

# TO BE OR NOT TO BE

*Funny or chippy? Smart or flippant? Guarded or refreshingly candid? Or, if you're **Benedict Cumberbatch**, all those things at once. ELLE steps into a world of delicious contradictions*

Interview Annabel Brog Photography Marc Hom Fashion Michelle Duguid

As work days go, this - a 12-hour stretch on a Friday in August - was one of my better ones. If it was a movie, it would be a Richard Curtis romcom by numbers, featuring, in no particular order: a walk in a London park, the word 'f\*ck' on repeat, a motorbike ride at sunset, school-boy banter, small furry animals, London's most sceney restaurant, devilled eggs, an awkward sex scene, and an uncomfortable leading man.

Perhaps it's just lack of practice, because the leading man, in this case, is played by Benedict Cumberbatch. This is an actor who, despite a 14-year career, 29 films, 21 TV shows, 16 theatre productions, 48 award nominations (and 17 wins), has never really played the romantic lead, sought adulation or fancied himself a heart-throb. And yet it happened when, four years ago, a largely unmarketed BBC miniseries became a global hit. *Sherlock* turned him into the star turn in one-million-plus filthy fan fiction fantasies.

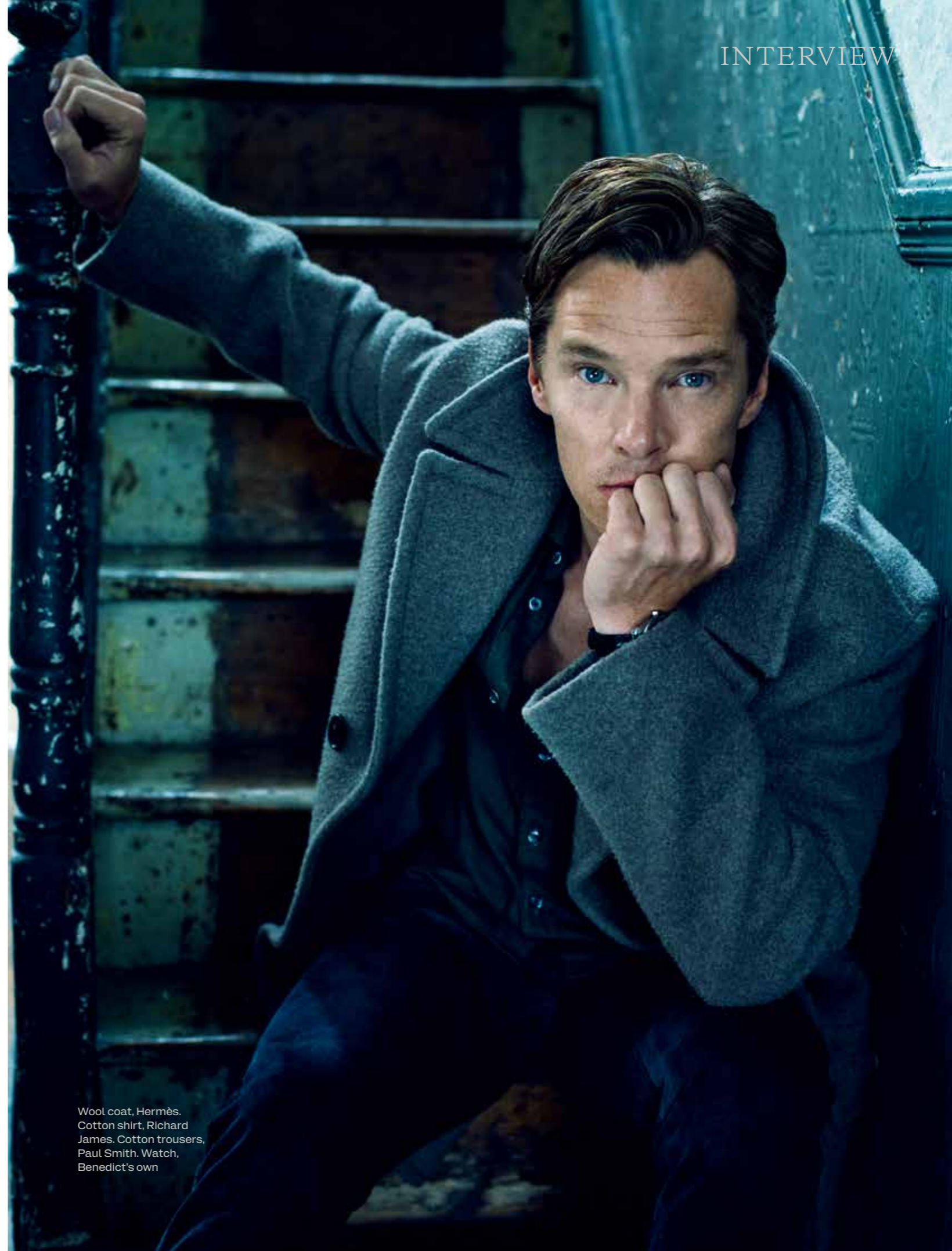
#### SCENE ONE: MOTORBIKE. LONDON. DUSK.

Right now, I am living one of those fantasies, though I am also having to try seriously hard not to headbutt Benedict. It's a fight I am, sadly, destined to lose. 'Sorry,' I mutter, as my head connects with his. I am riding pillion behind him on his motorbike - a Honda CBF600 - as he drives just a little bit recklessly through north London, so at least we are wearing helmets. 'Feel free to hold on tight,' he said to me when we climbed on. But I don't feel free. Given a green light to wrap myself around Mr Cumberbatch, I end up primly clasping his waist with my hands, creating an awkward space between our bodies, and the reflexive headbutt every time he slows down.

I try gripping him with my knees, for some balance. 'Sorry,' I say again. 'I keep thinking you're a horse.'

He is, of course, mesmerisingly beautiful, but Benedict has built a career on playing notably non-sexual men. >

Wool coat, Hermès.  
Cotton shirt, Richard James.  
Cotton trousers, Paul Smith.  
Watch, Benedict's own



**'I HAD A GREAT CHILDHOOD.  
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"WHY ME? WHERE ARE THE GIRLS?"'**

When I went trawling YouTube for the fodder of all the highly inventive daydreams he inspires, I couldn't find much. He played a sex-obsessed teenager in *Fortysomething* back in the early 2000s, and there is a ferocious, five-second sex scene in *Parade's End* (the 2012 BBC2 miniseries he starred in, opposite his friend Rebecca Hall), but mainly... no love scenes. And of course his Sherlock abstains from sex, although Benedict does insist: 'He's asexual for a purpose, not because he doesn't have a sex drive, but because it's suppressed to do his work. Cold showers, looking at a lot of dead bodies... that'll do it for you.'

Nonetheless, women absolutely love Sherlock. 'Not my problem,' says Benedict. I suggest idly that Sherlock would actually be a pretty lousy lay: technically proficient, but lacking enthusiasm. Benedict is appalled. He also likes an argument. First, he disagrees with me. Then, when I remain unconvinced, he proceeds to describe *exactly* what Sherlock would do in bed, using the words 'latex', 'porn', 'enter' and 'explosive'. (It's too lengthy to quote in full here, but feel free to visit [elleuk.com](http://elleuk.com) to read the transcript.)



So don't think less of me for being too spun out to hug him on the motorbike, OK?

**SCENE TWO: FLASH-FORWARD SEQUENCE**

Benedict's forthcoming roles will just reiterate what we know already: he doesn't play romantic leads; he has awe-inspiring range as an actor who can steal the show in Hollywood blockbusters, as with Khan in *Star Trek Into Darkness*; he can hold his own against Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts (*August: Osage County*); and he has been a must-see stage performer (in Danny Boyle's *Frankenstein* at the National Theatre in London).

Nonetheless, he has surpassed himself with his latest performance in *The Imitation Game*, a gripping and heartbreaking biopic, in which he portrays the brilliant mathematician Alan Turing - the man who broke the Enigma code for the allies in the Second World War and founded modern computer science, before being vilified by his country for being homosexual. In the film, Benedict, truly, is nothing short of devastating.

Turing is another genius; it's noticeable that Cumberbatch seems to specialise in men fuelled by intellectual fervour - Professor Stephen Hawking in *Hawking*, Julian Assange in *The Fifth Estate*, Sherlock - but it's testament to Benedict's skill that his prodigies barely register as the same species. 'It's very tempting to play these extraordinarily complex characters, because it's a very rich canvas to work with as an actor,' he explains. '[But] I don't really mind repeating [because] Turing is so different to Sherlock. There's a real subtlety about him; his flourishes aren't flamboyant, he doesn't think of himself that highly.'

Post-*The Imitation Game*, Benedict takes an unexpected turn in animated comedy, playing a smooth-talking wolf, Agent Classified, in *Penguins Of Madagascar* ('Why? "John Malkovich is playing the baddie. Would you like to play the sort of mock-Bond hero figure who has his come-uppance, and it's funny?" "Yeah, yeah I think I would!"'), followed by the title role in the BBC's *Hollow Crown* adaptation of *Richard III*. His portrayal of not-so-good King Dick, with his humpback and his limp and his homicidal inclinations, is likely to stir things up. 'You wouldn't look twice at him necessarily, but once he had you in his beam... He's a very dangerous, charming, powerful man.'

And then Hamlet, who Benedict will tackle on stage next summer. Another rather sexless man, I suggest. 'My God, he's got a depth of soul that, if he turned it on you, you'd be the happiest woman in the world,' Benedict responds, shocked. I say I find Hamlet a navel-gazing, self-



**This page:** Wool coat and cotton shirt, both as before  
**Opposite:** Shearling coat, Fendi. Wool-mix jumper, Louis Vuitton. Denim jeans, A.P.C. Leather boots, Original Penguin

obsessed bore and he tears a strip off me. 'Whose Hamlet have you seen?' When I admit my opinion is based on just reading the text, he rants for 11 whole minutes. 'Yeah, great,' he snaps. 'OK, so you're projecting your interpretation of a character off the printed word. You have to see an interpretation beyond your own reading. You have to. You can't say that you hate Hamlet. Hamlet doesn't just exist in a book, he exists in performance!'

He later apologises on the phone: 'Sorry, I got a bit defensive, didn't I?' But in fact, it was rather nice being the object of Benedict's derision, because: 1) he was completely right; 2) his rant involved an impromptu rendition

**SEE IT** Want more Cumberbatch? Visit [elleuk.com](http://elleuk.com) for behind-the-scenes pictures

of Hamlet's 'drown the stage with tears' speech, and it was spectacular; and 3) he was so unguarded. Benedict is funny and smart - he's great company - but he's struggling to walk a line between being genuine and people-pleasing, so it's rather nice when he forgets to care.

When discussing fans who furtively try to take his photo, for example, you can hear his longing to embrace a robust approach. 'People asking is nice. But when people just go [he imitates someone sneakily holding up a camera phone, dropping his jaw to the side], and they do generally do that mouth, [he does it again] then I'm gun-blazing. I cross-question them. They're like: "What, what are you talking about? I haven't taken your picture." And I'm: "Then let me see your phone." And they're like, "No, I'm not showing you my phone," and I'm [his voice rises in indignation], "Well don't f\*cking take a photograph of me then."'

Except he doesn't actually say that last bit out loud. 'No, not so much,' he says ruefully. 'But in my head, in my head... There are times when I'm completely fine with it, and other times I'm: "Actually I'm with someone you're totally ignoring and standing on while trying to get a photo of me, and this is not the right time." Then they walk away and I think: "God, am I an arsehole? Should I be accessible all the time?" But I think: "Not really."'

**SCENE THREE: FLASHBACK SEQUENCE**

So here's the story so far. Benedict Timothy Carlton Cumberbatch was born 38 years ago to actors Wanda Ventham and Timothy Carlton, a child 'prone to moments of hyperactivity, then exhaustion and bad temperedness. Also over-gregarious, over-friendly, oversharing.'

His was a remarkably happy family. Yes, he was sent to boarding school aged eight, but it was not the wrench everyone assumes: 'The first lump-in-the-throat moments were really horrible, but they were soon overridden by the sheer joy of what I was doing. It was like a band of brothers: sailing and camps and cricket and boys being boys and having adventures.'

After that, another boarding school, Harrow, where >



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Cashmere coat, Louis Vuitton. Cashmere jumper, Fendi. Denim jeans and leather boots, both as before

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FRIENDS GET TO SEE: DEADPAN,  
BOYISH FOR A MAN OF NEARLY  
40, SWEARY, RIDICULOUS**



Brown and cream suede  
and shearling coat,  
Burberry Prorsum

to study drama, which we don't really talk about, but I can't imagine a boy like Benedict would go to Manchester in the 1990s and not enjoy the range of amusements on offer. He made some great friends (one of whom, barrister Rob Rinder, now has a *Judge Judy*-inspired reality TV show, *Judge Rinder*) and fell in love with actress Olivia Poulet, whom he dated for around 12 years, during which time he carved out a highly acclaimed career for himself. Not just in dramatic roles, but also showing a fine knack for comedy playing absolute losers, like Patrick Watts in *Starter For 10* ('He was very stupid. That's more me than any of the geniuses I've played'), Martin Crieff in BBC Radio 4's *Cabin Pressure*, or the hapless hostage-negotiator in *Four Lions*.

Everything indicated that Benedict would be a talented actor, working consistently, making a good living (which, incidentally, was all he ever hoped for, and would have been delighted with), but then... *Sherlock*. Worldwide adulation. And, a year later, a parting of romantic ways with Olivia.

That must have been quite something,

I think: the sex-free adolescence, followed by real and lasting love, then emerging - in his mid-30s - to find the better part of the female population suddenly want to bang his brains out. He admits that it's a 'really double-edged sword'. That 'it's important to be able to have some fun with your currency', but also that, 'You know, you discover why people find you attractive - in a relationship, or a tryst - and if it's just to have a go on you, or try you out, then I can smell that a mile off.' He didn't let it make him cynical. 'I think the people around me are far more protective of me than I am, on that front.'

But 'fun with his currency' aside, Benedict is after the fairy tale. He has been open in the past about wanting marriage and children, then he stopped talking about it - 'It becomes a national talking point about why I haven't yet managed that. You know: "Can't he hold a relationship down?"' But when I ask where he wants to be in 30 years, he says: 'I can imagine I'll look back at this point in my life and think, "Wow, that really was extraordinary."' But at the same time, I hope I'm looking back and going, "Oh, that was the moment I got on with life and realised things beyond myself." Without using words like "marriage", "chil-

dren" and "family" - although I have just used those words - put it this way: I hope I've got other people to look back with me at that point. I hope I'm surrounded by family.' My guess is that Benedict is a man in love, and making plans already.

**SCENE FOUR: CHILTERN FIREHOUSE, MARYLEBONE, LONDON. PRIVATE BOOTH WITH PERSONAL HATCH WINDOW ON TO BAR**

Benedict is on the phone to his best friend Adam, who is joining us at the Chiltern Firehouse for drinks. 'I'm going to tell you what drink to order,' he is whispering into the handset. 'But I don't want to say it out loud because I want to order one for her [that's me] and I don't want her to hear the name because it's so funny.'

We are ensconced in the snug, curtained off from the prying eyes, with a window directly on to the bar. He ends his call, and leans forwards. 'Would you like a quick one before dinner?' he asks me. Then he calls through the hatch: 'Two Quick Ones Before Dinner,' he tells the barman.

I have seen many Benedicts today. There was the invisible Benedict I walked with on Hampstead Heath, who kept his head down, deliberately (and probably wisely) avoiding eye contact with tourists, young mums and the pre-teen girls playing softball - although he was enchanted by a little girl peeing on the grass: 'Oh look, she's having a wee. Now her mum is sitting in it.'

And there was the charming, charismatic professional at our cover shoot, who won over the ELLE team with his enthusiastic response to A.P.C. jeans, adidas trainers, Bunny (a rabbit who, given the chestnut fur, bears an certain resemblance to Cumberbatch himself), and Karl Lagerfeld sunglasses, which prompted him into an uncanny impersonation of the man himself.

And then there was the Benedict I interviewed, a little wary, veering between honesty and courtesy, while displaying small flashes of insecurity in a tendency to voice imagined criticism of himself before anyone else can.

But this is the Benedict I imagine his friends get to spend time with. Deadpan, very boyish for a man of nearly 40, swears, ridiculous. This, needless to say, is my favourite Benedict. I think by this time, he's forgotten to care how he comes across, which of course means he comes across great.

For example, I'm treated to a comic riff on the subject of his co-stars: 'He's the one who's picked up the f\*cking gongs,' he says, about *Sherlock* co-star Martin Freeman. 'I think it's been acknowledged how good he is. I think it would do him good to eat some humble pie and realise he's

working with a genius.' Is that a fact? I say. So what's the genius like at a humble pub quiz? 'Alright, actually. My general knowledge isn't that bad.' He gives me an evil smug look, drops his voice. 'But you'll never know, will you?'

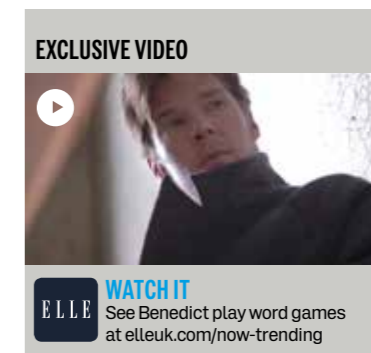
We order a selection of bar snacks to keep us going until Adam shows up, and Benedict is as delighted by the idea of devilled eggs as I am appalled. He tells me *The X Factor* makes him cry. 'Like anyone, I'm nearer to laughing and crying when I'm more tired than usual. That's when *The X Factor* segments might get me, in a weak moment at the end of a long week. Another well-edited story, however formulaic, can still get me in the gut.'

Adam arrives and, when I tell the pair that they have the snug for the night, they high-five and click fingers and Benedict actually says 'Boom'. 'We never normally do that,' he says hastily. 'That was done for show, Annabel.' It was a pretty smooth move for people who have never done it before.

'When I met him, he was the person painting my nursery wall with me, who came over and laughed at films with me,' Adam says when Benedict goes to the loo. 'He was never anything else. All this [he waves vaguely in the direction of fame and glamour], we find it quite funny. Obviously, it's amazing and he deserves it and it's a perk, but he's always just been my Benedict.'

It seems only fair to give Benedict the last word so, as I leave, I ask what he hopes I think of him. At first he's horrified. 'That's awful. Like I've tried to manipulate you into a point of view of me and I hope I haven't.' Then he seizes the opportunity. 'So. A few broad brushstrokes. Honest to a degree. Good company. A good motorbike rider. Someone who's comfortable in his own skin. And someone who's enjoying their life at the moment, because I am. I really am.' ●

*The Imitation Game* is out 14 November



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