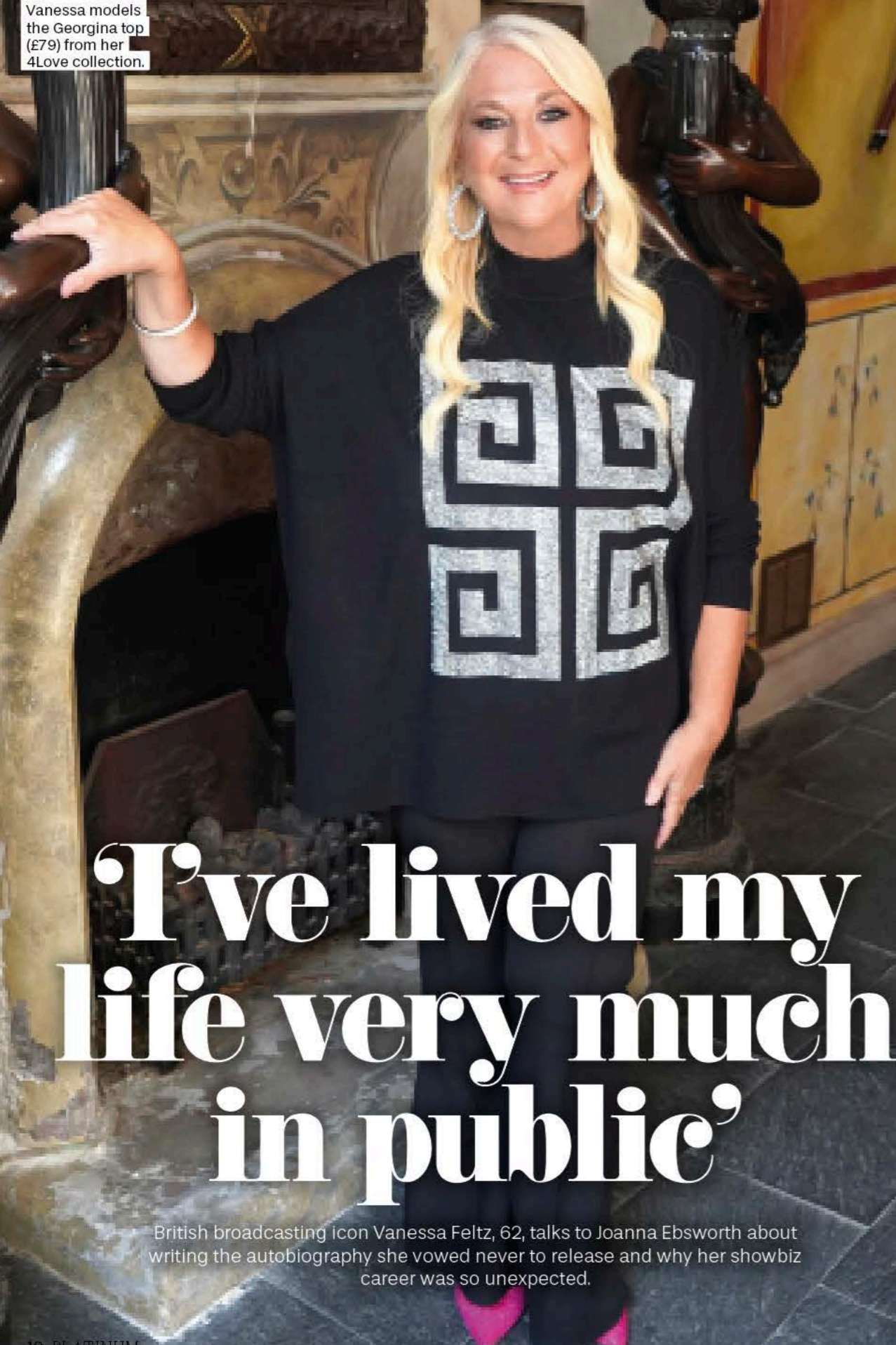


Vanessa models the Georgina top (£79) from her 4Love collection.



I've lived my life very much in public'

British broadcasting icon Vanessa Feltz, 62, talks to Joanna Ebsworth about writing the autobiography she vowed never to release and why her showbiz career was so unexpected.

Considering that Vanessa Feltz has spent a whopping 35 years in the public eye and had every part of her life dissected under a media microscope, you'd be forgiven for thinking you already know everything there is to know about the television personality, journalist and broadcasting legend. But trust us when we say you don't know the half of it. Find that hard to believe? Then give her utterly unputdownable autobiography *Vanessa Bares All: Frank, Funny and Fearless* a read and prepare to be shocked, saddened and surprised with every turn of the page.

Not that we're suggesting Vanessa's life story is a sorry tale of woe by any means. Yes, her moving memoir is full of tribulations – think navigating an excruciatingly public divorce, a gruesome gastric band surgery, and a 'sixteen-year skirmish with an ageing boybander' that ended with Vanessa finding herself suddenly single at 61 – but there are also just as many heartwarming triumphs, like the time she received an out-of-the-blue phone call inviting her to go on ITV's *This Morning* while defrosting a chicken, and being asked to become 'the British Oprah' with the UK's first US-style talk show, *The Vanessa Show*, while defrosting another chicken.

Jaw-droppingly hilarious, sometimes saucy, and incredibly inspiring in the end, this is Vanessa's chance, in short, to set the record straight in her own joltingly honest way as she charts her rise from being the wife of a junior NHS doctor and mother-of-two writing as many badly paid articles as possible to help pay off debts to becoming 'the nation's second-most-famous fat person' after Dawn French (her words, not ours).

But when we chat to a nervous Vanessa a few days before her book launch – she's understandably worried about how some of her revelations will be received, including the fact that she jumped out of a moving car when her partner at the time confirmed he had been cheating on her – it's somewhat surprising to learn she had always vowed never to write an



Born in 1962, Vanessa is pictured here as a newborn with her parents.



Vanessa, aged 3, on her birthday.



Already loving the camera, aged 12.



Aged 9, Vanessa already had a keen fashion sense.



WORDS: JOANNA EBSWORTH. IMAGES: 4LOVE AND GGGGGG.



Wearing the Kylie Multi Wrap (£75), and the Mia Pink Dress (£89), below.



autobiography, mainly because she felt she 'really hadn't done that much!'

'I thought all I did was get born, get married, get on the radio, and get on the telly, so I wondered, "what the hell am I going to put in the bloody thing?"; she exclaims. 'Also, as a journalist, I'm used to writing everything in about 250 words, so anything longer seemed like a hell of a lot. I had to have excellent reasons for wanting to write it, and it was only when a literary agent told me she thought there was a market for my story – and came back to me with a raft of offers and a bidding war after I disagreed with her – that I realised I'd better hurry up and write it before I got to a stage where nobody had ever heard of me!'

LIFE IN FULL VIEW

When we remark to Vanessa that her autobiography is full of surprising revelations, she seems surprised herself. 'Do you really think so?' she asks. 'I feel as if I've lived the last three to four decades of my life very much in public, and you know I was a victim of phone hacking where your very most intimate communications that you don't think anyone can hear are suddenly broadcast all over the place. So, I've never thought I've been very private. In fact, I thought I've always been absolutely out there with everything. I mean, I've always felt that my listeners and viewers are incredibly honest with me, so I owe it to them to be honest and reply in kind'.

Vanessa tells us the process of writing about events she had hoped to put behind her while trying to make her recollections as vivid and compelling as possible was a painful experience, rather than a cathartic one. 'The next thing you know, you're way back in it, remembering what you ate, what you were wearing, and exactly how you felt,' she says. 'And afterwards, you're still sort of swimming around in the memory, and you suddenly find you're almost living in it again. So no, I didn't find it cathartic at all. Although I did



Vanessa pictured with her daughters, before she found fame on TV.



Taken on her wedding day in 1983, with her mother Valerie.



With daughter Saskia on her wedding day.



Vanessa has interviewed Joan Rivers (below) and Miss Piggy (right) on The Big Breakfast bed.



enjoy writing about the way my television career came about, because it was so unexpected at the time,' she adds.

'I was just always defrosting a chicken in the kitchen or about to pick up the children from school when the phone rang, and each time it happened, it was such a shock. I was always like, "What? You want me to be on *This Morning* with Richard and Judy? Do you? Wow! And you want me to come to New York and be a guest on *The Maury Povich Show*, which I've never even heard of? And you think you might want me to be the British Oprah? Bloody hell!" she continues.

'It was like, hang on, really? Haven't I just spent the whole morning writing an article on the new brand of heated rollers for a hairdressing industry trade magazine for £49? And now you're suddenly calling to ask me to co-host *The Jerry Springer Show* in Chicago? I just remembered how absolutely staggered I was by it all, so recalling that part was really fun.'

Less fun to recall were Vanessa's childhood memories of being put on a strict diet by her mother at the age of nine once puberty struck, and being forced to eat half a grapefruit

or a slice of melon for dinner while everyone else tucked into a veritable banquet – a pattern that continued until she left home to study English at Trinity College, Cambridge.

Understandably, Vanessa says her time at university felt ‘as if wartime rationing had come to an end,’ and she admits to indulging in all the foods she had been forbidden from eating ‘to make restitution to myself for years of deprivation.’ Naturally, Vanessa gained a little weight and went up to a size 10 to 12. Her mother’s solution? To start passing her daughter amphetamines by the time she was 20, which Vanessa says were a ‘spectacular success’ even though the side effects were ‘nightmarish’.

Reading about Vanessa’s experiences of deprivation and her subsequent gorging on food when opportunities presented themselves, you can’t help but feel incredibly sad for the little girl and young woman who always worried when she would get her next meal. Equally, it’s hard not to draw a parallel between this negative cycle of behaviour and Vanessa’s subsequent decades of punishing yo-yo dieting that would only be laid to rest after a successful gastric bypass surgery in 2019, following a previously disastrous gastric band procedure in 2010 that left her unable to keep any healthy, fibrous foods down.

‘I always knew what my mother was doing wasn’t kind, or right, and I also knew I shouldn’t have been eating to get back at her,’ says Vanessa. ‘You’re meant to eat because you’re hungry and stop when you’ve had enough. But you never have enough when you’re unsure when you’re going to eat again.’

‘Of course,’ she continues, ‘I don’t think my mother meant it to be horrible. I think she meant to keep me slim. I think she just thought that life was just so much better if you were slim – or even better, thin – because you could wear whatever you liked, and everyone would fancy you, and you’d get married and enjoy all those good things life has to offer. So, the best thing for her to do was not feed me much so I couldn’t get fat. I don’t

think she was trying to torture me, even though it felt like torture at the time.’

SEEKING APPROVAL

Vanessa talks in great depth about her childhood growing up in Totteridge, which she refers to as the ‘Beverly Hills of North London’, as well as the impact her ‘Yiddish chorus’ of family and friends had on her life – not least her work ethic, which was driven by a desire to please her parents.

‘I was always trying to do what they wanted me to do so that they would be happy and pleased with me,’ she explains. ‘So, I think that did influence the way I behaved a lot because I was always trying to bring home some prize or win an award so I could say, “I’ve just done this”, hoping that they would say, “Oh wow, that’s fantastic, we’re so proud of you”. But somehow, they just never did. Whatever I did, I always somehow let them down or was an embarrassment.’

In her book, Vanessa even recalls the time her father failed to congratulate her for winning a Sony Gold award for Speech Personality Of The Year in 2009. But, long before then, she had found herself a new motivation to work hard. As the wife of a junior NHS doctor and mother to two young daughters, Vanessa was driven to take on as many jobs as possible to help her family stay financially afloat as they rocked ‘from overdraft to debt, debt to overdraft’, while keeping some words of advice



Pictured with her friend Anthea Turner.



Vanessa with her grandchildren.



The broadcasting icon posed as Cher for Comic Relief.



Wearing the Juliet Pink Dress (£89) from her 4Love collection.



Vanessa models the Penny Gold Vegan Jacket (£85), with the Isla Cream Gilet (£149), below.





The Zara Black Dress (£79), and Imogen Camel Coat (£99), below.

from her 'incredibly tough father' firmly in mind.

'He would always say to me, "Who's going to give you a pound? The answer is nobody will ever give you a pound." I always thought the answer should really be your father will give you a pound. But it certainly wasn't. No one was going to help me, so I figured I better do it myself. And then, of course, that turned out to be true after I ended up as a single mum and absolutely doing it for myself and my children. Being at the very sharp end of financial deprivation is awful when you haven't got any reserves of money, especially when the car pegs it, or the boilers packs up. So, I had to get beyond that. That was the ambition, and everything else was the unexpected icing on a big fat cake'.

That icing would include interviewing Hollywood stars such as Madonna, Goldie Hawn, Danny De Vito and even Miss Piggy on *The Big Breakfast* bed, as well as being the nation's alarm clock on Radio 2's *Early Breakfast Show* and BBC Radio London's *Breakfast Show* from 2003 to 2022. These days, you can hear Vanessa engaging in Britain's biggest conversations on Global's LBC, and the best bit, she says, is that many of her old BBC listeners have found her at her new home.

'The very first minute I started on LBC, the lines started lighting up with these familiar names, and I was like, "Oh my God, is that Shane from Edinburgh? And is that Jim from Lewisham?". They were my lovely listeners from the BBC who'd hung in all that time and found me at LBC over two years later,' she says joyfully. 'And I'm always absolutely ecstatic to hear from them. I remember every single one of their life stories, because they've been speaking to me on the phone for years. I wouldn't recognise them in the street, but I have a fantastic relationship with them!'

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT

Right now, Vanessa is juggling her radio show with her column for the *Daily Express* and regular guest appearances on the telly, so it's a



A journalistic sandwich! Pictured between Jeremy Kyle and Piers Morgan.



Vanessa loves spending time with her grandchildren, pictured here on holiday in Ireland.

wonder she manages to find the time and inspiration to work on her clothing range with 4Love (4love.uk), which launched in December 2023. But Vanessa says it's not hard when designing and modelling the clothes is such good fun.

'I absolutely love it, and because the range is also sold via my Instagram, my lovely followers are always sending me pictures of themselves in the outfits at weddings and barbecues and Christmas parties, and they look so lovely and happy, it's a really rewarding thing,' she tells us. 'But I also think fashion is kind of in my blood, because my dad was in the underwear business and my family was in the coat business, so it makes a lot of sense to me. I absolutely love selling clothes. I think I'm good at it, and I'm hoping they'll give me a chance on QVC one day – that would be fantastic!'

Vanessa's latest winter collection features everything from 'fabulous vegan fur gilets and coats in different colours that are as glamorous as hell' to 'diamante sprinkled jumpers' as well as her trademark dresses in bright, beautiful prints. But one of the

things she is most proud of is how size-inclusive the range is.

'Don't get me wrong, the 4Love range isn't just for larger women as it starts at a size 8, but I'm very pleased to be bringing really lovely garments in larger sizes that women can feel feminine, attractive and fashionable in,' she says. 'I definitely felt in my larger years that I was considered as non-fashion fodder. It was almost like I was being told, "You're fat, so you forfeited the right to have a beautiful dress in the current colours, styles and shapes". You feel excluded and marginalised and humiliated and stigmatised and every other bad thing. So, I do feel very strongly about it. Women of all shapes, sizes and stages deserve to feel fabulous!'

● **Vanessa Bares All: Frank, Funny and Fearless (£22, Bantam) is out now.**