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OUR 27TH ANNUAL
**MEN
OF THE
YEAR**
ISSUE

**Comeback
of the Year**

**BRENDAN
FRASER**

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On the Covers



Photograph by Mikael Jansson. Styled by Kate Phelan. Turtleneck, \$25, by **Uniqlo**.



Photograph by Steven Klein. Styled by B. Åkerlund. Blazer, \$3,590, shirt, \$1,290, pants, \$2,490, and bow tie, \$295, by **Saint Laurent** by Anthony Vaccarello. Brooch, \$35,000, by **Tiffany & Co.** Pavé hoop earrings, \$2,380, by **Grace Lee**. Key earring, \$2,580, by **Eéra**. Gold hoop earrings, her own.



Photograph by Andreas Laszlo Konrath. Styled by Mobolaji Dawodu. Coat, \$2,490, by **Burberry**. Shirt, \$750, by **Dior Men**. Bracelet, \$975, and ring, \$595, by **David Yurman**.

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MOTY 2022



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Jacket, \$2,495, by **Dolce & Gabbana**. Turtleneck, \$348, by **Brooks Brothers**. Hat, \$420, by **Stetson**.



COMEBACK
OF THE YEAR

BRENDAN FRASER MADE IT

When GQ last met him, Brendan Fraser was speaking candidly for the first time about his supposed disappearance from Hollywood. Now, four years later, he's an Oscar favorite—and a man reckoning in real life with the kind of comeback you only see in the movies.

BY
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY
ANDREAS
LASZLO
KONRATH

STYLED BY
MOBOLAJI
DAWODU



More

the past few years, Brendan Fraser has been attending fan conventions. Maybe a star with a different level of vanity or self-regard wouldn't talk about this fact because it could be seen as embarrassing, or humbling, but Fraser is not that star. He shows up, shakes hands, signs autographs, talks about the past. Shares table space with guys like Sean Astin, from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Goonies*. Fraser started doing this, he told me, "to get over myself. Because I thought either, It's not something I would do, or, I didn't want to put myself in a place where I was vulnerable in front of everyone." But then he went to a Comic Con in London. This was in 2019. Part of it, he admits, is that he was getting paid; part of it was that after a rough decade, he suddenly felt the desire to get back out there. "I wanted to see the people," Fraser said.

Even now, during a year in which Fraser has, quite improbably, become an Oscar front-runner for his performance in Darren Aronofsky's *The Whale*—a performance that has reminded audiences of just how great Fraser once was, and how great he was once supposed to be—he is still showing up at conventions. And what he's found is: People will line up to see him. Some of them ask about *The Mummy*, the franchise Fraser starred in from 1999 to 2008—would he consider doing another one? (Yes.) Some of them want to discuss obscure plot points from *Doom Patrol*, the superhero TV series Fraser acts in for HBO Max. Some come because they see in Fraser—an actor who was a fixture of the biggest movies of the 1990s and early 2000s, the star of *School Ties* and *Encino Man* and *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*—some ineffable connection with their youth. "In their words," he told me, "they say I was their childhood."

And in some, Fraser has learned to recognize a more specific kind of connection. "I can spot someone across the room who I know has something to say, something to share, who has had something that happened...someone hurt them." They come to him and they divulge their secrets in what Fraser calls "a moment of glorious honesty." And what he does is, he holds that person's hand. He says: It's actually possible to ask for help. "I do want them to know," Fraser told me, that "if they admire or esteem me for whatever special reason, that if that kind of thing had happened to me, it could happen to anyone too. And we're all just...we're all just people."

Perhaps, like the vulnerable men and women at the fan conventions, you're aware of what Fraser is referring to here; perhaps you have no idea. The story, briefly, is this: A few years ago, Fraser sat down and relayed to a journalist a series of things he had not previously talked about in public. He talked about the ways in which his body had failed him after years of doing stunts on film sets. He talked about the reasons that had led him to step back from Hollywood, or that had led Hollywood to step back from him—he still wasn't quite sure which it was. And he shared a startling allegation: that a once powerful man named Philip Berk, a former president and member of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, the organization that stages the Golden Globes, had groped and assaulted Fraser at a 2003 luncheon at the Beverly Hills Hotel. (Berk disputes Fraser's account.) The experience, Fraser said then, "made me retreat." He felt, he said, like "something had been taken away from me." The incident had colored his life ever since, in ways that sometimes felt small and sometimes felt very big indeed.

The article in which he disclosed all this was published in the March 2018 issue of *GQ*, and online the story quickly became the most read in the history of the magazine. It was an improbable phenomenon: one of those articles that goes viral in a way that defies expectation, or even explanation, and then continues to be widely circulated, years later. Now, you will rarely see Fraser mentioned in a context that doesn't also mention the article in *GQ*, which was titled "What Ever Happened to Brendan Fraser?" This is a strange thing to talk about with Fraser, or write about here, because I was the journalist he spoke to for the piece. But, we found, there was no way for us to have a conversation in 2022 without talking, at least a little, about the last time we met.

After the story came out, Fraser told me, "I heard from college friends, people I hadn't worked with or seen going back 30 years of my career." One day he got an email informing him that he was trending on Twitter. "I was like, Oh, my God. Oh, fuck, what have I done now? And it was people saying they like me. And they referenced that piece. I was like, Is this good, is this problematic? I don't know. What did I do to earn this?"

The experience, he said, was mostly positive, but it was also complicated. He'd admitted something very personal in a very public way, and the revelations had traveled. "I think the feeling that I have is, this is a hard one to describe, and not to be vulgar, but it's like: *I've seen you naked*," Fraser said. "It's like people know what you look like, they know the story about you." But, he said, mostly he found telling his story to be "liberating. It was a weight removed."

In *The Whale*, Fraser plays a 600-pound writing instructor named Charlie who is approaching the end of his life and who is desperate to connect with his daughter before he dies. Fraser is wary about overstating the similarities between himself and Charlie, but there are ways in which Fraser saw himself in the part; one of them was in the simple fact of Charlie's sincerity. "He tells his students, 'Just tell me something honest. This is a pursuit for authenticity.' And once they do, it's liberating."

Fraser has already been almost universally praised for the performance he gives in the movie. And, in turn, that praise has begun to build into a narrative that Hollywood loves: a comeback. Here was a guy who was a leading man, who was beloved and who then seemed to disappear and who now, after years in the wilderness, or at the edges of other people's movies, is back at the center of things, where he belongs. Fraser has a few reactions to this narrative, all of them complex. But on some baseline level he is there with us, marveling at his return: nicked up, battered, dented but still here. Like the rest of us. "I like people feeling like they're getting to know me again," Fraser said. "Because we've all grown a little older together."

At the fan conventions, Fraser told me, people often say, "Welcome back. Good that you're back. I'm glad to see you back." And I say thank you. And some of them even go, "We've missed you. Where have you been?" You know, like almost letting me know that I disappointed them. And the first thing out of my mouth is "I was never that far away."

ONE DAY IN the fall, in midtown Manhattan, Fraser was in the back of a Brooks Brothers, being fitted for a suit. Several suits, in fact. He and Aronofsky were taking *The Whale* to a bunch of film festivals—London, Mill Valley, Montclair—and Fraser needed clothes. Once upon a time, these would've been provided to Fraser well in advance—work as an actor long enough, and attend enough premieres, and most fashion houses have your sizes on

←
PREVIOUS PAGE
jacket \$595
Vince

sweater \$780
Salie 66

hat (throughout)
\$420
Stetson

watch \$10,250
Rolex

→
coat \$2,490
Burberry

turtleneck \$795
Paul Stuart

jeans \$98
Levi's

shoes (throughout)
\$875
Tod's



file and are eager to help you with whatever you might need. But for Fraser, it had been a while ("A dog's year, at least. Yeah, maybe two. Um, I don't remember, honestly"), and so he was starting from scratch. A sudden downpour had driven a few random customers in off the street, and so he shared the dressing rooms as sales associates weaved back and forth with stuff for him to try on.

About a month earlier, at the Venice Film Festival, where *The Whale* had its world premiere, Fraser had been supplied with some suits, but they didn't fit, and so he had to stop at Richards, a department store in Greenwich, Connecticut, more or less on his way to the airport, to pick up the outfit he ended up wearing to the event.

A few days later, Fraser received a standing ovation at the festival for his performance in the film. A clip of the moment, with Fraser in tears, quickly went viral. The suit he is crying in—well: "*Crying* is a word that's, like, you've injured yourself, or there's some harm done; I think I honestly was just smiling so hard my face leaked"—is probably one of the very few off-the-rack garments in the theater. But this is what his life is like now: the same, but different. He is himself, but in a crowd now, for the first time in years—and in certain crowds, for the first time ever. "I'd never been in that microscope before," Fraser said, about what it was like to receive the ovation in Venice. "It's...it's powerful stuff."

We took a car to Grand Central and wandered through clouds of commuters, asking for directions along the way, until we found

the Grand Central Oyster Bar. Fraser said his mother's father used to come here for lunch, back in the 1920s. It had been a while since we'd seen each other. I thought he had a kind of lightness, an ease, that had not been much in evidence when we last met. "I'm in a really good place," he said to me when we sat down.

Some of this was *The Whale*, he said, and some of it was the fan conventions, and some of it was the fact that even before *The Whale* he'd been doing interesting stuff—playing a bagman in a Steven Soderbergh movie, *No Sudden Move*; playing a defense lawyer in Martin Scorsese's forthcoming *Killers of the Flower Moon*. On *Killers*, he said, he'd had the uncanny experience of encountering Leonardo

DiCaprio for one of the first times since they were both young and new to the business. Back then, "when he was I think probably all of, I don't know, 17, 16 maybe, he did *Gilbert Grape*. I saw it on the Paramount lot." Fraser is a few years older than DiCaprio, and at the time was just starting his own ascent in Hollywood. "I think I had just been in *School Ties* or something then, and I was, like, flummoxed but I just wanted to tell him, *Hear, hear. That was incredible*. And he repeated that to me. He remembered me. He said: *You were the only guy who didn't treat me like a little kid*. He volunteered that to me. That was meaningful."

It was a reminder that Fraser, too, had once been a bright young thing—a kid from an itinerant family who became a leading man almost immediately after his arrival in Hollywood. He may be remembered for his big and broad and blockbuster-y roles now, but back then he was just one of a generation of actors—like his *School Ties* costars Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Chris O'Donnell—vying for great parts, with Fraser at the head of the pack. "Everybody was fighting one another to get to New York to read for Martin Brest for *Scent of a Woman*," Fraser remembered. "We were all looking for our next job." Throughout the '90s and early 2000s, Fraser played plenty of dramatic roles, in *Gods and Monsters* with Ian McKellen, and *The Quiet American*, with Michael Caine, among others; but he had a knack for stunts and physical comedy and falling down, and eventually, that was most of what he did. But then there he and DiCaprio were again, all these years later, on a set with Scorsese. "I was fantasizing that I felt like one of the apprentices in Michelangelo's workshop," Fraser said.

A friend of Fraser's, Jon Kretzu, had shared a quote with Fraser before Venice, and Fraser told me he was repeating it to himself seven or eight times a day: "I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing." The quote, by coincidence or kismet, is from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*—the same book, though not the same passage, that Samuel D. Hunter, the playwright who wrote both the stage and screen versions of *The Whale*, cites in the film. "Thinking that has just made me feel like, you know what? I'm gonna enjoy

THESE PAGES
jacket \$168
Brooks Brothers
sweater \$1,760
Bode
ring (on
pinkie) \$850
David Yurman
ring (on thumb,
throughout),
his own





whatever's coming. I'm going to go to it laughing. And, whatever happens after that, it, it was enough. It was enough."

The plot of *The Whale* is simple, and takes place more or less in one room over the course of a single week. Fraser's Charlie is an English teacher giving lessons on Zoom with his camera off; he's clearly grieving something, and as the end of his life begins to rapidly approach, he aims to set things right with his conspicuously absent daughter (Sadie Sink) and ex-wife (Samantha Morton). To play the role, Fraser wore hundreds of pounds of prosthetics. "The weirdest thing was taking it off," Fraser said, describing the vertigo he'd get when he removed the suit. "It was like coming off a boat and stepping on the dock." The film is claustrophobic and tense and about a man in a very dire place. But it works because of Fraser, who is back at the center of a major movie for the first time in years. Charlie, despite his abject circumstances, has a kindness and decency and improbable optimism that will be familiar to anyone who has encountered Fraser before. You believe in Charlie because Fraser believes. "Once a leading man, always a leading man," Aronofsky told me. "I really believe that. I think there's a quality to actors of his ilk—there's a magic in there that doesn't go away. Especially if it hasn't had much time to shine."

In 2008's *The Wrestler*, Aronofsky famously cast Mickey Rourke as his washed-up main character: also on the brink of death, also seeking to reunite with a daughter. The role earned Rourke an Oscar nomination. The parallels are not lost on Fraser, even if he doesn't totally see it the same way. "Mickey's role is about a guy who was addicted to fame," Fraser said. "Well, we all know that Mickey gave the finger to Hollywood and here he is coming back." Everybody loves a come from behind, stand up on your own, give it one last shot, you know? That works, because I think we can all identify with it. Whether we can all do that in our lives or not, it's nice to see that fantasy onscreen."

I am trying to figure out how to categorize the way Fraser sounded when he said this; I think the best I can do is that he said it as if this fantasy—of coming from behind, of rising from the dead—was something very distant from the way Fraser sees himself. This is something I struggled with at the Oyster Bar: I kept asking, *How does this moment feel?* And Fraser kept saying something to the effect of: *It doesn't quite feel like any one thing at all.* He was a father, a working actor; if that's all there ever was, it would've been enough. As for *The Whale*, he said, "I don't know if this is gonna give me some big redemption in my own life. I know that I'm proud of the work that I did, and it's enough. It'll live on long after me. And that's good. The other stuff, maybe not so much. That'll live on too, but...I think I just have to live for what's happening for me now."

By other stuff, he of course means—well, pick one. *George of the Jungle*. *Encino Man*. *Airheads*. Movies that are great in their own way, and beloved, and which often involve Fraser bumping into things, or falling down, or emerging dumbfounded from another universe entirely. He is proud of these films; he also was maybe in some ways trapped by them, and when he couldn't do them anymore, Hollywood didn't offer anything in return. He got older; his appearance changed along with his appetite for crashing into things; the work dried up. Maybe this is why he takes less joy in talking about his so-called comeback than the people who are rooting for him do. He

knows how fragile and random a career, and a life, can be. How fundamentally out of his control any of this was and still is.

One gratifying thing about *The Whale*, Fraser said, is that it offered him a chance to work on terms that felt like his

"My hope is that I can be recognized for my professional efforts, rather than the trope of the comeback kid... being written off and then coming back."

own again. "Maybe I wasn't supposed to be doing stuff that was rough-and-tumble, fall down, go boom, all my career," he said. "Harrison Ford still makes this joke. I hear him doing it, going, 'I get paid to fall down hard.' That's his one-liner. And you know what, he's not wrong. I understand what it feels like to have that be your prime directive."

But Fraser also knew he was capable of more, even if no one was giving him the opportunity, until recently, to show it. Charlie, Fraser said, "is the most physical role I've done. I have beat shit up and fallen down, been lit on fire and thrown against walls, and that's fine. That was okay. I liked that. I had fun. Yeah, it put some chips in the paint, but I'm still here, damn it. But this was probably the most heroic character I've ever played."

One interesting thing about the performance, and Fraser's emerging status as an Oscar favorite, is that at film festivals now, they have begun to give him tributes. The first was in Toronto. There was a gala dinner, and at the gala dinner they played a montage of all of Fraser's screen work before handing him an award. He watched all these different versions of himself flicker across the screen. "I saw this guy onscreen with really wide eyes and different hair each time," Fraser said. "And also I think a little bit of *I hope they haven't found me out yet* behind the eyes. And it was nice to see the reel that they played. It made me feel...just a strong sense of affirmation."

But the feeling was complicated too. There were years and years of Fraser's career left unaccounted for. At Toronto, Fraser saw a golden boy with his shirt off; then he saw nothing at all. Before the reel played, Aronofsky told me, he introduced Fraser; afterward he watched as the scenes from Fraser's past played, one after another, interspersed with clips from *The Whale*. "And it was incredibly startling. Because there was such a purity and innocence to those roles he played in his 20s that is still there. But then there was just a grown man, and all of the complexities of that were suddenly on the screen for the first time. And you sit there and you go: *This is the same human being.* And it was kind of shocking, because there's a huge chunk of his life that's missing from the screen."

Had he been wronged? Had something important been taken from him? These weren't the right questions, Fraser told me. The question was: "How do you account for something that could have been?"

In *The Whale*, Fraser continued, "Samantha Morton plays this guy's ex-wife, and her lament is what could have been. And how it was, and then it went wrong. And that's what she's sad for. But there's no accounting.... Like, is there a numeric or a... How would you compensate for something that didn't become? It just never did, so it's not quantifiable."

Then he invited me to his house, an hour or so north of New York City, to have a bonfire.

THERE IS A lake in front of Fraser's property—more of a pond, really—covered in lily pads, and on a brilliant fall day we sat by it as he built a fire. When I was here last, we'd gone together to visit a horse named Pecos that Fraser had rescued from the set of a TV show he worked on. Fraser had brought him back for his eldest son,

→
jacket \$2,495
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turtleneck \$348
Brooks Brothers



Griffin, who is 20 now, and rated on the autism spectrum, and who found spending time with the horse to be soothing. But Pecos had passed, Fraser told me. "He was a dapple gray, and a veterinarian told me they're genetically prone to melanoma. Little bumps. Like, he always had little marbles under his...under the surface. So if they were on the surface, then they were definitely in him too. And I had to put him down. He was a good guy." For his son, Fraser said, "death is abstract." But they talk about Pecos frequently. Griffin has a ritual, Fraser said. "He goes through names of all the people he knows, and he keeps tabs on everyone that way."

Haltingly, we talked about the last time we had met and the story that resulted from that encounter. He wanted to know if I had a theory about why people had wanted to read a story called "What Ever Happened to Brendan Fraser?"

"Why do you think?" Fraser asked. "Or should I be the one answering that?"

I said for the purposes of journalism, yes, it should probably be him.

"Um, why do I think? I guess because there was an unanswered question, and that answered it. I guess my absence was felt and I didn't know it. It's humbling."

He said that some of what we discussed then was a little hard to talk about, even today. "I would admit to feeling a little bit of a heart palpitation discussing this with you right now, but it's okay, because my hope is that I can be recognized at this time in my life and career for my professional efforts, rather than the trope of the comeback kid as being a standard in culture, sports, coming from behind, being written off and then coming back."

Fraser kept getting up to tend the fire. I asked if finally sharing what had happened all those years ago had brought him a measure of peace, or changed his relationship to the incident itself.

"Yeah, it did," Fraser said. "That doesn't mean I don't get triggered every now and then, but then I come hang out back here." He gestured at the archery target on the lawn, in the same place it was the last time I was here, four years ago. "And I'll send a few arrows down range, and things feel better."

But even this was a more complicated story than was maybe convenient to tell. After the article containing Fraser's allegations against Berk and the Hollywood Foreign Press Association came out, the organization issued a statement saying, in part, "The HFPA stands firmly against sexual harassment and the type of behavior described in this article." The HFPA promised an inquiry, and Fraser was interviewed by an independent investigator. The organization ultimately came back to him and proposed issuing a joint statement that, according to Fraser, would say, "Although it was concluded that Mr. Berk inappropriately touched Mr. Fraser, the evidence supports that it was intended to be taken as a joke and not as a sexual advance." Berk remained a voting member of the HFPA. When I asked him in 2018 if he faced any disciplinary action from the organization, Berk told me: "None at all."

Fraser refused to sign the joint press release. And that's where it was left. Despite Fraser's very public allegations about a member of the HFPA, the organization continued on exactly as it had before. "I knew they would close ranks," Fraser said. "I knew they would kick the can

down the road. I knew they would get ahead of the story. I knew that I certainly had no future with that system as it was."

Then, in 2021, a *Los Angeles Times* investigation revealed that the HFPA, which is notoriously secretive, had no Black members; the paper's reporting also revealed numerous allegations of ethical and financial conflicts among the organization's members. In response, multiple film studios and publicity firms in Hollywood announced they would no longer work with the HFPA. Berk was publicly expelled from the organization in April 2021, after sharing an article decrying Black Lives Matter as a "racist hate movement" in an email to the membership. Ultimately, NBC, the HFPA's broadcast partner, declined to broadcast the 2022 Golden Globes. (The HFPA staged an awards show anyway, with no talent in attendance.) But in response to a number of reforms proposed by the organization, including an expansion of the membership and new rules against accepting gifts, NBC said in September it was bringing the show back. The 2023 Golden Globes will be aired live in January, reinstating the show onto the awards calendar in its usual spot ahead of the Academy Awards.

In any other year, at any other time, all of this wouldn't necessarily have much to do with Brendan Fraser. This was a chapter of his life he thought he had dealt with and put away. But it has been a season of return for Fraser—his past has come back to him a lot, for one reason or another, and so perhaps it was inevitable that all this would come back too. *The Whale* is an Oscar front-runner. Fraser is not just favored to be nominated in the best actor category, he's currently favored to win. In a "normal" awards season, that would mean Fraser would very likely be nominated at the Golden Globes as well. I asked if he would go if invited.

"I have more history with the Hollywood Foreign Press Association than I have respect for the Hollywood Foreign Press Association," Fraser said. "No, I will not participate."

He was speaking very quietly. I had to lean forward just to hear him over the wind moving through the trees above us. "It's because of the history that I have with them. And my mother didn't raise a hypocrite. You can call me a lot of things, but not that."

He wasn't exactly excited to relive any of it, he said, but he also was going to do what he thought was right, even if the effects were wide-rippling, as they may yet prove to be. Last time, after Fraser told his story about what had happened with the HFPA, the Golden Globes proceeded as if he had not said anything at all, with a full complement of nominees in attendance. "I think it was because it was too prickly or sharp-edged or icky for people to want to go first and invest emotionally in the situation," Fraser said. Would that happen again? It was the same story that Fraser told before. Would it play out differently this time?

I asked Fraser if he believed in any of the HFPA's announced reforms.

"At the moment, no. Maybe time will tell if they're going to...I don't know what they're going to do. I don't know."

The organization still had never apologized, Fraser said. (The HFPA disputes this and says the organization has apologized twice, and though Berk has acknowledged writing a letter about the incident to Fraser, Berk told me in 2018 that the apology admitted "no wrongdoing... the usual 'If I've done anything that

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dior. tailoring
by ksenia golub.
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eventure production.

**"I owe it to myself," Fraser said
of promoting *The Whale* and
campaigning for an Oscar.
"I owe it to the filmmakers.... I owe
it to my kids. This is my shot."**

