

This Is Christian Bale

Famous for total transformations, the actor tackles an epic role in this month's *Exodus: Gods and Kings*—and opens up about celebrity, Hollywood rivalries and the private life he's so protective of.

BY ANDREW GOLDMAN

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A LOT CAN GO WRONG when adapting biblical stories for the movies, but there's perhaps no bigger mistake than handing a crown of thorns or a shepherd's staff to an actor who lacks the requisite heft for the role. Christian Bale, who is incapable of taking anything lightly or committing halfway, has no such issue and could plausibly embody just about anyone in the Good Book, from Genesis to Revelation. Fifteen years ago, he played Jesus in a made-for-TV movie and was rewarded with months of messianic nightmares. Bale was reportedly Darren Aronofsky's first choice to play the lead in his *Noah*, but an opportunity to star in a Terrence Malick film came along, so Russell Crowe would have to suffice. Ridley Scott was luckier and secured Bale for the part of Moses in his 3-D epic *Exodus: Gods and Kings*, opening this month. Few actors would be able to make audiences buy what Bale does—a man, driven half mad by the voice of God, warning of plagues that are actually coming, who parts an entire sea to accommodate a flock of fleeing slaves. But Bale is well-known for being an actor who morphs completely into his roles. To become Dicky Eklund, the strung-out ex-boxer in *The Fighter*, he shed pounds until he was skin and bones; the performance won him an Academy Award for best supporting actor. For Irving Rosenfeld, the unforgettable con man with a paunch and a comb-over in *American Hustle*, he gained 40 pounds (but lost the best actor Oscar to Matthew McConaughey).

The British-born Bale, married 14 years to Sibi Blazic, with whom he has a 9-year-old daughter and an

infant son, was brought up acting. At 12, he starred in *Empire of the Sun* and famously stabbed at an orange rather than respond to questions during a press conference. At 40, he's scarcely more comfortable with the scrutiny that comes with belonging to that small fraternity of actors who have earned the label "the best actor of his generation." Since Bale himself abhors that particular phrase, we'll instead say we recently had an animated conversation with an actor who makes a very convincing prophet, and leave it at that.

Andrew Goldman: You seem to be going through a Jewish phase in your career. First you played Irv Rosenfeld in *American Hustle*, now Moses.

Christian Bale: That was David [O. Russell]'s comment to me. He said to me, "Hey, so you're going from playing a Jew to the Jew."

AG: When Charlton Heston parted the Red Sea as Moses in *The Ten Commandments*, he looked a little like Kenny Rogers, or a very angry Santa Claus, with beautifully coiffed hair. You look considerably dirtier.

CB: Yeah, we just felt, let's make an attempt. I mean, no matter what we do, it's inaccurate—we're speaking English, for God's sake! I mean, the whole thing, the basis, is an inaccuracy, but we're trying to get the feeling, the emotion, hopefully. And recognizing that this wasn't a person able to scrub himself that much after he left the palaces of the Pharaoh; he inevitably would've looked more like somebody who'd been homeless for many years. So we had these moments in it with absolutely ratty, dreadlocked hair that you kind of have to hack through.

AG: You're famous for immersing yourself in your characters. I can't imagine what's involved with internalizing Moses' back story.

CB: Well, first off, I kind of said, "Look, can we say *Moishe* as much as possible?" Because you say *Moses* and you go, "Oh my God, how can I do that?" You say *Moishe*, and I can come at him from a human perspective: I was chasing some sheep up a mountain recently, and I got hit on the head by a rock. And when I came around, I spoke with God. And he told me things. And I'm changed forever. This is going to be my new destiny; this is my calling.

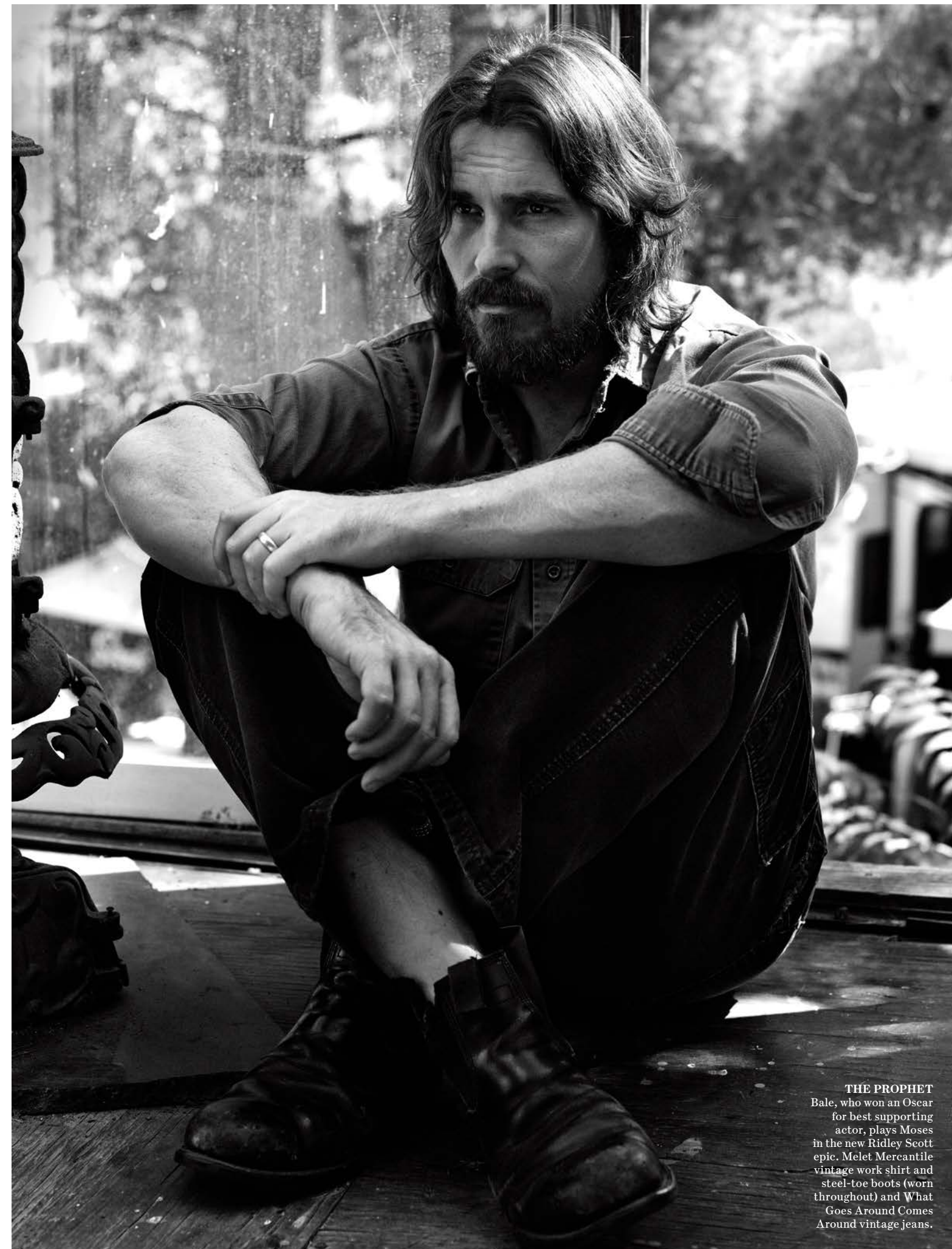
AG: I was shocked to learn that you'd said you thought your family would say you were most pleasant to be around when you were playing Trevor Reznik in *The Machinist*, a role for which you lost over 60 pounds.

CB: You know, my wife kind of liked Irv in *American Hustle*, 'cause she looked really skinny standing next to me. That's what she said. She loved it. She was like, "Keep getting bigger. I look fantastic and skinny."

AG: You got a lot of attention for gaining weight for that role. If I could eat everything I wanted, I'd be as big as Orson Welles.

CB: Right, but you don't have a deadline. You could do it at your own leisure. I had two months. It's no fun after about two weeks. I ate tons of potatoes. After that, your body's just going, "Please, please, please." After that, it becomes kind of disgusting, a gross, get-it-down-your-throat attitude. There's not much enjoyment of food.

AG: But you were good company when you were literally starving yourself for *The Machinist*?



THE PROPHET Bale, who won an Oscar for best supporting actor, plays Moses in the new Ridley Scott epic. Melet Mercantile vintage work shirt and steel-toe boots (worn throughout) and What Goes Around Comes Around vintage jeans.



ANGLE OF REPOSE
“I don’t wish to cultivate that thing so many public figures have, where you basically become numb because people are saying nasty things,” Bale says. Melet Mercantile vintage tee and work pants.

CB: Oh yeah. I was just a bit ponderous. I’d have a whiskey and roll my own ciggy every night, and I felt, I mean physically, just nothing going on, but mentally, wow, sharp as anything and feeling absolute tranquility. I’d sleep two hours a night and sit and read a book for eight hours without moving, start to finish. There was no roller coaster. Nothing could fluster me. I might sit there taking two minutes to answer a question or just staring out the window for five hours straight.

AG: If that was you at your most pleasant, what’s it usually like living with you when you’re not starving?

CB: I enjoy a bit of roly-poly chaos and a bit of turmoil. I just think that’s more fun.

AG: My marching orders for this interview were to tread carefully and make sure you don’t storm off in a huff. Do you like having that reputation?

CB: That’s always a nice potential, isn’t it? (Laughter)

AG: Have you ever?

CB: Yeah. You get people who are very rude. When you do these press junkets, you end up doing a lot of interviews, and you feel like you’ve gone a bit insane. And some people poke you like you’re an animal in a zoo, looking for a response. If you’re smart, you don’t give it to them. If you’re dumb, occasionally, like me, you give it to them. And then they’ve basically got what they wanted. I usually regret it afterwards. But some people have brought up things that are just abysmal, bringing up [the 2012 shooting incident in] Aurora in a way that I could not fathom.

AG: You mean suggesting that the Batman movie was actually responsible for a guy impersonating the Joker and killing all those people who’d come out to see the movie?

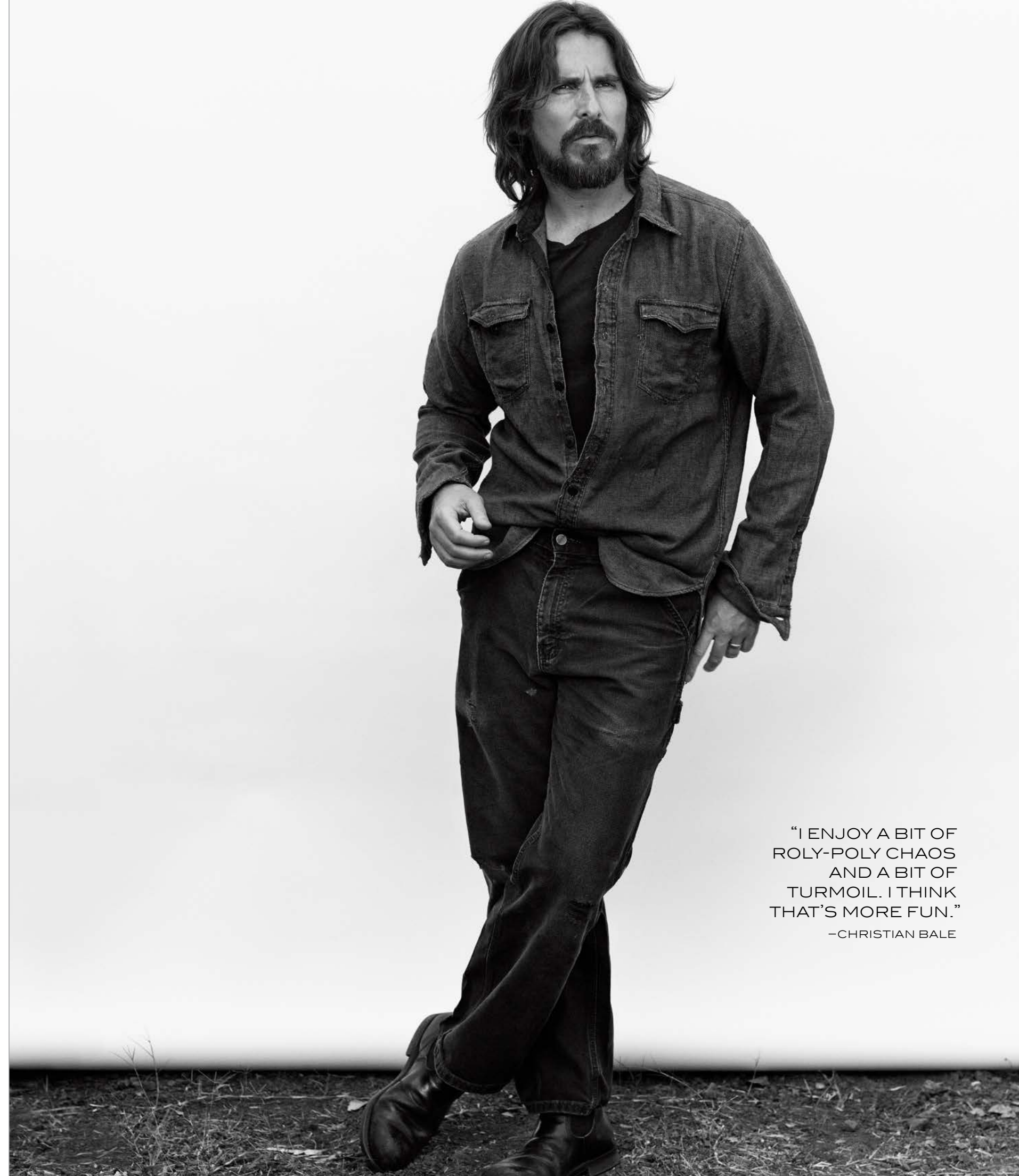
CB: Beyond that. And that haunts me to this day, haunts all of us who were involved. I know it haunts Chris [Nolan] as well, because we were stuck in a hotel in France when it happened. I don’t really want to credit them with repeating it. They can just poke you and poke you and poke you as though it’s just fun and games and means nothing. I don’t wish to cultivate that thing so many public figures have, where you basically become numb, become a roadblock, because so many people are saying nasty things or attacking. And I just go no, no. They win if I do that. I have to stay human, so sometimes that means you react. I was in Italy for a while, home of the *paparazzi*, right? I was in Italy with my wife. I would go to work; she would leave the hotel. There would be a man who stood outside of the hotel, and he would say the most obscene things imaginable to my wife. Now, that happened a number of times. I know what he’s after; he has a strategy there. Am I able to say I’m not gonna give him that satisfaction of angry Christian Bale coming after this man? But equally, he’s killing my humanity and my dignity as a husband if I do not, and he knows this. So you’ve got a choice.

AG: Dastardly, going after your wife to get to you.

CB: Because that’s the most vulnerable thing, isn’t it? I don’t really give a s— what he says about me. So what happens? One day I walk out and I see him. I go after him, and he gets all these shots of me coming after him. Bingo, he’s hit gold. He gets exactly what he wants, smiles and walks off. I feel like an ass ‘cause I’ve given him what he wanted. But in my mind, I had no other choice. How could I sit back and accept



DARK VICTORY
Melet Mercantile vintage
tee. Opposite: Ralph
Lauren RRL cotton twill
shirt and T-shirt and
Melet Mercantile
vintage work pants.



“I ENJOY A BIT OF
ROLY-POLY CHAOS
AND A BIT OF
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—CHRISTIAN BALE



THE NORMAL HEART
 “Everyone’s a bit damaged, aren’t they, by something?” Bale says. “You’re not really an adult until you’ve been damaged by something.” Melet Mercantile vintage flannel shirt and work pants.

somebody talking that way to my wife? I couldn’t. I just couldn’t do it.

AG: You might pop off at times, but you also seem like someone who’s willing to be a good soldier for the studio. After the audio of you berating a guy on the set of *Terminator Salvation* got out, you called into the *Kevin and Bean* show and pleaded with the public—on behalf of the studio, I imagine—not to punish those involved for your behavior by not going to see the film.

CB: No, on behalf of the crew, because everyone kind of busts their ass doing that.

AG: But the crew gets paid whether or not the movie does well.

CB: I know, but you know what? Good crews take pride in what they do, they really do, and when there’s a victory, they feel a sense of victory themselves. Look, it didn’t work regardless. But if it was going to fail, I wanted it to fail on its own merits. (Laughs) Not because people said what an a—hole I am, you know?

AG: I read that when you first sat down with the director of that film, McG, you told him that nothing you’d seen in his filmography suggested that he had what it takes to do that movie.

CB: Right.

AG: That’s brutal. Directors have egos.

CB: Ah, yes. Yeah. But he goes, “Give me a chance. Everyone needs to evolve, and I need to turn over a new leaf. And please, you must’ve been in this position before yourself, when someone has taken a leap of faith on you,”—which I have—“please do that for me now; I promise you, I’m ready for it.”

AG: So what do you think, having given him a chance?

CB: (Pause) There’s a lot of room for many approaches and many characters within the film industry. I won’t be working with him again, but I wish him very well. Okay?

AG: You will appear in Terrence Malick’s two upcoming films. He’s considered one of the greatest living filmmakers, and nobody even knows what he looks like. There’s amazing footage of TMZ shooting Benicio del Toro outside a restaurant with Malick, and TMZ had no idea who he was. Do you envy that invisibility?

CB: I’m lucky in that respect, as well, because there’s not many people that people consider to be movie stars anymore, right? Thank God, because otherwise I wouldn’t get a gig, because they’ve started casting people and then going, “He’s not really a movie star, but anyway, let’s give him a lead.”

AG: I’m sorry to break the news—you are a movie star.

CB: No, no, but in the sense of, you know, there’s that wonderful skill that some people have where it’s like, you know what you’re going to get, you know what kind of character they’re going to play and you’ve seen it many times, but you’re going to enjoy it anyway because they’re so charismatic. John Wayne is going to be John Wayne.

AG: Isn’t it more of a bankability thing nowadays? Knowing that if they put you in the Batman franchise, the studio’s not blowing two or three hundred million dollars for a guy who can’t fill seats?

CB: I don’t think they can lose with that. The character is bankable.

AG: *Batman & Robin* wasn’t a huge financial success, despite the character.

CB: Oh, is that right? I don’t know.

AG: And it had a movie star.

CB: He is; he’s a movie star.

AG: Speaking of George Clooney, I was just seeing all those pictures of him and his new wife being photographed in that boat in Venice, and it occurred to me that I had no idea what your wife, Sibi, looks like.

CB: I feel I should have as much privacy as anyone else.

AG: But I’ve heard Clooney railing about tabloids and privacy too.

CB: I know, but it’s boring, isn’t it? You know what I mean? It doesn’t matter that he talks about it. It’s like, come on, guys, just shut up. Just get on with it and live your lives and stop whining about it. I prefer not to whine about it.

AG: You now insist on only doing Q&As, because you’ve said that too many frustrated novelists had made up things when they’ve written about you. I was looking for the stories that might have offended you, but couldn’t find any.

CB: Maybe you just missed it. My feeling is, Look, there’s nothing wrong with being a frustrated novelist, but go write your novel. There was just stuff that was blatantly untrue—things where they kind of suggested attitudes that I had, and I went, “That’s just not true.” It was also about how whoever is being interviewed is the greatest master of whatever they do. And I go, “I’m so sick of reading that every person I ever read about is the absolute archetype best whatever, fill in the blank, that they’ve ever come across.” Because I just found it to be so sort of overindulgent and just kind of clearly false kissing ass.

AG: So let me get this straight: Are you telling me that you got sick of picking up magazines and reading that you’re the best actor of your generation?

CB: Because everybody is. *Everybody* is.

AG: I once wrote a profile of Ashton Kutcher. I did not say Ashton Kutcher was the best actor of his generation. I said he was a nice guy.

CB: Almost everybody is, all right? (Laughter)

AG: I’ve noticed that you’re always telling people that what you do for a living is either not worthy or not masculine, that at base there’s something kind of insubstantial about what you do.

CB: Yes, yes. Most people think it’s important and talk about it nonstop, about how important it is. I know what it comes from. Though there’s a bit of a circus background in my past, acting is not in my background, beyond that. My dad’s lineage, they were military men. They were bigger than me physically. I started at a young age, and my family was going through things and they said, “That’s an opportunity you can’t pass up. We need that money.” So I had a natural love of it but also far too early had the responsibility imposed of, “Please take that thing that you love, but can you make sure that you just keep doing it? Because we need that.” So there’s a hatred of it coming through. So I’m always doing that, all

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throughout filming there’s like, I love it, then, I can’t stand it, it feels like the most stupid thing ever.

AG: You’ve been acting since you were very young. You were in *Empire of the Sun* when you were 12 and *Newsies* not long after. You’re considered the rare example of a child actor who hasn’t gone off the rails in adulthood. But is it fair to say you consider yourself damaged by the experience?

CB: Everyone’s a bit damaged, aren’t they, by something? You’re not really an adult until you’ve been damaged by something. Would I ever let my own children go through that? No way in hell, because I would say they’re a victim.

AG: A victim how?

CB: You want your childhood. Do you have children?

AG: Two little boys, 4 and 6. You just had a son in August.

CB: I’ve got a little boy and a 9-year-old girl.

AG: I love my boys, but sometimes I envy the parents of girls—little girls can be so cuddly

and sweet. My boys are into a farting-in-your-face phase.

CB: In that case I’ve brought up my daughter like a son.

AG: Did this include endless watching of *Cars* too?

CB: She loves *Cars*. She loves driving. And my wife was a stunt driver—she was chasing me through the city in *Batman*. She was driving one of the cop cars. She can do 180s and stunts and all that. She terrifies me. My wife terrifies me.

AG: I gather one of the lowest points in your career was when it seemed as though Leonardo DiCaprio would be playing Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*, not you.

CB: Well, I’d been training for it for a long time.

AG: So was it devastating?

CB: Here’s what it was. I just pretended it didn’t happen. I’m English, so I never go to a gym, but for that role it was part of the whole deal that I had to go. I still kept going down to the gym every day because I was going, “Oh, I’m making the film.” I would call [*American Psycho* director] Mary Harron—she’d be having a nice dinner with her family—and I’d go, “So Mary, so when we do this scene....” And she’d go, “Christian, Oliver Stone is directing, DiCaprio is playing your role.” I said, “Right, but you said it, *my role*, all right? It is coming back, so let’s talk about it, because it’s coming back to us.” And she’d go, “Christian, can you please leave me alone?”

AG: Was this just cute repartee with Mary, or did she wonder why you were calling her at home?

CB: A mixture of the two. At the time I was just a 25-year-old, and she’s a woman with a family, you know? I understand that now. Yeah? It’s dinner. Right, let’s keep talking. But then holy s—, it all came back around. And that was just through pure attrition. I first read it when I was 23; we didn’t make it till I was 25.

AG: Did you have homicidal fantasies about Leonardo DiCaprio or Oliver Stone at that time?

CB: No, I like them both very much. But I had



BOTH SIDES NOW
Melet Mercantile
vintage leather coat
and tee and What
Goes Around Comes
Around vintage jeans.
Opposite: Melet
Mercantile vintage
leather coat.



nefarious sides of my family saying to me...

AG: You just gave me a sideways look. Oh my God, you had people offering to kill people?

CB: Not that extreme.

AG: What could they have done?

CB: Just make sure that they probably weren't appropriate for playing the role anymore. (Laughter) Making people less pretty.

AG: Did you actually entertain it?

CB: No, not for a second. Come on, mate. No, absolutely not. I think they're wonderfully talented people. Their only crime is having similar taste to mine. No, I was laughing, but I just wanted to make sure. I had to say, "Please, God, stop that train of thought right now. Immediately."

AG: Last year you were nominated for the best actor Oscar for *American Hustle*. I love that you actually looked disappointed when you lost to Matthew McConaughey. You see so much acting on those shows—people will leap up and applaud when they've lost. You did not look happy.

CB: No? (Laughter) What did I look like? I haven't watched it.

AG: Your whole body kind of went down in your seat.

CB: I put my head down, didn't I? (Laughter)

AG: Yes, and then everybody's standing up for Matthew and you're up too, but you're giving a sort of stone-faced ovation. Maybe you didn't want to be the only person in the auditorium sitting down.

CB: There were a number of occasions when I was like, oh f—, I'm the only one sitting down. It's going to look like a statement. I'm not trying to make a statement; I'd better stand up. I hate it when you've got to get excited about every damn thing that happens. There are certain moments that you go, "It doesn't mean much to me." I hate to sound like an ass, but I was all good with it.

AG: Really?

CB: Yeah, I didn't mind at all. I was like, "Oh, right on, Matthew, nice guy, mate. Good for you." But whatever. It was a fun night; it was an open bar.

AG: I know you have a policy about not discussing your wife and kids, but tell me about your friends.

CB: One thing I've heard consistently said to me throughout my life is, "You know what I've noticed about you, Christian? You hate hanging out with winners. You love losers. The more of a loser, the more you love 'em." (Laughter) I hate the "loser" title, but I do kind of realize there's something to it. The more successful you get, the more you have to fit into a certain kind of a successful mold. Successful people plan their days, and they waste no time whatsoever. It's all about quality, quality all day long. Losers waste their time. People who've failed miserably in their lives are much more fun.

AG: Can you give me an example of people you love who've had massive failures?

CB: Just people. Family members.

AG: So who are these people you're hanging out with?

CB: Well, now I've put myself into a corner, because they've been described as losers—not in my mind, but in other people's minds. So I don't want to put any of my friends' names out there where they go, "Oh, thanks mate. I'm a loser. Appreciate that. Nice one." ●

Abridged from Goldman's interview with Bale.



EARN YOUR STRIPES
Melet Mercantile
vintage flannel shirt and
work pants. Grooming,
Torsten Witt; prop
styling, Nicholas Des
Jardins. For details see
Sources, page 162.