THE GOOD LIFE

Once the poster boy for the cocaine and supermodel high life, author Jay McInerney has largely settled down, but his life remains complex — he spends the weekends in the country with his third ex-wife and their kids, and weekdays in the city with his fourth wife. But, the reformed libertine tells **Britt Collins**, he's happier than ever

Jay McInerney has had his hits of drama, divorces and celebrity hell. He's scraped the depths of depravity, done an anaesthetising amount of class-A drugs and been out with supermodels as well as some real shockers — one of them, a woman he spent half the night chatting up and taking home, even died beside him.

It's been 25 years since his million-selling classic *Bright Lights, Big City* brought him fame and fortune, and it is about to be remade into a new film version. McInerney's account of the greedy, seedy excess of Eighties' New York turned him, overnight, from "a marginally employed, party-crashing hanger-on with no money or claim to anyone's attention" to a white-hot literary star. He became an avatar of everything that was cool and hip, and women swarmed around him like honeybees. The thrill of his fiction comes from the knowledge that he shamelessly draws much of it from his own life. He lived the louche, drug-fuelled existence he wrote about, "doing non-literary things at nightclubs and parties", with his exploits — snorting powder off Porsches, skinny-dipping and *menages a trois* — regularly splashed across the tabloids. "I have many regrets, but not that," he says. "I lived the way I felt like living."

After two decades of notoriously bad behaviour, McInerney is back with a dark, witty collection of stories, *The Last Bachelor*, chronicling the lives of disillusioned urbanites in post-9/11 America. These days, he's more subdued. Scruffily elegant in a striped shirt, Levi's and sensible shoes, he is no longer the *enfant terrible* of American letters. He is well into his 50s, a reformed family man, off the hard booze and Bolivian marching powder, and on to his fourth marriage to publishing heiress Anne Randolph Hearst — Patty Hearst's younger sister — and, he says, is "happier than he's been in a long while".

The moment you set foot in Jay McInerney's modest, exquisitely minimalist book-lined, two-bedroom, Fifth Avenue penthouse that reeks of middle-aged mellowness and monied sophistication, it's evident the party has moved on. The wasted, narcissistic libertine with the rock 'n' roll lifestyle is long gone. "Hopefully, I've killed him off. I've led a rich and complicated life since I wrote *Bright Lights*," he says, raking his hand through a thatch of silvery hair and gazing out at the roof terrace towards the downtown skyline. "But I'm not allowed to exist outside of this stereotype that was created in 1985. Most people somehow expect me to be frozen in time. The book itself isn't really about drugs and decadence. It's a conventional coming-of-age story with a lot of loss and sadness. I was grieving the loss of my mother, the loss of my wife."

His personal affairs, however, remain tangled and complicated. He spends his weekends in the Hamptons with his third ex-wife Helen Bransford, an artist and author, and their 14-year-old twins Maisie and Barrett, along with a menagerie of cats, dogs, goats, llamas, emus and chickens, as well as the Vietnamese potbellied pig who once shared their marital bed. Although they went through a hellish divorce in 1999, he and Bransford are still close and both look after the twins.

Though he sobered up and gave up the illicit drugs and sex years ago, McInerney is still stalked by his wild-boy image. "I seem to be this lightning rod for the controversial," he says, scratching his face and shifting in his chair. The first thing you notice about him is his restlessness. A tangle of nerves and anxiety, he seems highly strung — a curious mix of vulnerable lost boy and a jaded, world-weary sophisticate. "I guess I was living a more flamboyant life than was acceptable," he says. "I think with the early success, critics expect you to die young."

McInerney first came to New York City straight out of college at the tail-end of 1979, a wide-eyed preppy amid the transience of rock stars, punks, poets and runaways in search of fame and adventure. When he arrived, he remembers, the conventional wisdom was that "the city and the great American novel were both on their last legs". The city, "facing bankruptcy, looked like hell — a graffiti-ridden, garbage-strewn war zone, where muggings, stabbings and rapes weren't considered news and heroin was chic and everywhere." After dark, the crummy fringe neighbourhoods, where he lived and hung out, were lawless and you moved at your own risk. But he was 24 and in love with it all, with a youthful sense "that anything could happen here and yet somehow miraculous encounters did happen".

Inevitably, his desire for colour and excitement drew him to the alternative subculture and places such as CBGBs and the Mudd Club, which had no press or paparazzi. "I can't remember how I found my way there," McInerney reflects, "as I wasn't the hippest, most plugged-in guy. But I had a friend who knew Andy Warhol and I tagged along and sometimes got past the bouncers, hanging out with people like Lou Reed and Deborah Harry, as well as the drag queens, drug dealers and night crawlers who were equally the stars of the scene. It seemed like a new and brilliant idea; staying up all night, drinking, snorting coke and pursuing sexual adventures in the company of artists and derelicts on the wrong side of the tracks."

> 'I've had to tell my kids about my past. But the first drug lecture is going to be hard. If I'd known I was going to be a father, I would've done things differently'

After a brief sojourn teaching English in Japan, he returned to the city with a gorgeous Japanese girlfriend — who he married — and found a cool East Village apartment and a job as a fact-checker at *The New Yorker*. Within a year, he'd lost all three. Though, with his street-savvy grasp on the city's exhilarating club culture, and his exotic model wife, he "always had one foot in a slightly more glamorous world rather than the ink-stained wretches at Random House".

Before being fired from *The New Yorker*, which in its pre-Conde Nast days "was still a wonderful dingy, spooky place, a refuge of eccentrics and talented misfits", he collected useful contacts and crashed *soirees* at the famous author and editor George Plimpton's house — which also housed the offices of his *Paris Review* — "cocktail parties that were always the perfect mix of beautiful young girls from Smith with trust funds, and literary lions like Truman Capote and William Styron".

During that time, McInerney struck up a friendship with Raymond Carver, the godfather of dirty realism, who encouraged him to apply for a graduate fellowship at Syracuse University, where he was teaching literature. While there, McInerney wrote *Bright Lights, Big City*, named after an old blues song, about his heartbreak and the life he left behind.

The story of *Bright Lights* is legendary. By the summer of 1984, McInerney was a skint grad student living in a sunless tomb of an apartment in upstate New York and working evenings at an off-licence. Nearly 30, he said at the time, just publishing his novel "was enough to make him happy". So when his book suddenly caught fire and Hollywood came calling, he was more surprised than anyone. When he got that dream call, he was doing his night shift, arguing with one of the regular patrons, "a local wino trying to steal a bottle of Wild Irish Rose".

"When the guy from Paramount called to say get a plane immediately and we want to turn the book into a movie, I initially thought it was one of my friends winding me up," he recalls, laughing, his sapphire eyes sparkling at the memory. "But he sounded so cliched that I thought that maybe it was true.

"This young movie exec heard all the noise in the background and asked where I was. I was too embarrassed to admit that I was working for minimum wage at a liquor store, squabbling with drunks. So I told him I was at a party and he replied, 'Yeah, man, excellent. Read the book, like, where else would a guy like you be?'"

Days after, Jay McInerney was flown out west to write the screenplay to his underground best-seller and put up in Hollywood's hippest haunt, the Chateau Marmont — a well-trodden spiritual pilgrimage for writers and place of legendary happenings, where Marilyn Monroe lived, John Belushi died, and where rock stars still ran wild.

The Chateau Marmont — which McInerney once described as "where all the cool people hang out and where you feel overdressed in a tie and underdressed without a cigarette" — became his regular West Coast crash pad long after he finished several drafts of the *Bright Lights, Big City* screenplay, the film came and went, and he returned to Manhattan and lost another wife along the way.

"This was the sort of place where you'd expect to see Boris Karloff loom out of the shadows," explains McInerney. "In a city of bright sunshine, this was a dark corner, a place were it always seemed to be vaguely twilight somehow, even by the pool. It was home of the night people and the rockers." He dusts off old anecdotes about encountering Sting by the pool with a bunch of topless French girls on his first day, and how he was checking in one evening when Shane MacGowan suddenly appeared beside him with his trousers around his knees and no underwear. Recovering from his momentary shock, McInerney turned to the hotel clerk and asked, "What the hell kind of hotel is this?"

This wild living is now consigned to his books and dinner-party conversation.

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McInerney says he's a changed man. "Being a parent is one of life's great adventures. After a certain number of years, partying and staying out all night starts to lose its lustre and excitement."

He has been pretty open to his two teenage children about his drug use and playboy period. "You can't keep secrets from kids. They're actually harder to fool than lovers or wives," he says. "I've had to tell my kids about my colourful past. But the first drug lecture is going to be hard. I don't want to be a hypocrite. They sort of know that their dad was a poster boy for cocaine and that I have a reputation as a philanderer. Sometimes I think if I had known I was going to be a father, I would've done things differently. Whenever I talk about things I wish I hadn't done, I imagine them on the internet. There's all this lurid stuff out there too awful to talk about."

But his need to reveal all is insatiable, and the stories just tumble out. "A few years ago, Maisie googled me and found this gossip item about a sordid episode involving my two-timing," McInerney explains. "I'd been seeing a couple of women at the same time and they discovered each other's existence through a misdirected email. They met up to compare notes and set up a sting. They got together and called me in quick succession, asking if I loved them, while the other listened. I was at a dinner party, drunk and feeling amorous, and hoping to locate one or the other and get lucky. The next day, they confronted me. It's not exactly the type of story you want your adolescent daughter reading."

His daughter, McInerney boasts, is a vegan and a precociously talented poet. "Maisie's started asking about the women in my life," he says. "She's actually quite friendly with my old girlfriend Jeanine and she recently asked how we got together and why we broke up. I want to be honest without disclosing everything. As someone who has a complicated history with women, you worry about your daughter's judgement at some point. I've often worried that my frequent absences since the divorce would make her needy and less discriminating but, in fact, unlike me, she seems naturally sensible.

"Like her mother, she teases and chastises me when she catches me staring at women in the street, or at least when she thinks she has. My hope is that she'll react against me — just like I reacted against what I perceived as this boring, suburban nature of my parents by doing everything that they hadn't done. It's part of the reason I came to New York, to escape. But I also want both my children to have adventures as I did. Just not too many or too wild," he says.

"I think, as she gets older and more curious about love, it's going to get harder for me," McInerney goes on, "I want her to understand how lustful, selfish and driven men are, without entirely losing her respect for the opposite sex or her ability to trust. I would tell her some of the stories I am most ashamed to tell to give her insight to men and the lengths they will go through to sleep with women."

He should know, as a notorious collector of women, going through lovers as though

Jay McInerney and his fourth wife, publishing heiress Anne Randolph Hearst

SUN/REX/FRANK EDWARDS

McInerney and Forkey — 'I have a better relationship with the pig now I don't have to sleep with her'

he were selecting fruit — the best and the rest. "Well, I'm not a womaniser, I'm married," McInerney points out, with a wicked smile. "I haven't exactly left a trail of weeping women.

"Have I really behaved that badly?" he asks, suddenly unsure of himself. He is immensely likeable and beneath this elusive, mild-mannered reserve, he has a roguish charm, a sense of humour about himself and a childlike desire to please. "The fact that my marriages ended doesn't mean they're failures. Aside from the first, who disappeared, I'm on good terms with all my ex-wives, which I think is some indication of their success. I don't think anyone is furious with me. I keep believing in the idea of love, almost too readily, perhaps. My parents had a good marriage and I always felt that it's something to aspire to."

His first wife, a Japanese model and the heartbreaker in his *Bright Lights*, left for the catwalk shows in Milan, fell in love with a photographer and never returned; the second, a fellow graduate student and aspiring writer, who once described him as "slick, self-centred and dangerous", couldn't cope with his sudden stardom and subsequent womanising. She attempted suicide and ended up in a mental institution for nine months. He "did everything he could to take care of her" and footed the massive six-figure bills, which wiped out his *Bright Lights* royalties. But it's his marriage to wife number three, Bransford, as glimpsed through his books, that fascinates. A glamorous southern belle from one of Nashville's grandest families, she persuaded him to leave New York for Tennessee. Deeply in love, they lived the idyll on a lavish ranch with an ever-expanding private zoo for nearly a decade, until she found out, through an informer, that he was cheating on her.

He says their relationship crumbled for a multitude of reasons, his infidelity and excess among them, as well as her desire to live full-time in the South, where he always felt like an outsider. "Ours is an odd ex-marriage but a good one," says McInerney "Helen is a great eccentric. She's a southerner, they're different. I mean, not many women would install a pig in the bedroom. We're back to where we started, we're best friends and we go on holidays together with our kids. I have a better relationship with the pig, too, especially now that I don't have to sleep with her."

The pet pig, Forkey, now a 14-year-old *grande dame*, features in one of McInerney's stories *Sleeping With Pigs* and Bransford has also published a book, *Swine Not*, about the urban adventures when she was forced to live undercover with the family in a Manhattan apartment, where barnyard animals were forbidden. As an infant, Forkey was snuck in and out of the building in a handbag. But as she grew, a screenwriter friend who had the top-floor flat met Forkey at the freight elevator for her daily walks around his roof terrace, while a friendly doorman helped her venture outside.

In fact, McInerney reveals, he started his relationship with his current wife Hearst because of their pets. He relates the story of how he moved his former wife and family from Nashville to their current home in the Hamptons. Not long after the split, McInerney rented a camper van and loaded his ex-wife, the twins, six cats, several dogs and the potbellied pig and set off on the three-day journey.

"We barely left the driveway, when one of the cats pissed on my lap and a tyre blew out," he says, laughing. "Then when we finally got to Long Island, Helen's house wasn't ready. I called Anne, an old friend, who had this guesthouse and she put them all up. Fortunately she was animal lover because there weren't many places were they could all go, and it was in the middle of the summer in the Hamptons. But at same time, I'd been crazy about Anne for years and suddenly we were both single. So our time had finally come."

This retreat from the limelight and desire for a low-key life may have been influenced by his marriage to Hearst. As a granddaughter of William Randolph Hearst, the flamboyant publishing scion who inspired *Citizen Kane*, and the sister of Patty Hearst, the kidnapped heiress and former revolutionary who robbed banks and dominated the headlines in the Seventies, she seems to value her privacy.

Bransford agrees her ex-husband has calmed down. "Maybe it's all of Anne's influence. I feel this is the happiest period in his life," she says. "I've always thought Jay is partly wild and partly square. The wild part was in remission during the early years of our marriage. The womanising crept in later and is no thrill if you happen to be the wife, or even one of the women. But Jay also takes his duties as a father seriously. The children adore him and he calls them every night from wherever he is."

Bransford was 43 when they married — seven years older than McInerney — and had suffered several miscarriages. They had the twins with a surrogate mother.

"Helen went to these extraordinary lengths," says McInerney. "She literally clawed those children into this world." A friend of hers, a country-and-western singer, offered to donate eggs. So Bransford advertised for a surrogate mother through the local paper and found a waitress who was willing to do it for $15,000. The waitress, meanwhile, refused to give up smoking and developed diabetes. The twins were eventually born three months prematurely.

McInerney's involvement was little more than sperm donor. "I was kind of fascinated and there was a certain amount of disbelief when the whole thing went down. It was a real drama. For about four months, we didn't know if they were going to survive. Then, when we brought them home, Helen went into full postpartum depression even though she didn't give birth."

> 'We go on holidays together with our kids. I have a better relationship with the pig, too, especially now that I don't have to sleep with her'

He had felt like he could postpone fatherhood indefinitely or skip it altogether. "I don't think many men are ready for fatherhood. You just have to be thrown into it. I'm glad it happened. They're great kids."

Nevertheless, McInerney insists, the transition didn't come easily. He wasn't ready to give up his hedonistic lifestyle. But at least he waited until the children were asleep before trawling the bars, often on his own, as his wife was fine with him staying out at night as long as he didn't expect her to accompany him.

"I was terrified of growing up and taking responsibility for anyone else," he says. "I really struggled and I dealt with a lot of things badly. All your flaws don't suddenly disappear because you're a parent."

A few years ago he suffered a mid-life crisis and slipped into a black hole of depression, which made him realise he had to end his long adolescence. "I had one of my darkest periods when the children were about five," he says. "I was going through the divorce with their mother and feeling lost and adrift. I was as reckless as I'd ever been in terms of drugs and alcohol."

Burnt-out and heartbroken, he was holed up in a two-room sublet, "struggling with debts, writer's block and the inescapable sadness" of his personal crisis. He distanced himself from the world he had become immersed in, quitting drugs and drying out. At his lowest moments, thoughts of suicide haunted him, but he shook himself out of it. "You know, self-destruction loses its romance when you realise children are dependent on you," he says. "You have to keep yourself together for them. When I was much younger, the idea of death and suicide seemed so romantic and glamorous, with so many artists, rock stars and writers like Hemingway and Jim Morrison taking their own lives. But it ceases to become an option when you're a parent. Obviously there are parents who've committed suicide. But look what it's done to their children.

"I experimented a lot, but I was dabbler and never really an addict," he says, "I'll never forget, a year or two after my first visit to LA, that giant Marlboro Man billboard on the Sunset Strip, which had been a Hollywood landmark for decades, was replaced by a gruesome black-and-white photograph of a morgue with tagged bodies laid out on gurneys, under the tagline: 'Welcome to the glamorous world of cocaine'. After a night out, it scared the hell of you. Considering the way some of us were living at the time, it seemed more than a little morbid. The decade would be pretty well over before we noticed that it was possible to have too much of a good thing. Even when John Belushi died, in 1982, we could tell ourselves that it was the heroin rather than the coke in his speedball that had stopped his heart. I'm hoping that my children live more sedate and grounded lives than I did."

Settling down hasn't stopped McInerney socialising, at least not entirely. He looks a little rough and red eyed, hiding behind shades, when we meet the morning after at a cafe around the corner from his apartment. Nowadays, when he's not in the Hamptons with his ex-wife and children, his nights out mean stepping out with socialite wife Anne Hearst at fashionable dinner parties and charity galas.

Sitting at a cramped corner table, over a cup of coffee, he admits he has never been able to resist the stardust and superficial glamour of Manhattan. "As a writer, I'm always going to be attracted to this world. I'm a very social creature and as I spend the days alone writing, I like to have company at night. But now it's just vintage wine and mineral water."

New York itself, he says, is an addiction that he and many others can't seem to break. "It's changed so much," he explains. "The sense of danger was everywhere. Being mugged was a rite of passage. I felt like we lost something when this city became so safe and you couldn't locate the edge," he says wistfully, sounding nostalgic.

He adds that his next book will address the meltdown of the Wall Street money culture and corruption. "It's going to be a very different place in the next year or two," he says, distracted and skittish, scanning the room as if he's trying to score drugs. "It will be interesting to see the values of the boom being replaced with something else. I truly feel sorry for those who've lost their jobs and are struggling. I don't want the city to descend into poverty and chaos, but I think there's been too much excess and greed, and a little gravity could be a good thing."

McInerney may be older, wiser and gentler, but he comes across as a man caught between two worlds, rebelling against himself and striving to recapture those fleeting, gritty New York moments of his youth. Whenever he goes out to clubs with his younger friends, he finds it "most boring" and is usually in bed by midnight.

Like one of the characters in *The Last Bachelor*, McInerney is at a crossroads: "God allows us all a swimming pool of vodka and a bathtub full of cocaine," says one of the many Manhattanites trying to figure out if he's reached his quota. He gives up the powder after realising he's dipped into his second bathtub.

"Well, I've exhausted all my quotas," says McInerney a bit groggily. "I'm only sure of a couple things: that I've survived, my heart's still beating despite the odds; and that *Bright Lights, Big City* will be on my headstone when I reach the end of the line." L

'The Last Bachelor' by Jay McInerney is published by Bloomsbury at €15.50