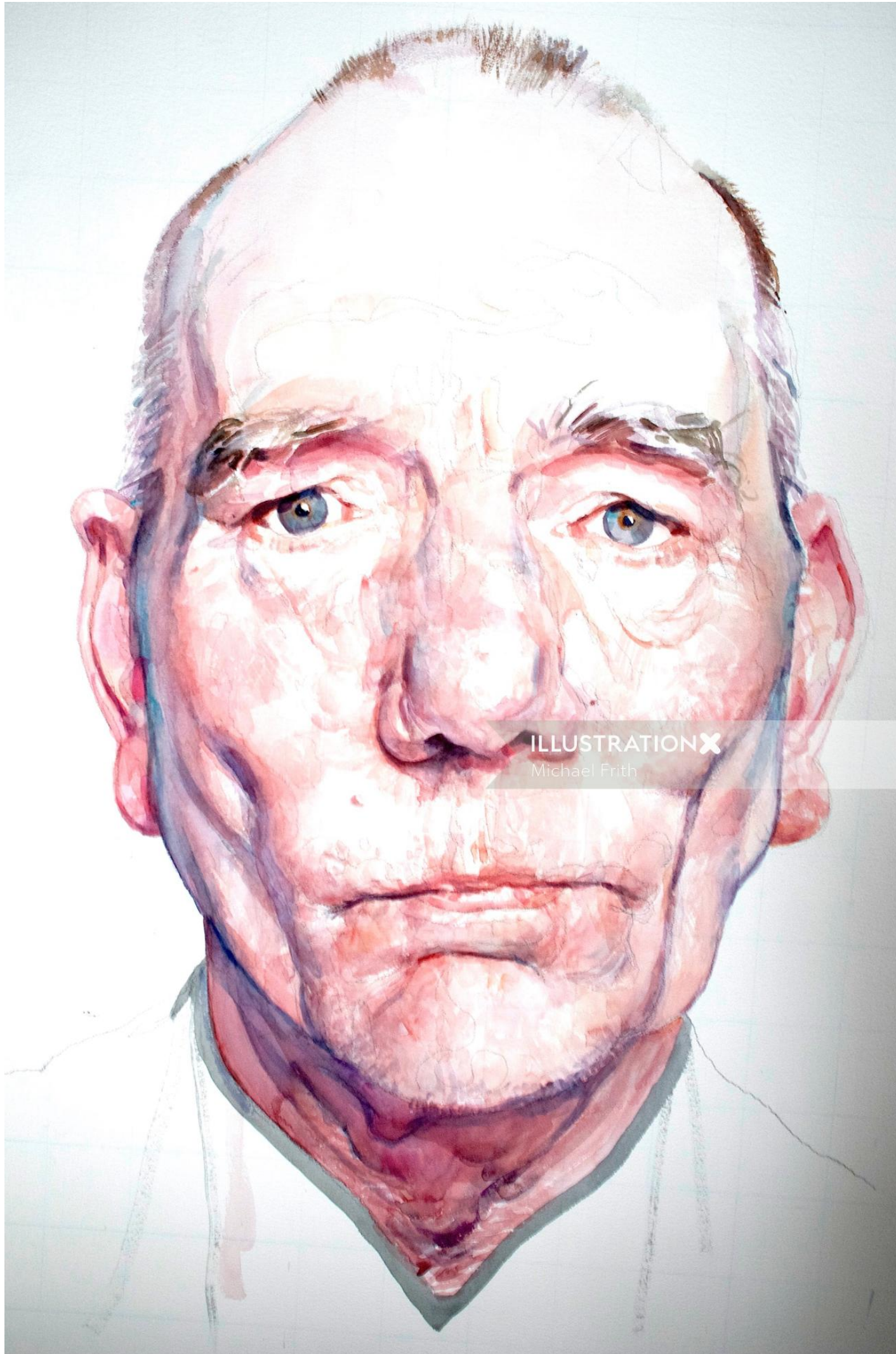


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TABLE TALK

A A Gill



LAST week I got stopped in the street by a couple of tourists. Nothing particularly unusual in that — except that it was two in the morning and teeming with rain. Retired American tourists always look like they're on do-it-yourself moon landings. He was swagged and accoutred with an entire life-support system. Bits of string and Velcro tape dangled sadly, as if waiting to be plugged into the mother ship. Everything she was wearing could have been folded up 300 times. She could have whipped off the whole lot and stood naked with her entire wardrobe in her mouth. They were both covered in plastic sheets. I thought for a moment that they'd brought their own oxygen.

The most winning thing about American tourists is that they don't give a damn. Really and truly, they couldn't give a monkey's what they look like. "Sweetcakes, we're going to vacation in London, street-fashion capital of the world, home to Vivienne Westwood and Alexander McQueen, Savile Row tailoring, Jermyn Street shirts and bespoke shoes — so why don't we go looking like a cross between the Waltons, Flash Gordon and a basketball team's laundry basket?"

Anyway, he asked me how to get to Buckingham Palace. I vaguely pointed east. Could they walk there? Well, they could — Mao Tse-tung walked across China, and some mad bird walked around the world — but frankly, I wouldn't. Not at two in the morning, in the rain.

"Why," I couldn't resist asking, "do you want to go?"

"Oh," she said, "all my life I've wanted to see Buckingham Palace by moonlight."

Good grief — you fly halfway round the world, walk three arthritic miles in a thunderstorm, in the middle of the night, to discover that Buckingham Palace isn't the Taj Mahal.

I worry about tourists. I watch them standing in bus lanes turning Tube maps slowly round and round, and I try to imagine what on earth they are doing here. They don't see the same city I do. There is a truly foreign place — they make me feel like an Aboriginal on my own street. I often wonder where they go at night. Restaurants are still mostly used by the indigenous population. I suppose they watch a musical, then go back to their hotels, where we Aboriginals never go.

Hotel dining rooms are sorry places with sad, lonely waiters who look like refugees. You imagine them sending their meagre tips back to families who live in mud. The lingering aura of inclusive breakfast hangs — hospitality measured out in recalcitrant minitubs — and the piped music is turned up to muffle the sounds of homesick sobbing.

There are only a handful of hotels in the world I'd recommend for their kitchens. The rest, with their nose-

to call them something else — call them Nobu or Marco Pierre White or I-Thai at the Hempel (on second thoughts, probably not I-Thai at the Hempel). And if they employ a locally renowned chef, the reservations book will overflow. That's the theory.

Bruno Loubet is one of the few top-class chefs in Britain to command a personal following. I would travel quite a long way, pay quite a lot of money and sit on uncomfortable seats to eat his food. It's not just that he's a good chef — he is a uniquely original one. His repartee is the culinary equivalent of experimental free-form jazz. If you don't eat out a lot, then you may think his menu was the result of a game of blind man's buff in the kitchen. But if you've chewed around a bit and you can nick up the

personal style didn't always mesh with the demands of a large brigade and too many covers. In the end, it was rather more miss than hit.

I hoped that he'd go back to a small restaurant like his cafe in Frith Street and just jam. But the press releases started to roll: he'd been taken on by the Chelsea Hotel doing something called Bruno and the Baron. This was not promising.

The Chelsea Hotel is one of those places that only exists in a parallel vacation universe, and Bruno and the Baron is an irredeemably naff name. It sounds like a 1970s detective series, with Michael Elphick as Bruno and Nigel Havers as the Baron. Because it was Loubet, and because it got some good reviews, we went. We took my oldest friend Lucy, who was

modern in the sense that it has no discernible history, it doesn't belong anywhere. It is pale, clean, tubular, modular and crackling with static.

"Oh, this is Hamburg," said the Blonde, in her helpful-tour-guide voice. I've never been to Hamburg, but it suddenly slipped off the list of places to see before I'm 150.

The only other diners were an American family: a silent lout son brewing up nicely for a spot of patricide when he got home, and parents who bickered about exchange rates in whiny whispers. The only other table held the third military attaché from some unpronounceable African country, entertaining a girl whose family were obviously under house arrest back home.

The waiters huddled together for

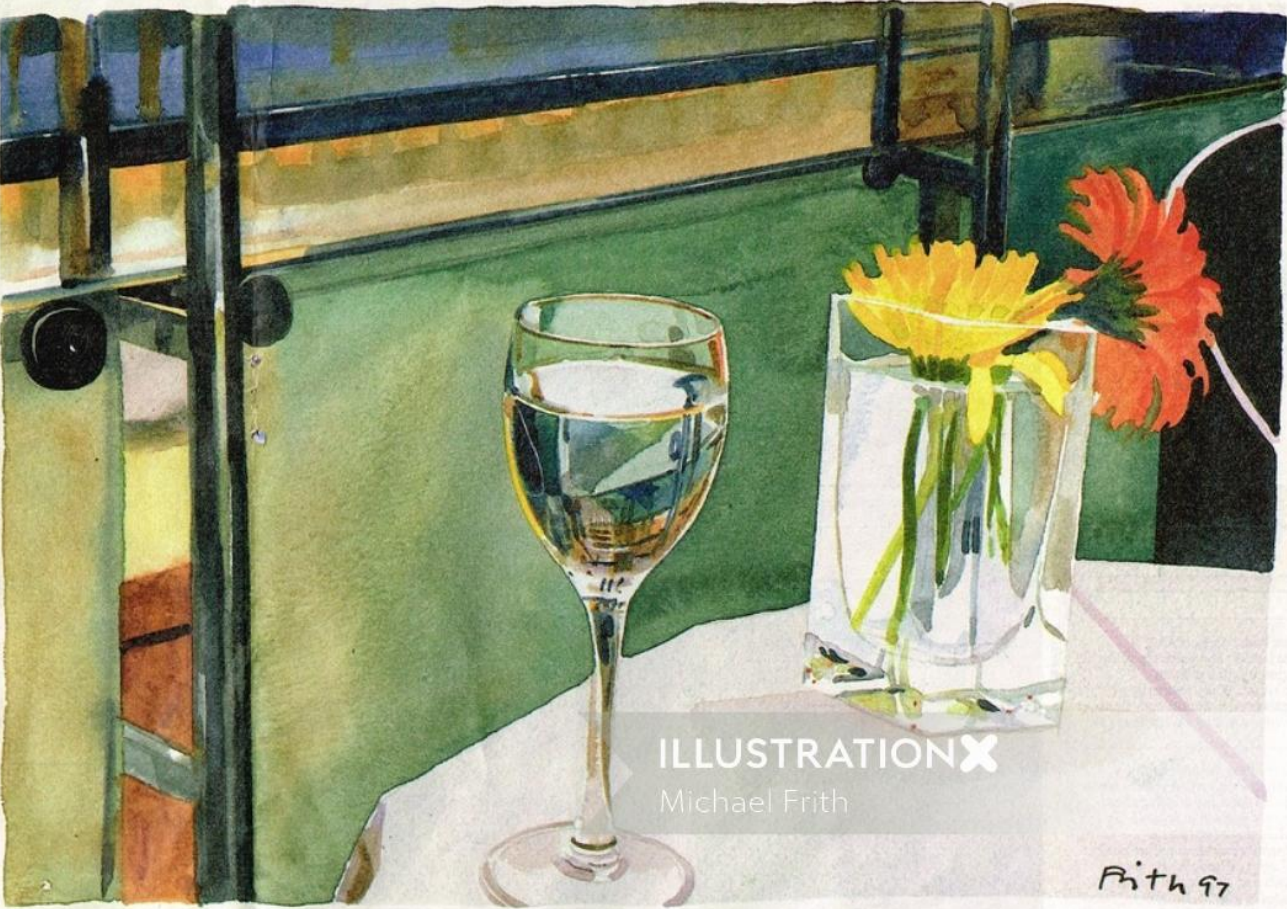
Bruno Loubet done by a catering committee, greatest hits played by the Portsmouth Sinfonia. But still, if it was cooked by him the food would be good. It wasn't and it wasn't.

I'm sure for people used to staying in tourist hotels, it came as no surprise that we didn't finish a single dish, because the kitchen hadn't. The fresh crab and corn risotto was undercooked to the point where it was mouth aerobics, the fishcake was the size of a Cornish pasty and had a bland, tuberous monotony, and even the scallops with black pudding and mashed potato, written up as Loubet's signature dish, came on like a regional contestant for Masterchef.

I've eaten much worse food, in worse places, served by worse waiters, but I've never been sold a ticket

their names without their hands-on skill is growing and it ought to stop.

In the end, I just had a bad dinner that I wanted to be good for a friend. The hotel will probably survive on once-in-a-lifetime package tours, but what has suffered irredeemably is the reputation of a great chef. If you could become a genius simply by following the recipes, then we'd all do it. But you can't, and no amount of pep talks, meetings and master classes are going to clone the cook. Chefs devalue their currency when they attempt to cook by memo. The sooner Loubet goes back to doing what he does best, the better for both him and us — and that goes for all chefs who think they can be in two places at once and get paid in both. I'll go to see Buckingham Palace by



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Nothing like a name

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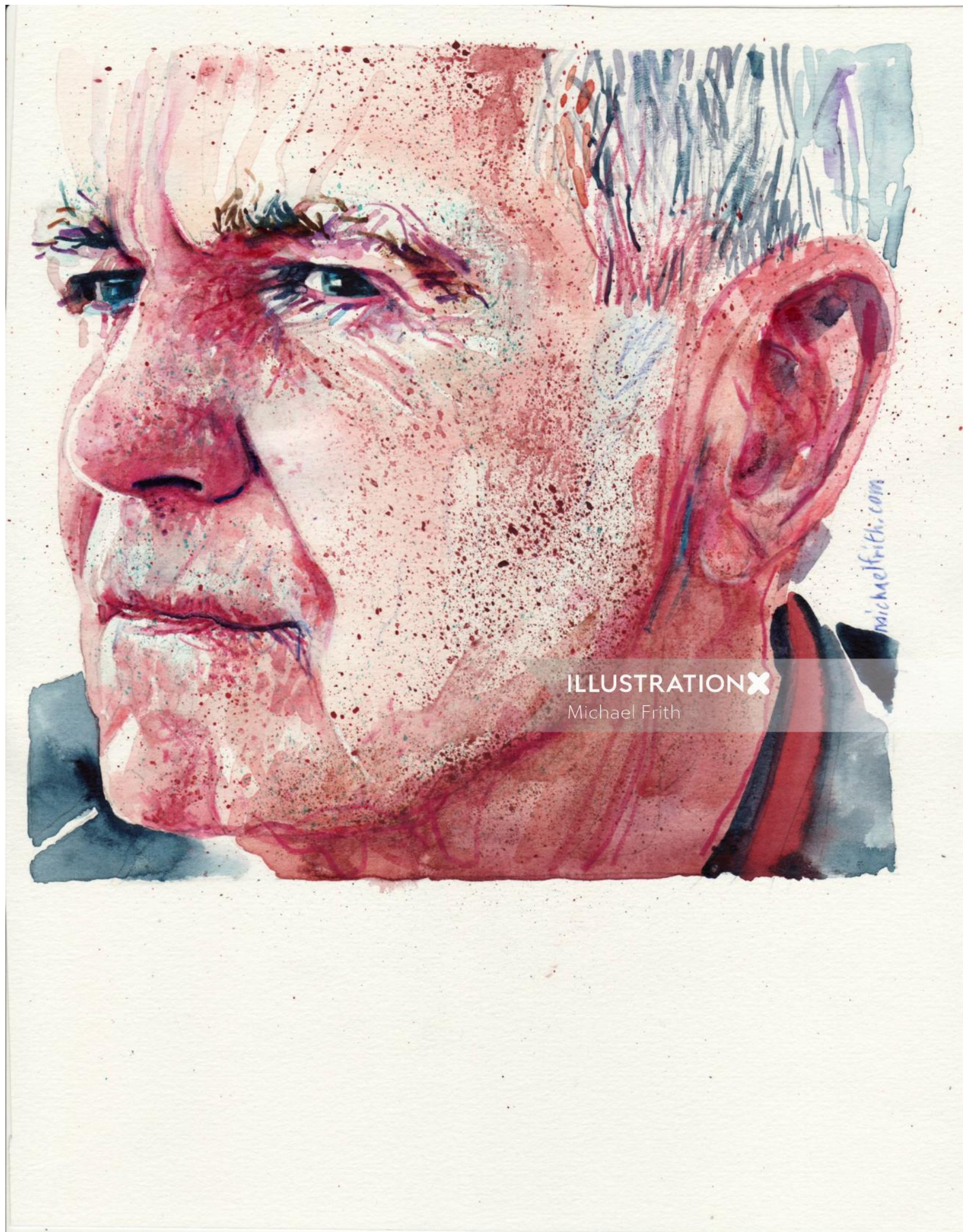
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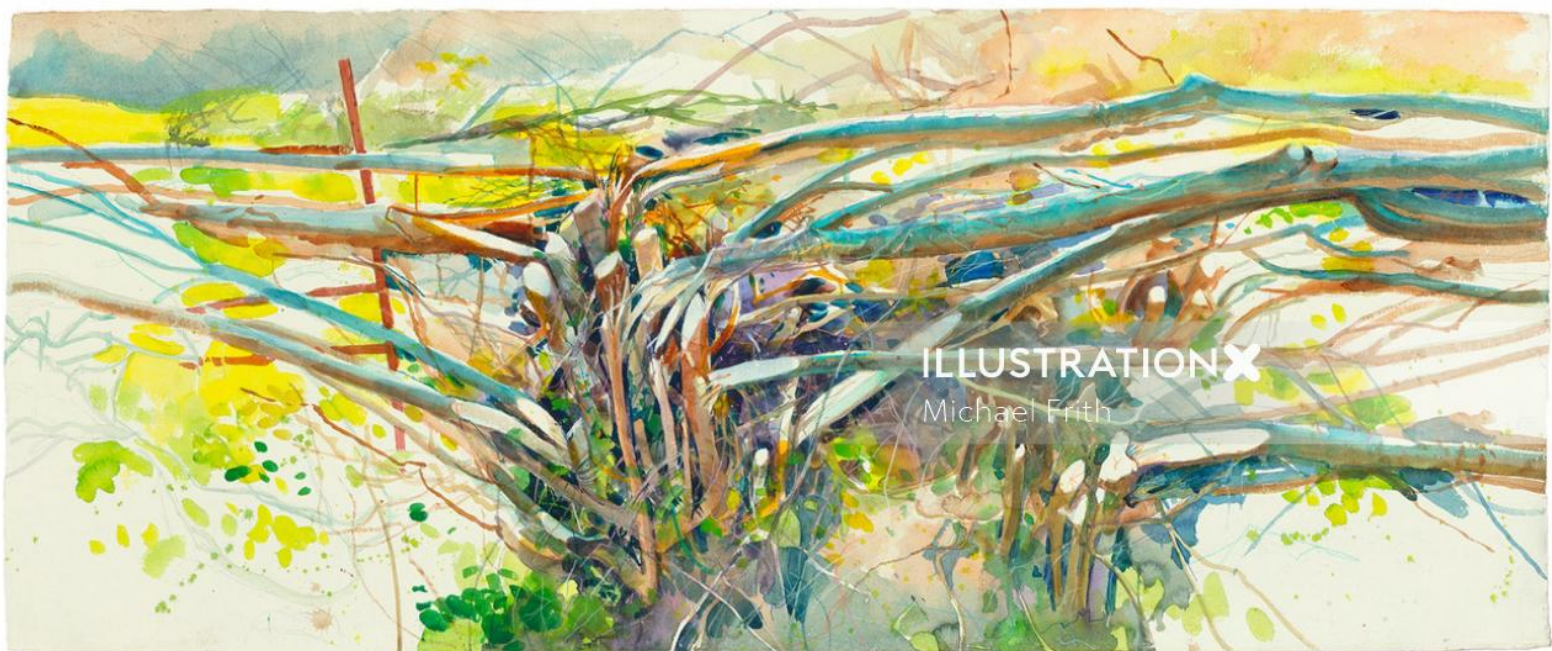
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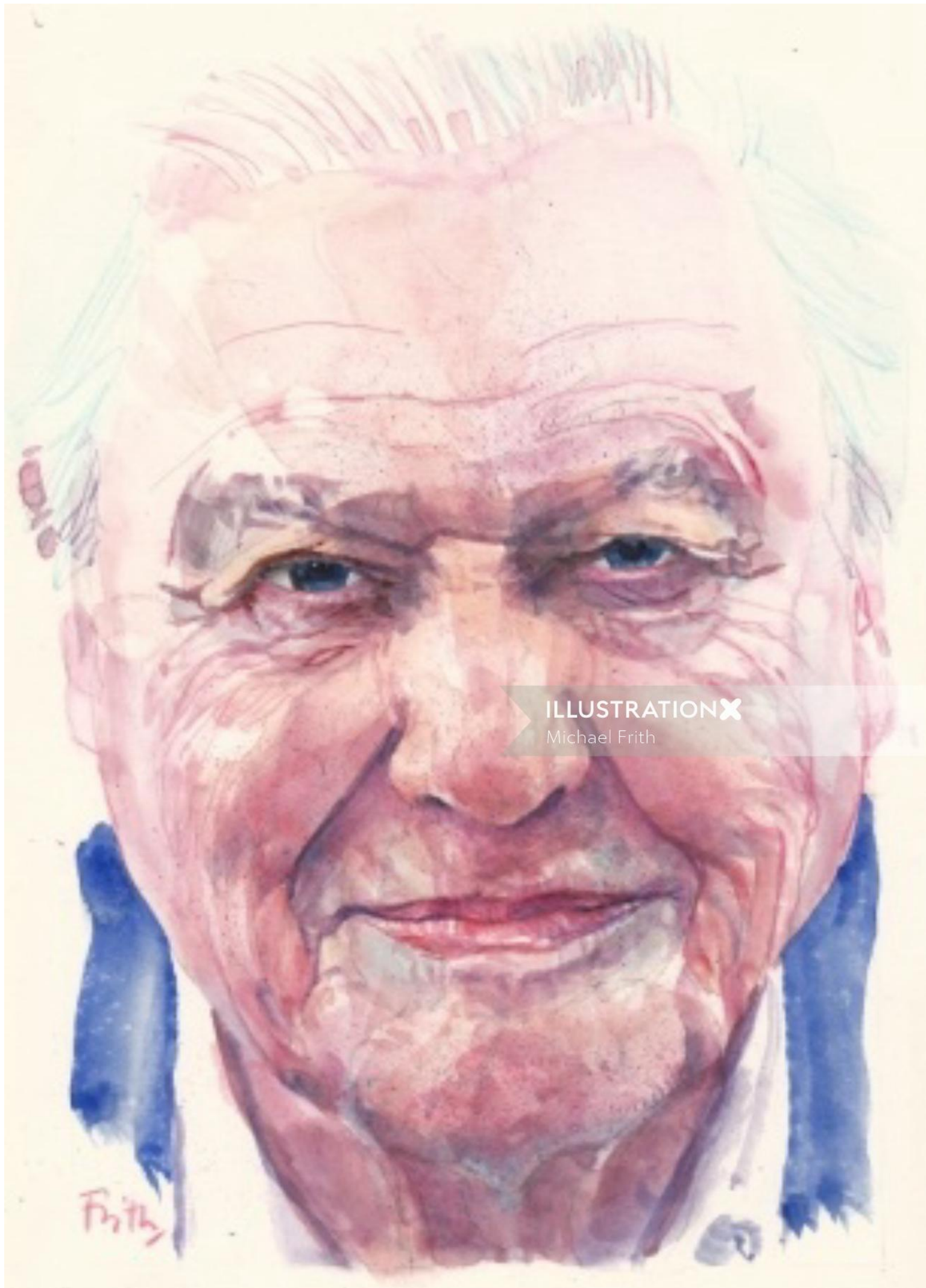
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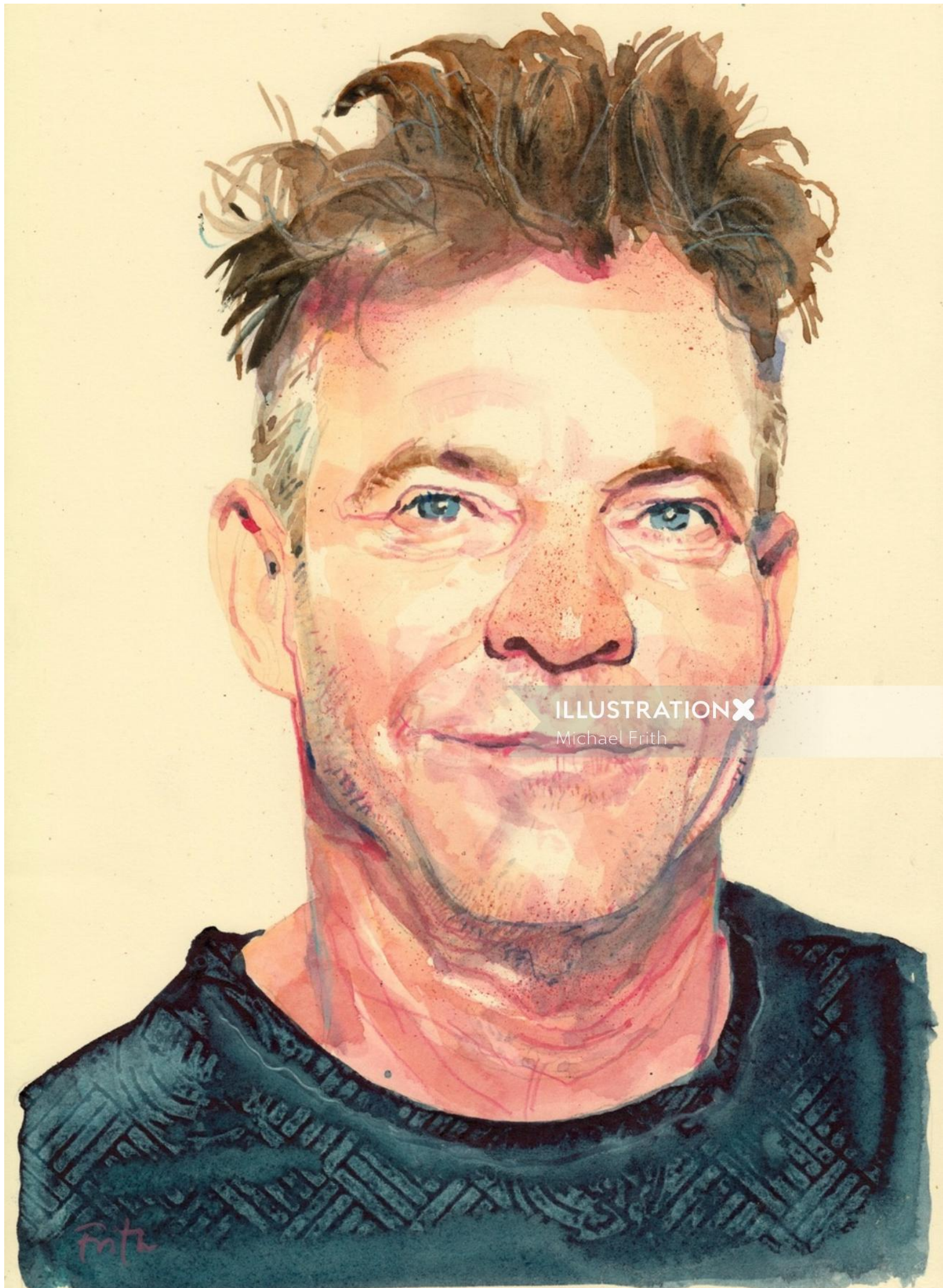


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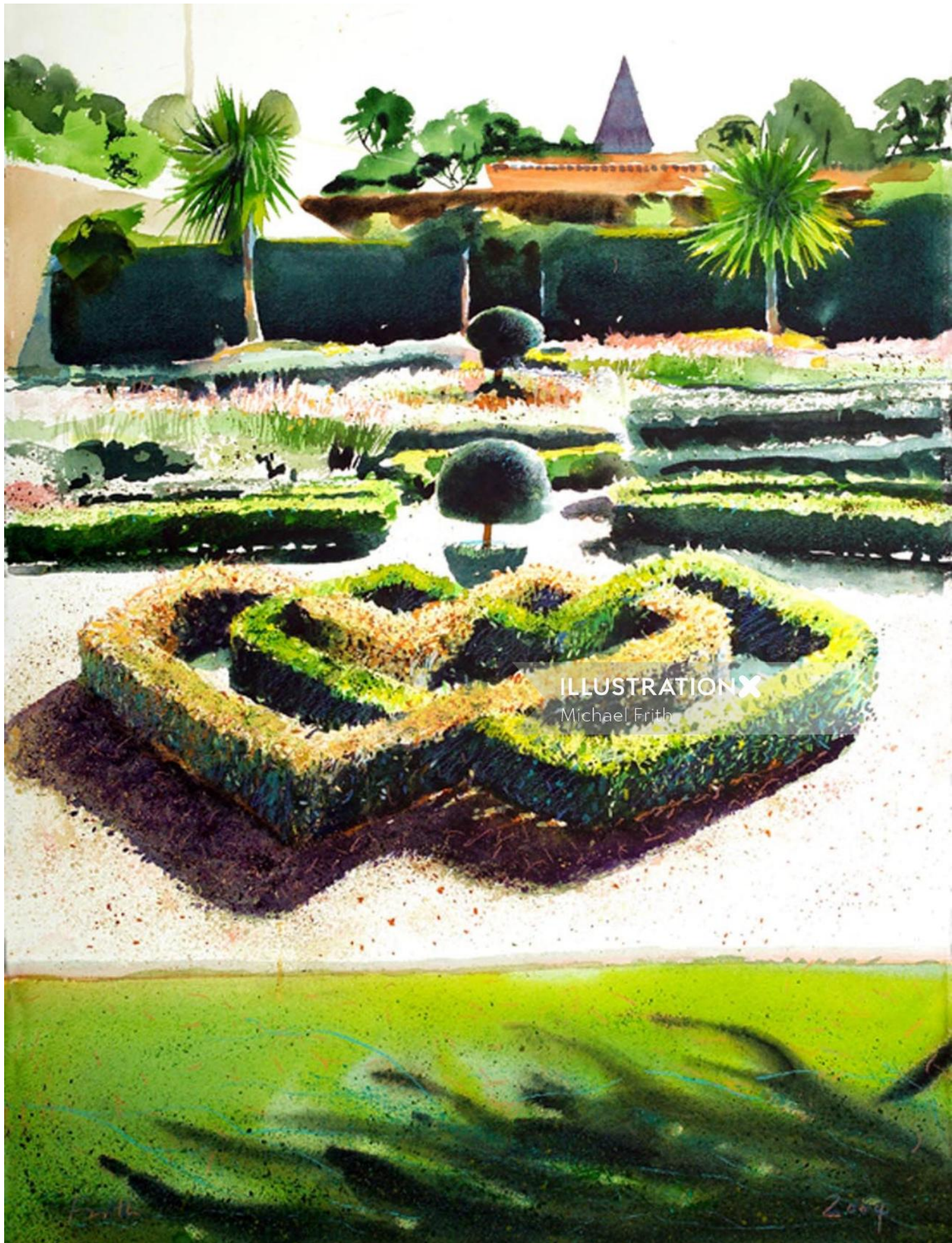
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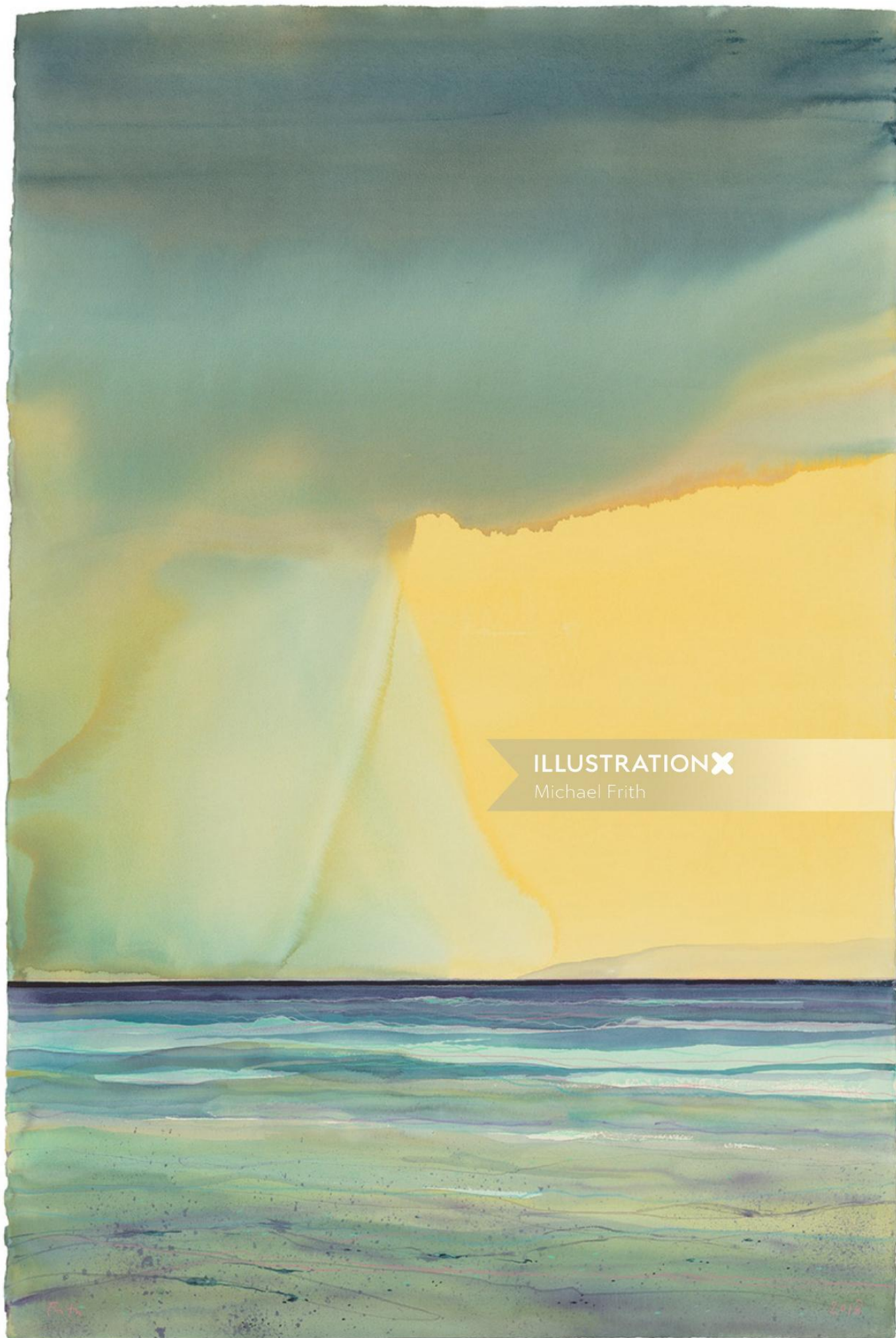
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Loganberries, tayberries & boysenberries

Mark Diacono

LATIN NAME

Loganberry: *Rubus* × *loganobaccus*. Tayberry: *Rubus fruticosus* × *idaeus*. Boysenberry: *Rubus ursinus* × *idaeus*

SEASONALITY

July–September

MORE RECIPES

Wineberries with peaches and custard (page 317); Blackberry yoghurt soufflé cake (page 73); Mulberry and walnut cranachan (page 391); Basil pannacotta with minted raspberries (page 96); Raspberry almond streusel cake (page 526)

Some people dedicate a lifetime to the pursuit of an invention or ideal. Others, like James Logan, just get lucky. He accidentally created the loganberry by crossing a particular strain of raspberry with a certain variety of blackberry. Looking like a long raspberry but with blackberry dominating the flavour, loganberries have a fine balance of sweet and sharp. They ripen gradually across the plant, which means that they are rarely grown commercially, so you'll need a nearby pick-your-own farm, or a plant in your garden, to enjoy them. Relishing loganberries at their very best demands patience. Don't be tempted to pick the raspberry-red fruits, which will still be a little too acidic. Instead, wait for them to turn wine-coloured, almost purple, when they will reveal their full, sensuous sweetness and aromatic depth.



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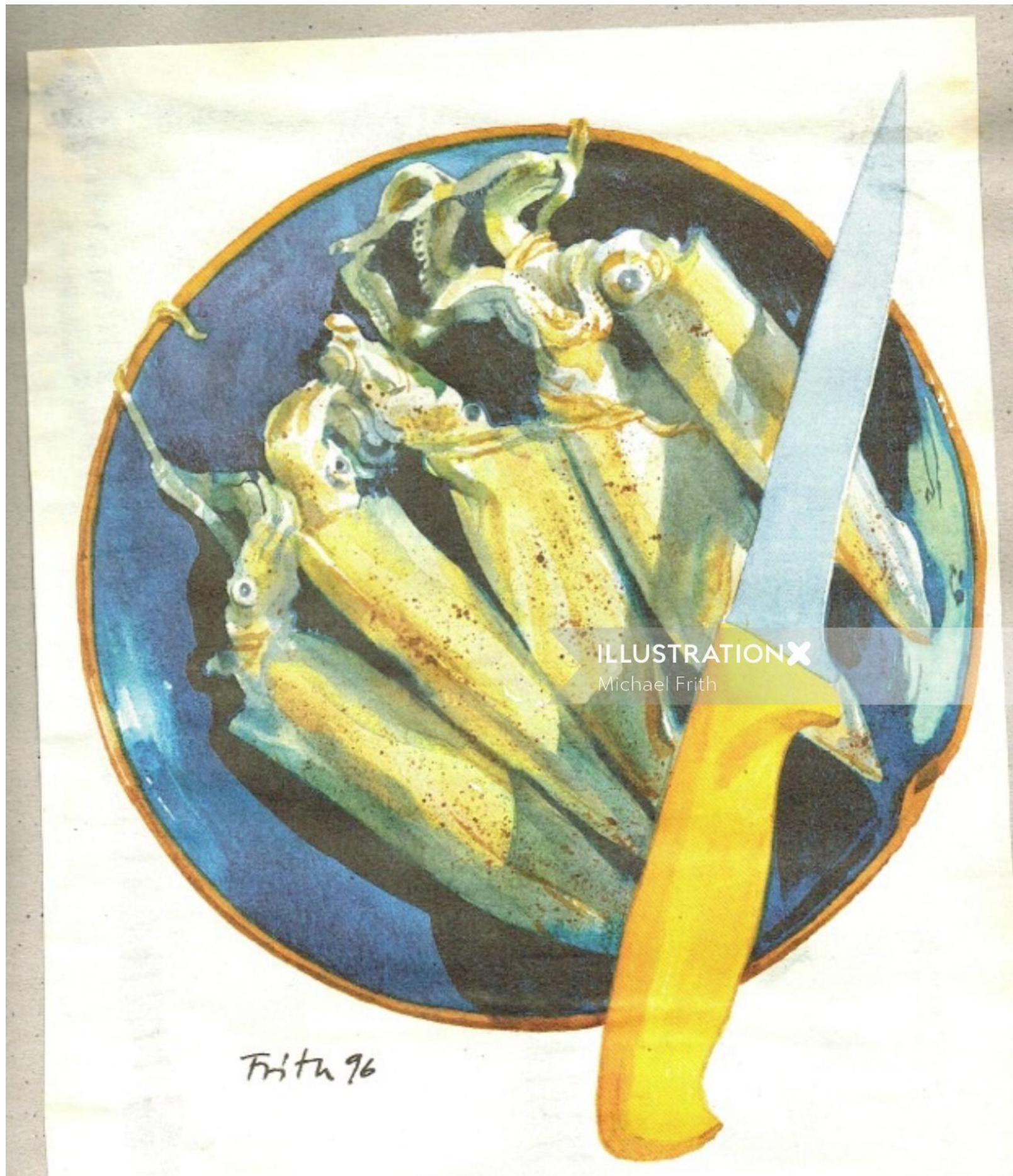
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