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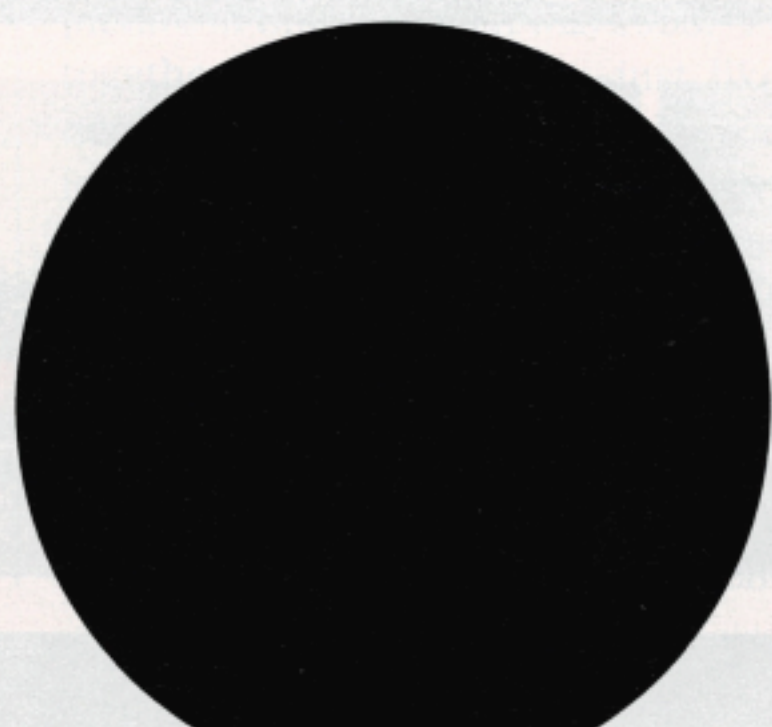


What Ever Happened to This Guy?

A LOT.

Zach Baron reports on the stupendous rise and surprising disappearance of
BRENDAN FRASER

Photograph by Martin Schoeller



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Brendan Fraser wants me to meet his horse. "I got this horse because it's a big horse," he says, standing in a barn in Bedford, New York. He removes a green bandanna from his pocket and gently wipes the animal's eyes. The horse's name is Pecos—the Spanish word for freckles. Fraser met him on the set of a 2015 History Channel series, *Texas Rising*. Fraser played a mid-19th-century Texas Ranger. They were filming down in Mexico, he says, when he and the horse had a shared moment of recognition. "Without doing too much—what's the word? Anthropomorphic... anthropomorphizing... Without pretending that the animal is a human, he looked like he needed help. Like: *Get me out of here, man.*"

So Fraser brought him back here. Fraser lives nearby and owns property that overlooks this farm, about an hour north of Manhattan. And though he's been traveling for most of this past year, going back and forth between Toronto, where he was shooting a series based on *Three Days of the Condor* called *Condor*, and Europe, where he was shooting *Trust*, an FX series about the kidnapping of John Paul Getty III produced by Danny Boyle, he makes sure to stop in and visit Pecos every few weeks or so. Why he does this is a question with a few different, surprising answers. But that is the way it is, I'm learning, with Brendan Fraser. He can't help but digress—"Instead of telling you what time it is, I might give you the history of horology," he says, in the middle of saying something else. He's compulsively honest. His mind is like a maze. You wander in and then emerge, hours or days later, disoriented but appreciative that something so unpredictable can still exist in this world.

His eyes are pale and a bit watery these days—less wide than they used to be when he was new to the screen, playing guys who were often new to the world. Blue-gray stubble around the once mighty chin, gray long-sleeve shirt draped indifferently over the once mighty body. I'm 35: There was a time when the sight of Fraser was as familiar to me as the furniture in my parents' house. He was in *Encino Man* and *School Ties* in 1992, *Airheads* in 1994, *George of the Jungle* in 1997, *The Mummy* in 1999. If you watched movies at the end of the previous century, you watched Brendan Fraser. And though his run as a leading man in studio films lasted to the end of this past decade, he's been missing, or at least somewhere off in the margins, for some time now. He was there on the poster, year after year, and then he wasn't, and it took him turning up in a supporting part in the third season of a premium-cable show, *The Affair*, for many of us to even realize that he'd been gone.

There's a story there as well, of course, and Fraser, in his elliptical way, will eventually get around to telling it to me. But first, Pecos. The other horses in Mexico were lean: mustangs, Fraser says. "And they beat up on this horse. I mean, I swear, I saw him get kicked so many times, bit, by other horses all the time. And I never saw him fight back."

Fraser watched this daily, this big, silvery horse being taunted by the sleeker horses around him. "And I thought, *All right, I got a job for you if you want it.*" He put the horse on a trailer, Durango to Juarez. Quarantine in El Paso. A FedEx cargo plane to New York. "And the veterinarians that ride on those cargo planes, they were like, 'This horse walked on like he wanted to know what the movie was and what was for dinner.' He just marched right on. He got off, came here, saw the cedar chips in the stall barn... Anyway, so I can get Griffin on him."

Griffin is Fraser's eldest son—15 years old. "Griffin's rated on the autism spectrum. Um, and so he needs extra love in the world, and he gets it. And his brothers"—Holden, 13, Leland, 11—"ever since they were small, one was always the spokesperson and the other was the enforcer." Fraser interrupts himself here to talk more about his eldest son. We've just met, but that doesn't seem to bother him. Details just pour out in a kind of loving torrent. Griffin, he says, is "a curative on everyone who meets him, I noticed. People have some rough edges to them. Or he just makes them, I don't know...put things into sharper relief and maybe find a way to have a little bit more compassion. They don't put themselves first so much around him."

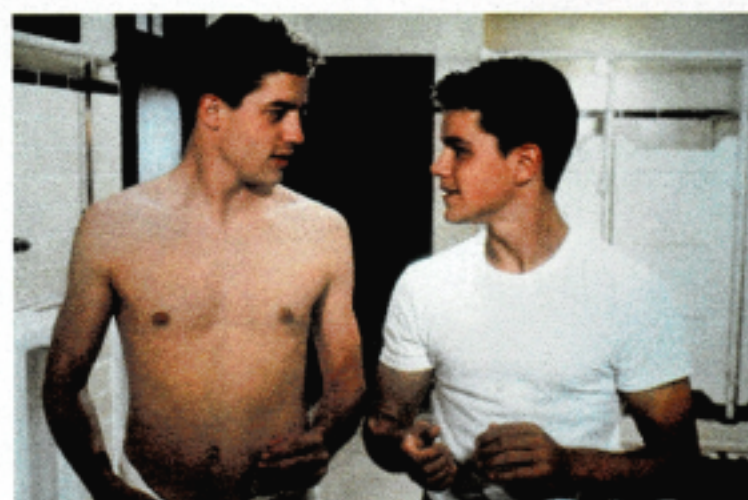
This was the job Fraser had for Pecos, to take care of Griffin: "There's something good that happens between the two of them. And even if he doesn't ride him, just give him a brush. The horse loves it, the repetitive motion that kids on the spectrum have that they love. And it just works... You know, you have to find those tools, strategies. If I ride, too, I just feel better. I just feel better."

And that's how I spend my first hour with Brendan Fraser.

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FRASER LIVES DOWN a dirt road, in a tall, angular house with a wide lawn that descends to a glittering lake. As he parks his car, he begins removing items from it: a black leather satchel, a riding helmet, a hunting bow. "Can you just grab those hatchets?" he asks. There are two of them. I do. Inside, his house is dark wood, open, with windows that look out onto his backyard—hammock, soccer goal, trampoline, tetherball, zip line, swimming pool. "I love forests and the seasons and...burning

• From left: Brendan Fraser in *School Ties* (1992), *Encino Man* (1992), and *George of the Jungle* (1997).



• From left: Fraser in *The Mummy* (1999), *The Quiet American* (2002), and *Crash* (2005).



wood," he says. His sons live with his former wife, Afton, in Greenwich, Connecticut, just across the state line from Bedford. "But they're here all the time," Fraser says.

He disappears for a moment, and then suddenly the sound of synthesizers comes from the speakers overhead, followed by a Pandora ad. "I thought this would be chill," he says when he returns. I ask what station he's chosen for us.

"Chill?" Fraser says. He doesn't remember the name. "Chillax, maybe?"

And so these synthetic flutes end up being the soundtrack to Fraser's story. He starts, uncharacteristically, at the beginning. Fraser's first acting job was in a 1991 film called *Dogfight*, starring River Phoenix and Lili Taylor. He played Sailor #1. "They gave me a sailor outfit, along with some other guys, and we did a punch-up scene with some Marines. And I got my Screen Actors Guild card and an extra 50 bucks for the stunt adjustment, 'cause they threw me into a pinball machine. I think I bruised a rib, but I was like: *That's okay! I'll take it. I can do it again. If you want, I'll break it. You want me to do it again?*"

Well, yes. This would become an on-screen signature of Fraser's: crashing into things. He was big and handsome in a broad, unthreatening way, and most important, he was game. In *Encino Man*, the film that helped turn him into a star, Fraser played a caveman recently freed from a block of ice in modern-day California; he likes to joke, or simply recount, that his audition consisted of wordlessly wrestling a plant. He had the unique quality of a man beholding the world for the first time, and directors began casting him as exactly that. For much of the 1990s, Fraser spent a lot of time emerging wide-eyed from bomb shelters (*Blast from the Past*) or Canada (*Dudley Do-Right*) or the rain forest (*George of the Jungle*), but he also took on more serious roles. In 1992, he starred with Matt Damon, Ben Affleck, and Chris O'Donnell in the drama *School Ties*, as a Jewish scholarship quarterback fighting for his place at an elite, anti-Semitic boarding school. (This was a natural part, minus the religious dynamics, for Fraser, who grew up in a happy but peripatetic family—his father had a job in Canada's office of tourism—and enrolled in a new school practically every other year.)

School Ties was marketed, correctly, as the launch of a new generation of leading men: the next *Diner* or *Footloose* or *The Outsiders*. And Fraser, who was bluff and hunky but

also had acting chops, was for a while the film's breakout discovery. But though as the decade wore on he'd continue to take more traditional leading-man parts, he ultimately found most of his success with his shirt off. In *George of the Jungle*, he wore a loincloth for most of the movie; his muscles had muscles: "I look at myself then and I just see a walking steak." The film eventually grossed \$175 million. "The naïf cum babe in the woods cum new guy in town cum man-boy cum...visitor-in-an-unusual-environment conceit was, uh...was very, very good to me," Fraser says now. That movie put him on the track toward a very specific kind of role. In 1999, he starred in *The Mummy*, a horror-adventure flick that also made a bunch of money and ultimately spawned a franchise that would occupy, on and off, the next nine years of his life.

Movie stardom is a phenomenon even movie stars can't reliably explain. Some executive or a director puts your face on a screen in a theater, and there's something about your features or the way your parents raised you or the decade you happened to arrive in Hollywood, some ineffable thing that goes beyond acting that you have no conscious control over, and millions of people respond to it. Fraser was gentle and eager and apparently guileless, and we as a country decided that was something we wanted as frequently as he would provide it, and so he spent some of the best years of his life doing his best to do just that.

He remade *Bedazzled*, with Elizabeth Hurley, in 2000. Did *MonkeyBone* and a *Mummy* sequel, *The Mummy Returns*, in 2001. *Looney Toons: Back in Action*, 2003. And on it went—in retrospect, far beyond where Fraser wanted it to go. "I believe I probably was trying too hard, in a way that's destructive," Fraser says now. The films, in addition to having diminishing returns, were causing a physical toll: He was a big man doing stunts, running around in front of green screens, going from set to set. His body began to fall apart. "By the time I did the third *Mummy* picture in China," which was 2008, "I was put together with tape and ice—just, like, really nerdy and fetishy about ice packs. Screw-cap ice packs and downhill-mountain-biking pads, 'cause they're small and light and they can fit under your clothes. I was building an exoskeleton for myself daily." Eventually all these injuries required multiple surgeries: "I needed a laminectomy. And the lumbar didn't take, so they had to do it again a year later." There was a partial knee replacement. Some

more work on his back, bolting various compressed spinal pads together. At one point he needed to have his vocal cords repaired. All told, Fraser says, he was in and out of hospitals for almost seven years.

He laughs a small, sad laugh. "This is gonna really probably be a little saccharine for you," Fraser warns. "But I felt like the horse from *Animal Farm*, whose job it was to work and work and work. Orwell wrote a character who was, I think, the proletariat. He worked for the good of the whole, he didn't ask questions, he didn't make trouble until it killed him.... I don't know if I've been sent to the glue factory, but I've felt like I've had to rebuild shit that I've built that got knocked down and do it again for the good of everyone. Whether it hurts you or not."

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IN A FEW HOURS, a car is scheduled to pick Fraser up and take him to the airport to fly back to London, where he's filming *Trust*. The series, like Ridley Scott's recent *All the Money in the World*, tells the story of the 1973 kidnapping of John Paul Getty III. Donald Sutherland plays the elder Getty; Hilary Swank plays his former daughter-in-law, Gail; Fraser plays a fixer for the family, James Fletcher Chace.

Danny Boyle, an executive producer of the series, cast Fraser after seeing *The Affair*, in which Fraser was a prison guard who seemed to harbor some dark secrets. Boyle says he was drawn to the deftness of the performance—"I utterly believed him"—but he also just liked the sensation of seeing Fraser again. "It's one of those delicious moments where you see someone you're so familiar with who is so changed by time and by experience. You kind of just clock that, and it's both so sad and wonderful. Because we all share that same time line."

Sarah Treem, the co-creator and executive producer of *The Affair*, says that Fraser's familiarity to audiences—his "star quality," as she puts it—was one of the reasons they wanted him for the show, in part so that the series could play with that stardom. "We were looking for somebody who had the ability to be incredibly compelling," Treem says, "but also really creepy and disorienting."

When his episodes of *The Affair* began airing, in late 2016, Fraser was asked to give his first interview in years, for AOL's YouTube channel. It is an uncomfortable watch. Fraser seems morose and sad; for much of it, he speaks in a near (continued on page 168)



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 147

whisper. The video went viral. In the months that followed, theories sprang up about what ailed him, focusing on his 2009 divorce and the fact that two franchises he'd once starred in, *The Mummy* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, had been rebooted and recast without him.

As it turns out, what was behind the sad Brendan Fraser meme was...sadness. His mother had died of cancer just days before the interview. "I buried my mom," Fraser says. "I think I was in mourning, and I didn't know what that meant." He hadn't done press in a while; suddenly he was sitting on a stool in front of an audience, promoting the third season of a show he'd barely been on. "I wasn't quite sure what the format was. And I felt like: *Man, I got fucking old. Damn, this is the way it's done now?*"

He was like one of the characters he used to play in the '90s, emerging dumbfounded into a new world. "Going to work—in between being in and out of those hospitals, that wasn't always possible. So what I'm saying to you sounds, I hope, not like some sort of *Hey, I had a boo-boo. I needed to put a Band-Aid on it*. But more of an account of the reality of what I was walking around in." For a while, sitting in his living room, he kind of talks around some other things—you can tell there's maybe more to this story that he's not yet ready to share. But clearly, it had been a bad decade: "I changed houses; I went through a divorce. Some kids were born. I mean, they were born, but they're growing up. I was going through things that mold and shape you in ways that you're not ready for until you go through them."

Fraser pauses, and his eyes seem to well up, and for the first time in this litany of surgeries and loss, he seems like he might not want to continue. I ask if he needs a break.

"I'm okay," he says. "I think I just need to let some arrows fly."

He excuses himself as I ponder what this means. A few minutes go by. When he returns, it's with a leather quiver full of arrows strapped to his back. He steps out onto his porch. Outside, he lofts a bow, nocks an arrow. Down below on his lawn, maybe 75 yards away, is an archery target. He releases the arrow straight into the target's center. Bull's-eye. Then nocks a second arrow, and does it again.

Finally, he exhales. "I feel a lot better now," he says. He hands me the bow: "Okay, now you try."

ON A FRIGID December day a few weeks later, *Trust* is shooting in a studio complex in East London, on a little island surrounded by empty parking lots and gas stations. Inside, the set is full of pine trees covered in fake snow, glittering in the bright lights. Fraser is in costume—long white trench coat, white shirt, white suit,

white Stetson, bolo tie—long legs stretched out, studying his lines. This afternoon, Fraser and Hilary Swank are shooting a scene inside a car. The set is made up to look like the mountains of Calabria, Italy, where their two characters have traveled to deliver ransom to Getty's kidnappers. The two actors sit inside a white Fiat, cameras still mounted on its hood, big soft lights surrounding it. As various people fuss over the setup, Fraser and Swank discuss their lines. Swank was supposed to say, nervously, as they drove to the rendezvous point in the snow: "They said that I have to drive 80, but I can't see. I can only drive 50."

To which Fraser responds, in his calming way: "You're doing just fine." As they run through the scene a few times, one of the show's producers, Tim Bricknell, says quietly to me that he's enjoyed watching Fraser over the past several months. "It's so cool to see leading men become great character actors later in their career." And it *is* cool to see Fraser work now. One thing you notice, re-watching his films from the '90s and early 2000s, is how much they depend on the gravity Fraser exerts as an actor. This is obviously the case with Fraser's dramatic roles: 1998's *Gods and Monsters*, opposite Ian McKellen; 2002's *The Quiet American*, opposite Michael Caine; and *Crash*, which won the Academy Award for Best Picture of 2005. But it's also true of Fraser's more ridiculous blockbuster fare. He exudes a kind of solid decency and equanimity that makes the implausible plausible. His presence in a scene makes you believe it.

"I always notice with comic actors, when they can do that stuff really well, you don't notice this great integrity in the way they're doing it," Danny Boyle says. "Because obviously you notice the cartoon effect of what they're doing, and it's very pleasurable. But in order for it to work, it actually has to have integrity. It is in some way based on truth and honesty."

"Am I still frightened? Absolutely. Do I feel like I need to say something? Absolutely. Have I wanted to many, many times? Absolutely. Have I stopped myself? Absolutely."

On *Trust*, Fraser's character is essentially the show's narrator—even turning, on occasion, to address the audience directly. It's a risky conceit, but it works because of Fraser. There he is: amiable, slightly amused, solid, dependable.

A few weeks after that day on set, Fraser calls me. There's something he wants to tell me that he couldn't quite bring himself to relate in London or New York. He's sorry about that, he says—that he didn't have "the courage to speak up for risk of humiliation, or damage to my career."

Certain pieces of what he tells me have already been told, it turns out—but this is the first time he's ever spoken publicly about any of it. The story he wants to relay took place, he says, in the summer of 2003, in the Beverly Hills Hotel, at a luncheon held by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, the organization

that hosts the Golden Globes. On Fraser's way out of the hotel, he was hailed by Philip Berk, a former president of the HFPA. In the midst of a crowded room, Berk reached out to shake Fraser's hand. Much of what happened next Berk recounted in his memoir and was also reported by Sharon Waxman in *The New York Times*: He pinched Fraser's ass—in jest, according to Berk. But Fraser says what Berk did was more than a pinch: "His left hand reaches around, grabs my ass cheek, and one of his fingers touches me in the taint. And he starts moving it around." Fraser says that in this moment he was overcome with panic and fear.

Fraser eventually was able, he says, to remove Berk's hand. "I felt ill. I felt like a little kid. I felt like there was a ball in my throat. I thought I was going to cry." He rushed out of the room, outside, past a police officer he couldn't quite bring himself to confess to, and then home, where he told his then wife, Afton, what had happened. "I felt like someone had thrown invisible paint on me," he says now. (In an e-mail, Berk, who is still an HFPA member, disputed Fraser's account: "Mr. Fraser's version is a total fabrication.")

In the aftermath of the encounter, Fraser thought about making it public. But ultimately, "I didn't want to contend with how that made me feel, or it becoming part of my narrative." But the memory of what had happened, and the way it made him feel, stuck with him. His reps asked the HFPA for a written apology. Berk acknowledges that he wrote a letter to Fraser about the incident but says, "My apology admitted no wrongdoing, the usual 'If I've done anything that upset Mr. Fraser, it was not intended and I apologize.'"

According to Fraser, the HFPA also said it would never allow Berk in a room with Fraser again. (Berk denies this, and the HFPA declined to comment for this story.) But still, Fraser says, "I became depressed." He started telling himself he deserved what had happened to him. "I was blaming myself and I was miserable—because I was saying, 'This is nothing; this guy reached around and he copped a feel.' That summer wore on—and I can't remember what I went on to work on next."

He knows now that people wonder what happened to Brendan Fraser, how he went from a highly visible public figure to practically disappearing in the public mind, and he'd already told me most of it. But this, he says, is the final piece. The experience, he says, "made me retreat. It made me feel reclusive." He wondered if the HFPA had blacklisted him. "I don't know if this curried disfavor with the group, with the HFPA. But the silence was deafening." Fraser says he was invited back to the Globes only once after 2003. Berk denies that the HFPA retaliated against Fraser: "His career declined through no fault of ours."

Fraser says the experience messed with his sense of "who I was and what I was doing." Work, he says, "withered on the vine for me. In my mind, at least, something had been taken away from me." This past fall, he watched other people come forward to talk about similar experiences, he says. "I know Rose [McGowan], I know Ashley [Judd], I know Mira [Sorvino]—I've worked with them. I call them friends in my mind. I haven't spoken to them in years, but they're my friends. I watched this wonderful movement, these people with the courage to say what I didn't have the courage to say."

He was in a hotel room just weeks ago, watching the Globes on TV, Fraser says, as the actresses wore black and the actors wore Time's Up pins in solidarity, when the broadcast showed Berk in the room. He was there and Fraser was not.

"Am I still frightened? Absolutely. Do I feel like I need to say something? Absolutely. Have I wanted to many, many times? Absolutely. Have I stopped myself? Absolutely."

On the phone, he breathes deeply. "And maybe I am over-reacting in terms of what the instance was. I just know what my truth is. And it's what I just spoke to you."

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THE LAST TIME I saw Brendan Fraser, in a restaurant in Soho, he told me a story so digressive and confusing that I hesitate to try to re-create it here. But it's stuck with me in ways that I can't quite articulate. And with the benefit of what I now know, I think I maybe finally understand what he was trying to say. So here goes. It begins with Fraser trying to explain why he was drawn to the script for *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*, in which he played an actor who happens to be the stuntman for Brendan Fraser. This was 2003-ish—around the same time that a script for a new *Superman* film, written by J. J. Abrams, was making the rounds in Hollywood.

Fraser, along with a bunch of other actors, was floated as a potential new Superman—a coveted but famously cursed role. The director of the film at the time was Brett Ratner, currently accused of sexual misconduct by multiple women, but who was then just another fast-talking Hollywood director. (Ratner, through his attorney, has denied the accusations.) Since the studio was interested in Fraser, and Fraser was interested in the script, Ratner asked Fraser to come by his house one morning to talk about the role. "He rolled down and he looked still asleep," Fraser remembers. "And there was a photo booth. Like, a retro, old-timey black-and-white photo booth. And he said, 'Would you want to do a photo?' So I sat down and got my picture taken in the booth. And he opened the door to show me that, you know, it was all real. It wasn't digital or anything like that. And I was like, 'You can't open the booth.'" Ratner had exposed the film. "He pulled it out and he went, 'Oh... Gee, it's all white. Can we do it again?'"

But Ratner told Fraser he was working on a book of these photos, and so, despite his misgivings, and because he wanted to be Superman, Fraser went back in the booth and took the picture again. And then "the meeting ended with him sitting on a pool table with a phone getting into a full-throated argument with somebody at the studio, I don't know why."

But history records what happened next: Ratner never directed a *Superman* film. And Brendan Fraser never played Superman. (The film ultimately became 2006's *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer and starring Brandon Routh.) Which, Fraser says, pretty much broke his heart. It made him feel ashamed, even. "You feel like: *I didn't measure up. Oh, I failed.* And the truth is, you didn't. That's erroneous. That's wrong. It's not true. You didn't fail. You're not. But even if you—if like, as I sit here and say that to you right now, I feel like, *Well, no, no, the proof's right there.*"

It's around this time that I ask what any of this has to do with *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*. And even Fraser looks perplexed for a second, but then he remembers. "I started telling you this because all of this intrigue was going around while I was shooting *Looney Tunes: Back in Action*, which is about a stuntman...who was Brendan Fraser's stuntman. And then the stuntman meets Brendan Fraser at the end. He meets Brendan Fraser and punches him out."

Fraser says when the day came to shoot the scene where he punches himself out, he put on the most ostentatious clothes he could find to play Brendan Fraser. "It was my vision of the worst version of myself. And I get to deck me." And the point, finally, is this: "The reason I was adamant about wanting to do that"—by which he means take a film role with a bunch of cartoons that involved punching himself in the face—"even if I didn't realize it until much, much later, is that at that time I think I wanted to knock myself out. I wanted to take the piss out of myself before someone else would, 'cause I had it in my head that I had it coming."

He wasn't worthy of being Superman. He wasn't even worthy of being Brendan Fraser. And this feeling ate at him as the decade wore on, and he starred in movies he was less and less proud of, and his body deteriorated, and his marriage fell apart, and he kept thinking about what had happened to him in the summer of 2003: "The phone does stop ringing in your career, and you start asking yourself why. There's many reasons, but was this one of them? I think it was." And that, he says, is why he ultimately disappeared for a while. "I bought into the pressure that comes with the hopes and aims that come with a professional life that's being molded and shaped and guided and managed," he says now. "That requires what they call thick skin, or just ignoring it, putting your head in the sand, or gnashing your teeth and putting on your public face, or just not even...needing the public. Ignoring. Staying home, damn it. You know, not 'cause I'm aloof or anything, but because I just felt I couldn't be a part of it. I didn't feel that I belonged."

So he left, and it took years, and some surgeries, and a horse, and the third season of a Showtime series, and now *Trust*, here in London, to bring him back. "Something good came out of something that was bad," he says. "Sometimes it takes a while for that to happen."

He brightens. There's yet another postscript to the story he's been telling for the past hour, as we sit in this restaurant and people pass by our table, doing double takes as they realize who's sitting at it. "The coup de grâce," as Fraser puts it: Ratner did, ultimately, publish a book of photographs. It appeared in Fraser's house one day, he's still not sure how—certainly he never gave his consent to appear in it. He paged through the book: Michael Jackson, Chelsea Clinton, Harvey Keitel, Britney Spears, Sean Combs, Shaquille O'Neal, Val Kilmer, Jay-Z, a cavalcade of stars who wandered through this strange photo booth on some strange day and whose images were captured, for reasons that were probably never clear to any of them, reasons that weren't always sound or rational but there they were, in black and white.

And there he was, too. "I remember thinking: Well, you're welcome." ❖

ZACH BARON is GQ's staff writer.

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