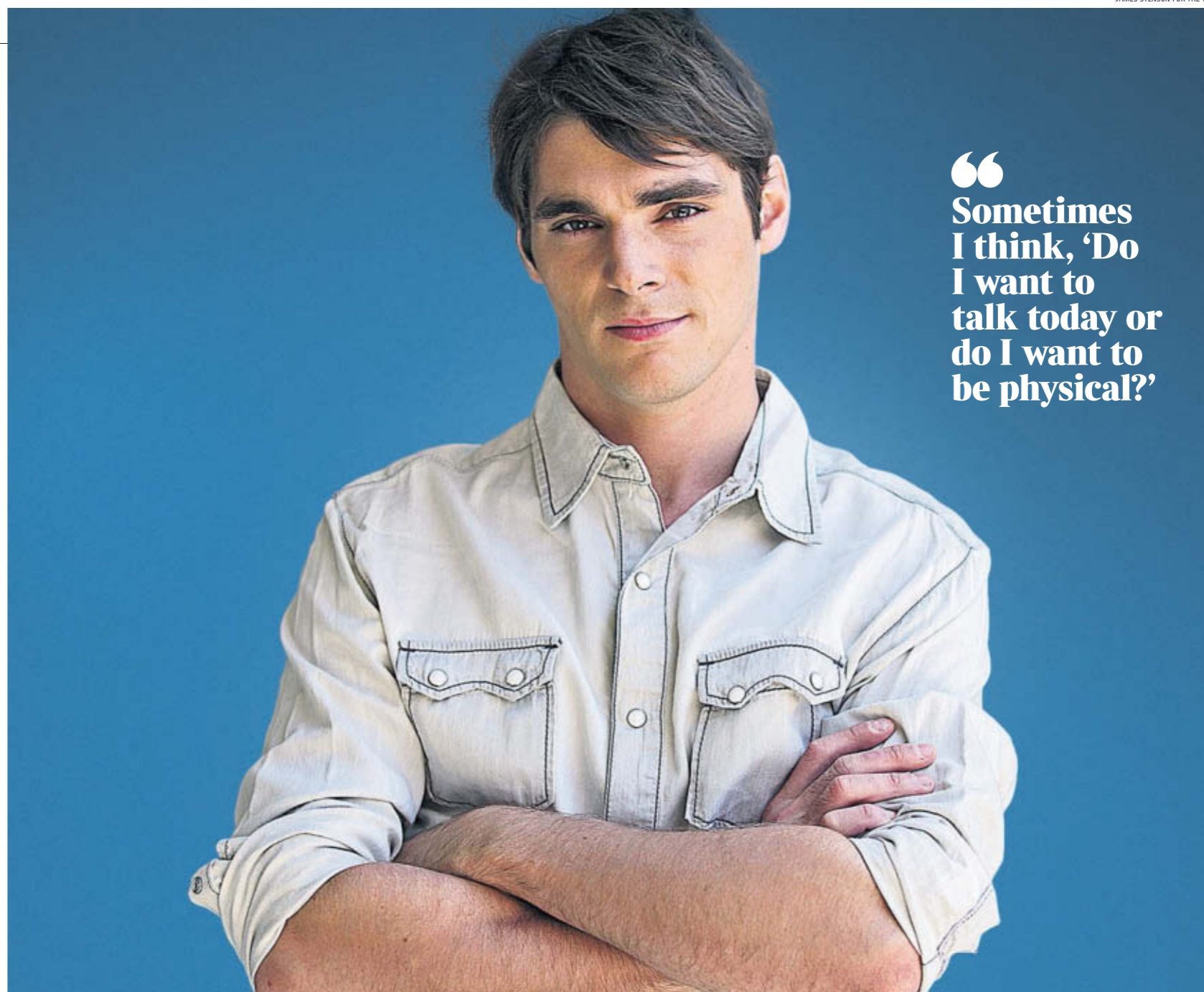
He also began earning money: mowing lawns and doing other odd jobs. When his sister was one, she was cast in a commercial and the family moved to Los Angeles. One agent,

meeting RJ, suggested finding work for him too. His mother resisted, fearing that the industry would make him feel self-conscious about his condition. But RJ was determined and within a few months he was working as an extra on shows such as *Hannah Montana*.

So when the call came for *Breaking Bad*, Mitte was more than ready. "Thousands of people auditioned, including a couple of hundred with CP, but it just fitted me perfectly," he says. "I think I looked the most like Bryan [Cranston, who played Walter White] and Anna [Gunn, who played his mother, Skyler]."

Because of the show, people assume he knows a lot about drugs. "And sadly enough I do," he says, laughing. From the show or personally? "Personally I've not dabbled, but I've been around it enough. It's 2017: everyone is on something!"

Breaking Bad itself, he points out, was far from an advertisement for drugs. "It didn't end terribly well for anyone." This is quite an understatement. In his last



“Sometimes I think, ‘Do I want to talk today or do I want to be physical?’

scene with his screen father, Mitte is seen yelling at him: "You asshole! Why are you still alive? Why don't you just die already?"

There is a scene on *Celebrity Island* when one of the contestants says of Mitte: "He often goes so far off and does such mysterious things it wouldn't surprise me if he was running a cartel at the same time."

The camera cuts to Mitte in some bushes where he has found the dregs of a rum bottle. "I've found liquor," he shouts triumphantly. "A quarter of a shot. I think the fumes from this, if we mix it with gasoline we could take some pretty big hits off it." He is joking of course.

Single at present, Mitte says he is steering clear of relationships for a while, having recently broken up with a girlfriend. "I'm done. My heart can't take much more. Relationships are hard. It's rough out there. Every relationship I've ever been in has felt like work. The last one I thought I had [something special] for a minute. And then it all went horribly wrong."

One day, he says, he will settle down and have a family. "I love kids. But I'm not financially stable enough yet." People wrongly assume that he made his fortune on *Breaking Bad*, but the show acquired its huge fanbase only once it went to Netflix. "No one knew it was popular until it was off the air; so there was no redoing contracts."

In the meantime he still lives with his mother and sister in West Hollywood. "A lot of people tell me I need to get rid of my mum and not have her be part of my life, but I've always really fought that. I've taken care of her this far. Why abandon her now? She's always been there for me and I've always been there for her."

With his good looks, easy charm and sense of humour, Mitte has no shortage of admirers. His Twitter and Instagram accounts are strewn with propositions from girls. As he walks down the street, women — always women — stop to ask him for selfies. Each time he politely complies, lingering afterwards to engage them in conversation. "I'm

RJ," he tells one pair, as if they didn't know. "Are you having a nice day? If you're looking for something to do, you should go to Forest Lawn [cemetery]; they have a stained glass window of *The Last Supper*. It's beautiful: it changes colour depending on the way the light hits it."

The women nod politely, slightly bemused. They look like committed celebrity spotters and everyone — except perhaps Mitte — knows that they have no intention of following his advice. Not unless Jesus is offering selfies.

But this boyish enthusiasm for all things is part of what makes Mitte so endearing. He lives life to the full. "I burn the candle at both ends — and in the middle too."

He insists that there is a darker side to him. "I try to be generous and nice, but I'm not always happy, I'm not always smiling. I know that I'm going to be an angry old bastard by the time I'm 65. Zero f***s given."

But this is uttered amid such a gale of laughter that it is hard to believe him.

***Celebrity Island* with *Bear Grylls* starts on August 29 on Channel 4**



Bear Grylls and Mitte on *Celebrity Island*