23 JULY 2023

The Observer Magazine

'Therapy has been a lifeline': The Crown's Tobias Menzies

Nigel Slater's fruity sundae

A journey in search of my mother's secret teenage life

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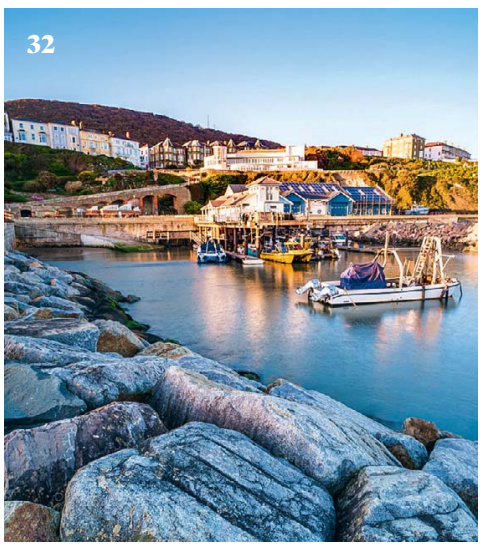

In this issue

Contributors

Journalist **Marisa Bate** covers stories that impact the lives of women. During the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court nomination hearings in 2018 she began to question how women's rights can be reversed. Read about how it inspired a very personal journey (p34).

Kiran Sidhu has written for the *Observer* and the *Independent*. Her *Guardian* feature about friendship with a farmer in the valley where she lives was turned into a Tribeca-award-winning film, *Heart Valley*, and inspired her first book, *I Can Hear The Cuckoo*. This week, she writes about moving from London to Wales – and finally finding a sense of belonging (p18).

Illustrator **Lisa Sheehan** creates images that are often typographical with a pop of colour. She loves to use detailed, delicate forms as well as mixing 2D and 3D in her illustrations, and has had her work featured in the *New York Times*, *Women's Health*, *the Washington Post* and the *FT*. See her work this week on p8 – and this amazing cover.

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Cover image **Lisa Sheehan**

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Eva Wiseman

Cashing in on Jack the Ripper diminishes the horror of these crimes

@evawiseman

When we first met, back in the soft crevices of history, my boyfriend worked in a pub that happened to be on a Jack the Ripper tour. Every evening a group of tourists would come in and order a glass of water each, and the manager would roll his eyes, and off they'd shuffle to look at another autopsy photograph in an alley. He and I lived in Whitechapel for 12 years after that, and I'd watch the serial killer tours walking slowly through our little streets with respectful bemusement.

The skyline changed behind the tour groups, sky-scrapers emerging like a sort of architectural knotweed, and the murder tours were eclipsed by street art tours, which changed the area in a different way. Yet both tours imposed an authoritative order on things that might have previously escaped it. A great episode of the This American Life podcast focused on ghost tours in Savannah, Georgia, and the stories guides told about enslaved people betraying or seducing their masters. "If you look at them as little moral fables," noted reporter Chenjerai Kumanyika, "the message of these stories is that everything would be fine if everyone just stayed in their place."

The story of Jack the Ripper was part of my local landscape, but it's long been part of the landscape of the whole country, too, a series of brutal murders commodified for our entertainment. A Ripper industry has been thriving since the discovery of his second victim, Annie Chapman, in 1888. Locals paid a penny to view her body, and fruit sellers set up around the scene to cater for the crowds. Since then Jack the Ripper has become one of Britain's most lucrative cultural exports, as recognisable and exportable a brand as the Beatles.

While the tours continue in Whitechapel, the Ripper marketing concept is strong enough that it no longer needs to trade on any connection to east London. A couple of years ago a hotel in Leeds invited guests to enjoy a two-course meal before watching "a team of clinicians dissect the Rippers victims, looking at how they were 'mutilated' using 'real specimens' and new technology". The most recent business venture is a Jack the Ripper-themed "immersive horror" bar and restaurant in Southsea. Nearly 300 people have signed a letter to Portsmouth city council asking them to take action against the bar, one of whom is a direct descendent of Chapman. (The owner told local press how the scandal had already led to thousands of bookings.)

What remains even more interesting to me is the way the world balances its repulsion towards sexual violence with its never-ending fascination with it as entertainment. We've seen serial killers, such as Ted Bundy, repeatedly glamorised, their crimes readjusted in our rear-view mirrors until they appear simply as edgy stylistic quirks, like an earring or ripped jeans. And, going back long before Victorian times, we've seen murder victims objectified and (especially if they were sex workers, as the Ripper's victims were assumed to be) blamed for their own deaths. On Radio 4, historian Hallie Rubenhold said a bar like this is "a real problem" because the victims, Mary Ann Nichols, Annie Chapman, Elizabeth Stride, Catherine Eddowes and Mary Jane Kelly, "were real women, Jack the Ripper was a real person – it's not *Jekyll and Hyde* or *Frankenstein*." How can we thrill at their deaths when similar violence happens every day?

A 2018 study found a large proportion of people still believe sex workers can't get raped, or that they deserve it. On average in this country, three women are killed by men every week, while one in four women has been a victim of rape or sexual assault. One in five schoolchildren have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment at school and, according to the most comprehensive study of its kind, sexually abusive language has become "normalised" in British classrooms. A spokesperson for East London Rape Crisis (speaking from the borough where Ripper tourism thrives) said: "We are almost at the stage where sexual violence has been decriminalised."

The problem with the Ripper industry is not just that the victims are erased but that the distance encourages us to normalise these kinds of crimes. The last time I stumbled upon a Jack the Ripper tour was shortly after Sarah Everard's murder, and the horrifying reality of the tourists' hen-night jollity made me feel quite breathless. Ripper tourism and the appetite for a bar like the one in Southsea reveals a grim and uncomfortable reality that no suggestion of offering profits from a cocktail to a "women's rights charity" (as the owner has floated) can hide. They fulfil a horrible need in a society where sexual violence is quotidian. The only clear way to escape it seems to be to laugh at it. People are desperate for a chance to be further anaesthetised to the knowledge that men frequently kill, that marginalised women remain especially vulnerable, and how quickly a person can become dehumanised, a Halloween costume, a joke. ■

From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

On 2 January 1966, the *Observer* looked at what 10 years of change had wrought. Britain looked and felt as different as the two models on the cover: the haughtily patrician Barbara Goalen in gloves and pearls, and gamine Jean Shrimpton with flowers in her hair. The country was younger (1 million more under-15s), there were 10 times more immigrants from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan than in the late 1950s, 15% more white-collar workers and twice as many students.

Living standards were rising, with postwar parsimony giving way to a new age of consumption. A 'revolution in habits', included vastly expanded car and home ownership with attendant mod cons: 'Vacuum cleaners, TVs and washing machines are owned by a substantial majority.' Diets had changed, too, though arguably not improved, with more 'frozen vegetables, processed meats and instant coffee'. Meanwhile, popular culture was shifting away from protest to 'glamorisation of women and young people, and the pursuit of fame'.

The accompanying 'then and now' photo essay spans everything from parking meters, which had 'caused an outcry when they were introduced in 1958', to sex workers. 'London's prostitutes were the most blatant in the world' in 1956, the article declared breezily (though they look tremendously respectable in the accompanying photo); now they had 'Moved indoors leaving discreet cards in shop windows'.

Pop music in the 1950s meant Doris Day and Johnnie Ray; now Sandie Shaw was 'singing of broken dates' and 'Every schoolboy dreams of making as much money as the Beatles.' It was a brave new world at home and abroad: the Blitz-disfigured London skyline had filled out with 'glass palaces' and holidays no longer meant goose-pimples on Hove beach, but 'chips with everything on the Costa Brava'. What next? ***Emma Beddington***

One more thing...

Megan Nolan's latest novel, *Ordinary Human Failings*, about the tabloids, a tragedy, one unhappy family and a journalist who can't stop the phrase 'I'm the loneliest man in the world!' from screaming through his head, is typically spectacular. Her nonfiction writing is equally great: I recommend subscribing to her Substack.

According to the *Daily Mail*, Waitrose has adopted a new tactic of 'love-bombing' customers in a bid to combat **spiralling shoplifting**. The company claims that being extra attentive and friendly to customers, including at self-service checkouts, is proving to be an effective deterrent. I worry it might have exactly the opposite effect on me.

The Bear is back! Everybody's favourite show about cooking and grief, and panic and beef, and chaos, family, stress, addiction, dread, anxiety, PTSD, dysfunction, sandwiches, modern work, white T-shirts and survival. I love it.

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This much I know

Skin, musician, 55

Interview **JAMES McMAHON**
Photograph **BRETT STEVENS**

My first memory is getting told off at school. My dad was in the Air Force and I went to school on the base. We once had to draw a giant, as a class. Everyone went out to play, but I stayed behind and painted the giant's feet green. I got told off, but I just knew they had to be green.

I'm from Brixton, proper Brixton, not trendy Brixton or gentrified Brixton. I love Brixton, even though a lot of my community is being kicked out. But I always wanted to get out of there, too.

I get bored if things aren't hard. It's more interesting to keep moving forward. Getting married and having kids and a normal job was expected of me. I always knew I never wanted that.

I was raised Christian, but I think Christianity is embarrassing and I think it's going in a bad direction, towards the right wing. The way it views queer people and abortion is absolutely despicable. How dare they say what God wants, what God is? I'm spiritual. But right now, I'd describe myself as spiritually confused.

I get itchy feet. We stopped moving around and settled in Brixton when I was six. But that early experience of moving a lot has stayed with me ever since. Thankfully, I joined a band. You're never in one place for long in a band.

I always knew I could sing. I think a lot of singers suffer from impostor syndrome, even very successful ones. But I knew I could sing before I'd sung a note. I don't mean to sound arrogant. I think everyone can sing. They just can't sing as well as I do!

Talent is only half the battle. You can be talented and achieve nothing. It's the work you put in that reaps the rewards. The world is filled with talented people who didn't get their dues.

I'm proud of my OBE. It did cross my mind what people would think about me accepting it, but I didn't care. It didn't come from the royal family. Nobody in that family has listened to Little Baby Swastikkka. It came from a committee of people who recognised what I'd contributed to my country.

Some people think a Black person shouldn't accept an award like that. Why? Very few white people have turned it down, because they see it as their right. This is my country. It's my right, too.

Headlining Glastonbury was enormous – it's easy to forget what a big band we were. That was a moment where I absolutely knew we deserved to be there. But we weren't accepted by a lot of the music press because we were a band with two Black people. We weren't a rock band, we were something... else. Has that changed for Black artists? I don't know. ■

Skunk Anansie are working on their as yet untitled seventh studio album

We need to talk about

Modern parenting is preoccupied by the idea of perfection, and that includes weight. But what if we just let our kids eat what they wanted to? Virginia Sole-Smith, author of a brave and radical new book, talks to Rebecca Seal about why our worth shouldn't be measured by size – and how our obsession with what our children eat might also be about our ingrained fear of them getting fat

After reading the last page of *Fat Talk: Coming of Age in Diet Culture*, I cried. Virginia Sole-Smith's book made me radically question my own beliefs about fatness, health and diet. If you have a child, were a child or know a child, and think even a little bit about what our culture tells us about "good" or "bad" bodies, then this book will turn everything you thought you knew about how to raise a "healthy" child upside down.

We are so convinced that it's awful to be fat, and especially to be a fat child, that we don't interrogate what that anti-fatness does to kids, large or small, nor whether we are correct in our convictions. As Sole-Smith writes: "It's not their bodies causing these kids to have higher rates of anxiety, depression and disordered eating behaviours. The real danger to a child in a larger body is how we treat them for having that body."

Sole-Smith started looking at the relationship between food, weight and health when her daughter had to be placed on a feeding tube until she was two. She'd developed a food aversion after major heart surgery when she was just a week old, an experience which led to Sole-Smith's first book about kids and food, *The Eating Instinct*, in 2018. *Fat Talk*'s point – backed up by hundreds of expert interviews and years of research – is that our pervasive anti-fat attitude and relentless pursuit of thin-ness have created systemic biases (however well intentioned), which harm people who happen to live in bigger bodies far, far more than body size ever could and which are especially dangerous for children. "We have lots of research showing that high bodyweight correlates with poor health outcomes," Sole-Smith, a former health and beauty journalist, tells me from her home office in the Hudson Valley, New York State. "But we don't have good evidence that body size itself causes poor health outcomes." Weight and health outcomes might both be influenced by underlying issues or root causes – experiencing poverty, food insecurity or oppression, for example. "Sometimes a health issue increases weight, but that doesn't mean weight loss will fix anything, because body size is just a symptom," she says.

Experiencing stigma and shaming, discovered Sole-Smith, leads to intense physiological stress responses, actually triggering some of the health consequences sometimes experienced by people in larger bodies – consequences we attribute to body size, rather than our treatment of the people in those bodies. Repeatedly experiencing high amounts of the stress hormone cortisol, for instance, can in itself lead to high blood pressure and heart disease, and can result in weight gain. Sole-Smith also cites reams of recent data on weight stigma in medicine, which often prevents bigger patients seeking treatment until they are very sick, then receiving poorer care when they do, which may in turn skew the data on body size and health and mortality risks. According to a *Lancet* policy review in 2022, "69% of doctors, 46% of nurses and 37% of dietitians report biased attitudes against people living with obesity".

The strongest predictors for weight gain in children are weight teasing and being put on a diet; they are also strong predictors for eating disorders, Sole-Smith writes. Being told you're too fat in childhood is associated with a higher likelihood of an obese BMI later in life. The epidemiologist who first uncovered this, Dr Dianne Neumark-Sztainer, was repeatedly challenged when she presented her 2012 findings at conferences, by medics who assumed she must have made a mistake. "They couldn't believe that trying to lose weight, let alone just feeling bad about your weight, would result so consistently in people weighing more," she told Sole-Smith.

It's not uncommon for kids in larger bodies to show signs of disordered eating, but because we have a clear image of what an eating disorder looks like – thin – they rarely get diagnosed. But atypical anorexia nervosa, in which sufferers are not underweight, affects 3.6% of all adolescents, versus anorexia nervosa, which affects 0.6% of young people. Eating-disorder specialists report that up to 30% of their patients are or have been higher weight, especially in paediatric wards. As one of Sole-Smith's interviewees, a doctor who treats eating disorders, says to her: "I'm not saying extreme obesity isn't a problem. But malnutrition will kill you quicker. Restrictive eating disorders kill more kids than diabetes or cancer." For Sole-Smith, our ineffectual war on obesity hasn't just made people feel miserable, it is also inextricably linked to the recent rapid increase in eating disorders. According to the London Centre for Eating Disorders, UK hospital admissions for eating disorders have risen 84% in the past five years, with almost 10,000 children and young people being admitted between April and December 2021 (the number of children admitted with – not necessarily for – obesity was roughly a quarter of that number over the same period).

In pointing all of this out, Sole-Smith has sent a few commentators completely off the rails, with them arguing that questioning the received "obesity = death" narrative is wildly irresponsible.

In America, where the book hit the *New York Times* bestseller list as soon as it was published in May, Sole-Smith has been called a "fat skank" and a "bigoted piece of shit", and accused of publishing "grifting nonsense". She's had plenty of emails, mainly from men, admonishing her for failing to do proper research – "science shows that" is a recurring phrase – but without ever sending a contradictory citation. "'Please do your research' is one of my favourites," she laughs, somewhat wryly. "Because I do ›

Illustration **LISA SHEEHAN**

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› research this. For a living. It just shows this is an issue we are very polarised on, and that this bias is tangled up in a lot of fear." How does that feel? "It is an energy drain," she says. "There's a steeling of yourself when you go to open your email. The positive response does outweigh the negative, though. At my first book event, there was a row of health teachers who told me they were there because they want to change their curriculums and be more inclusive. All the following week, when the hate mail was coming in, my mantra was: 'The health teachers, the health teachers!' Hearing from researchers saying they're re-evaluating their protocols because they haven't been controlling for anti-fat bias in research – that's huge. Hearing from doctors embracing the book is huge – doctors are a major source of anti-fat bias and can cause a lot of harm. I hear so many eating-disorder origin stories that start with, 'I was 10 years old at the doctor's and they grabbed my stomach...'"

Our dislike of fatness and our fear of becoming fat are things we are taught from the first moment we interact with the culture of appearance. As it happens, mine is a smallish body. I would like to think much less about the doming of my stomach, but I don't experience the horrific systemic discrimination experienced by people living in bigger bodies. The consequences of living in a culture mired in anti-fat bias and its veneration of thin-ness are real for all of us, but my negative self-talk is nothing in comparison to what the roughly 50% of people who are designated overweight according to BMI, experience.

As Sole-Smith points out again and again, there is so much anti-fat bias laced into research around obesity, weight and metabolic health, that it's unclear exactly how much of the data on the consequences of obesity we can trust (which is why I'm deliberately not repeating any of it here). She debunks, for instance, the still widely made claim that obesity kills 300,000 Americans a year, which has never been true. *Fat Talk* contains a chapter titled "The myth of the childhood obesity epidemic", detailing, among other things, how the arbitrary shifting of boundaries on growth charts in 2010 moved a whole cohort of kids out of the overweight BMI group and into the obese one.

Body mass index, or BMI – not weight – is how health professionals designate people as underweight, normal weight, overweight or obese (it's calculated by dividing weight by the square of height). But it is a blunt tool, primarily useful at population level and was first developed using height and weight data from white men in Belgium in the 19th century, then slightly refined in the 1970s, again mainly using white male data. As a result, BMI is notoriously bad at accurately predicting the health-weight relationship of people from non-white groups and for women. The often-told story is that of the athlete categorised as obese because BMI can't tell the difference between muscle and fat, but as Sole-Smith notes, it's more important that it fails to assess metabolic health – how well our bodies process energy – elsewhere on its scale. When other tests are used, around 30% of people at the smaller end have metabolic health issues, while half of people it designates as overweight and a quarter of people it says are obese are metabolically healthy.

Children's bodies change as they move into adolescence and are highly heterogeneous. BMI is terrible at adjusting for stage of life, which is why it seems flat-out mad to apply BMI to children, and why many campaigners, including Sole-Smith, take issue with the idea that we should be freaking out about children's weights at all. "BMI doesn't take the puberty stage into account – which starts at different points," she says. "So if you're comparing a white eight-year-old girl who's nowhere near puberty to a black eight-year-old girl who's starting puberty, you're going to demonise the black girl's body. She's fine. She's healthy. During puberty, girls have to increase their body fat percentage in order to menstruate. And that is where it starts – we demonise losing the tiny childhood body if you were a thin kid, and becoming a differently shaped adult, and we tell kids to fear it and every bodily change after that. But what if we celebrated them all? Weight gain is always framed as failure, but why is it a failure, if everyone's body does it?"

One of the things Sole-Smith wants to explode is the idea that weight is solely about what we eat and how much we move, a belief we hold very tightly, but again, just isn't true. The eat-less-exercise-more mantra has been repeated so many times that it's no wonder we struggle to let it go. The reality is much more complex and involves our genetics, our physical and food environments, and our microbiome – all things over which we have little personal control and which interact with each other in ways we do not fully understand. (She does note that moving is important, citing an analysis of 22,746 people in 2020, which showed that being physically active was associated with a larger reduction in heart disease risk than having a "normal" BMI.) "Sometimes, of course, weight does appear to be causal – but even then, pushing weight loss isn't the answer. Safe, sustainable weight loss is out of reach for most people and the increased risks for disordered eating and the health impact of weight cycling are rarely factored in. Focusing on the 'dangers of obesity' costs our health because it leads us to misdiagnose, pathologise and mistreat people when we could be focusing on their actual health needs.

'Deeply embedded in us is the idea that it's your body so it's your fault'

"The willpower myth has been disproved in the literature," she continues. "The reason weight-loss drugs are being developed is because we know willpower is not enough. But the main pushback I get about this work is, 'OK fatty, just go to the gym, why don't you try harder?' It's fascinating that the idea is so deeply embedded in us that my body is my responsibility and so it's my fault." Similarly, it's curious that we accept that it's possible for a person to eat what we might consider a lot and carry on living in a thinner body, but we don't accept the inverse, which is that some – perhaps many – bigger bodies are bigger for reasons not entirely connected to the amount of food they consume. "Non-pathological human body diversity exists and has always existed," she says.

Sole-Smith is more relaxed around ultra-processed food (UPFs) than I am, given the new books by Chris Van Tulleken (*Ultra Processed People*) and Henry Dimbleby (*Ravenous*), plus the recent *Panorama* documentary that revealed an alarming bank of evidence around food additives. For her, we are so screamingly frightened of fatness that we are, once again, failing to tease apart whether it's fatness which is the problem, or something else about these foodstuffs, which may do us harm.

"What people are really talking about when they get anxious about UPFs is, 'If I have that packet of Oreos in my house, I will eat the whole lot uncontrollably, and my children will, and they will get fat.' That is the underlying fear, that these foods make us feel out of control in a way that equates to fatness. I am fine with critiquing the food industry. But what I want to critique them for is the fact that they are actually selling us restriction. All of the marketing around ultra-processed foods is just the flipside of diet-culture marketing – indulgence. These large conglomerates own both diet brands and ultra-processed food brands, and they're selling the same thing – you have to restrict, you have to restrict, and then you have to be bad. And because we're caught in that web; that's why we feel out of control around these foods." Sole-Smith has two young daughters, and no food is restricted in her home. "And I can tell you, nobody is out of control around these foods in my house."

'We can reject the premise that our worth, as parents or as people, should be measured by our weight': Virginia Sole-Smith at home in Hudson Valley

That web makes it hard to determine which of our health concerns for ourselves or for our kids are worth having. "One good question is: 'Would you be worried about this if you or your kids were guaranteed to always be in a thin body?'" she asks me. "If weight was not part of the conversation and if you knew your child was guaranteed to stay in a thin body and would never experience anti-fat bias, would this be an anxiety? Often there's some degree of, 'Oh. Yeah, I wouldn't care as much,' which shows you that it's the bias driving the fear."

The UPF and obesity debate threatens to erode the gains made by body acceptance movements. We hide fat phobia behind concerns about health and dress it up still more by being concerned about what obesity might cost health services. And yet the government does not seem moved to do what would undoubtedly have a greater impact than any anti-obesity campaign ever has: to research the metabolic impact of UPFs, which may explain the relationship between ill health and diet better than size does; to better regulate the food industry; and to deal with structural inequality and our long-hours-low-pay, always-on hustle culture which makes so many people feel too busy or stressed to eat well.

As well as exhaustive myth-busting, Sole-Smith has a huge amount of practical advice for anyone caring for kids, much of which boils down to us accepting and then teaching them that bodies are all different and all worthy, and that being bigger is not a bad thing. She advocates for trusting children to choose what they eat, allowing them to live by their likes and dislikes, to choose when they've had enough, and to say no when they want to, so that they learn to know themselves and their bodies. That, of course, is challenging for anyone who a) grew up in the clean-your-plate era, and b) who believes their children would live on Haribo given the chance (she debunks the science of sugar highs, too).

Modern parenting – and adulting – is riddled with the idea of perfection. What made me cry, after finishing Sole-Smith's book, wasn't just the scale of what we've got wrong about food and bodies and children over the past 40 years, but also the feeling of hope. "We can make fat into just another body descriptor," she writes. "And we can make fat good. Because once we know that to be true, we have no reason to keep pursuing thin-ness at any cost. We can stop judging how our kids' bodies grow. We can reject the premise that our worth, as parents or as people, should be measured by our weight." What also made me cry was the idea that rather than fixating on how to feed my children perfectly, I might instead be able to make them feel safe inside their own skins, in a way I'm not sure I ever have. ■

Fat Talk: Coming of Age in Diet Culture by Virginia Sole-Smith is published by Ithaka at £16.99

Tobias Menzies has always relished a challenge, whether it's playing

'You never quite know if the cake's going to rise': Tobias Menzies wears shirt by Bode and trousers by Studio Nicholson (both matchesfashion.com). Shot at the Dorchester

Prince Philip; a New York therapist – or keeping up with Brad Pitt

‘I try to turn tricky things into gold’

Interview **TIM LEWIS**
Photographs **ZOE McCONNELL**
Stylist **HOPE LAWRIE**

As a child, the British actor Tobias Menzies was a talented junior tennis player. At the beginning of the Covid pandemic, he decided to see if he could get his game back. He joined his local club in north London and started hitting, mostly on his own with a machine firing balls at him, at least a couple of times a week: for the first six months, he only struck forehands; then he did a similar stint on his backhand. Two years on, Menzies has finally felt ready to contest matches, mainly against the club pro.

“When I started playing again, I thought, ‘OK, I’m going to do my 10,000 hours, I’m going to start again,’” says the 49-year-old Menzies, referring to the principle, popularised by the writer Malcolm Gladwell, that it takes that amount of time to achieve expertise in any field. “I’m monomaniacal, I get slightly obsessive. I don’t get bored by hitting forehands for six months, that’s just how my brain is.”

The methodical rigour and discipline that Menzies has applied to tennis seems very much to mirror his approach to his day job. He has been acting for 25 years now and there is a sense that he has been learning, taking notes and adjusting the whole time. He’s had some meaty roles, such as his big TV breakthrough as Brutus in the (saucy) BBC/HBO drama *Rome* in the mid-2000s, and his dual performances as the academic Frank Randall and his sadistic ancestor Black Jack Randall on the wildly popular time-travel series *Outlander* (also saucy).

But almost more impressive are the smaller parts in some of the finest series of recent times; how often Menzies backs the right horse: there he is as Edmure Tully in *Game of Thrones* or Sharon Horgan’s gynaecologist in *Catastrophe* or Aisling Bea’s gruff love interest in *This Way Up* or a villainous spook in *The Night Manager*.

And then, boom! One day, the 10,000 hours pays off. After the Netflix historical drama *The Crown* had run for two successful series, the show’s creator Peter Morgan was looking to recast the main characters for the next pair of installments. Olivia Colman signed on to be the Queen in middle age, with first Mark Strong, then Paul Bettany, lined up to play Prince Philip. But it fell through with those actors, and Menzies found himself in an audition room with Colman, reading 10 pages of a draft script. Two weeks later, he was offered the gig.

Did he have any hesitation in accepting? Menzies, who today wears a loose linen shirt and bookish specs, and is assiduously polite, but now looks, frankly, like the question is so stupid that it might be a joke. “No, I had an instinct that I could do something with Philip,” he replies, when we meet in a pub near where he lives. “Olivia was already onboard and I thought that was a very exciting thing to try and build that marriage with her. And I had admired the first two seasons, I liked the writing on it. So no, I wasn’t nervous about going into that. I was like, ‘I think this could be really good.’”

Menzies won an Emmy, and was nominated for a Golden Globe, for his portrayal of Philip. He’s never totally happy with any of his performances – that’s not his style – but the role is the closest that he has been to being not actively *un*happy. One episode in season three particularly stands out: it is 1969 and Philip becomes obsessed with Neil Armstrong and the Apollo 11 astronauts landing on the moon. There are long stretches without dialogue, the camera lingering on Menzies’s face as he makes the Prince almost child-like with wonder and envy. He’s smiling, but on the verge of tears: it’s obvious to the viewer – though not him – that Philip, a passionate and apparently talented pilot who had to leave the military after the Queen’s coronation, is experiencing some kind of existential crisis. It’s a masterclass in not overacting.

“That episode of the moon landings, I felt that got very close to something that I was really hoping to do with it,” says Menzies, as near as he’ll ever come to bragging. “So that was probably something I’m most proud of. I fully felt like I was in the right person’s hands in the right moment with that performance. You need a few things to come together at the same time, you need a bit of luck, sometimes. Even if you’re doing all the work to put yourself in a position, you never quite know if the cake’s going to rise.”

The Crown has been a game-changer for Menzies. We are meeting to discuss a new film, *You Hurt My Feelings*, directed by indie darling Nicole Holofcener, in which he stars opposite Julia Louis-Dreyfus. He’s about to spend the summer travelling the world with Brad Pitt shooting a Formula 1 film for Apple TV+ made by the team behind *Top Gun: Maverick* and produced by Lewis Hamilton (actors strike permitting). “The Emmy [for *The Crown*] was a big deal,” he says. “But the honest answer is, I can’t point to something and go, ‘Well, that led ›

NEW RECIPE

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› to that...' It's a bit more ephemeral than that. But overall, I get a sense that I'm having conversations with people a little earlier in the process now. You are entering the river further upstream."

So the work is great now, but the attention that goes along with it is not always entirely welcome for Menzies. He's quite enjoyed a career where, even if people do recognise him, it takes them long enough to work out where from that he's moved on and no exchange is required. "I'll put it like this: 'I quite like to watch the world and not have the world watch me,'" he says. "A big part of being an actor is behaviour. How do people exist in different situations? You get that from watching people. And obviously, if those people start watching you, that's a different thing."

Menzies was born in London: his father was a radio producer for the BBC; his mother was a drama teacher. They separated when he was six, and he moved with his mother and brother to Kent. He attended a Steiner school from the age of seven to 14, before going to an independent school in Surrey for his exams.

"I have a lot of time for the Steiner system," says Menzies. "The education is very broad and there's plenty of performance in it. Often as a class you will get up and recite a poem... so the idea of performance is less special. Everyone does it. And, funnily enough, when I left that system and went to, quote-unquote, a normal school, I actually didn't fall into the performance crowd there, because it was this separate thing that the drama lot did and I wasn't hugely in that crowd. So I only did one play while I was there."

Outside the classroom, though, his mother was schooling him in theatre, from big shows at the National to more avant-garde work by companies such as Complicité or Shared Experience. His original plan for when he finished school was to study mime at the Jacques LeCoq theatre school in Paris: "That's where all my heroes – all the Complicité lot, who were my gods – had all gone." But he couldn't raise the funds and ended up – not too shabbily – at Rada instead, where his classmates included Sally Hawkins and Maxine Peake.

After graduation, the work came and has continued. Why does he think that is? His first response is: "I'm competitive." But then he takes a moment and gives a more considered answer. "I feel quite porous as a person in my life," he says. "That can make me sometimes not the most definite in my opinion, because I'm often, like, 'Well, there's this side... But then, of course, there's that...' So that thing, which isn't very useful in life, is quite good for getting under the skin of people."

The skin Menzies has to get under in *You Hurt My Feelings* is Don, a New York therapist who seems to have a lot going for him. He has an affectionate relationship with his wife, a writer named Beth (played by Louis-Dreyfus) and they have a grown-up kid (Owen Teague) who manages a pot store, but writes plays on the side.

Slowly, however, the facade is chipped away. Don starts to suspect that his clients think he's doing a bad job (with some justification, as it turns out). He's neurotic about his appearance, fixated on the lines underneath his eyes. But *You Hurt My Feelings* really hinges on an awkward moment when Beth overhears Don describing her new book to a friend in somewhat tepid terms. As problems in the world go, it's the smallest of small beer, but the loss of trust has seismic implications for their relationship.

You Hurt My Feelings is a funny and thought-provoking film, and Menzies and Louis-Dreyfus make for a believable, winning couple. Menzies is also a very convincing therapist, something he puts down to his own time on the couch. "I've had lots of therapy in my own life," he says. "So it wasn't that hard to imagine myself into the room."

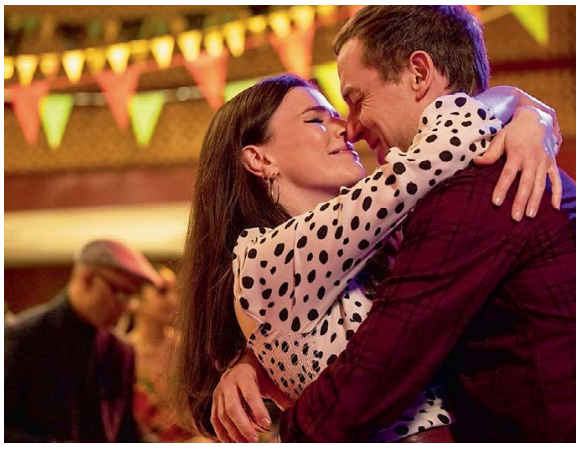
What benefit does Menzies find from therapy? "What do I want to say about that?" he replies, leaving a long pause. "It's been a real lifeline for me over the years, in the simplest terms, to navigate my life. To deal with the challenges that have come along. To have a neutral space in which I can, without fear of judgment and ridicule, articulate things I'm ashamed about or things that unsettle me or upset me. It has given me much higher levels of mental health and it's been a powerful resource in my life, for sure."

Work rarely comes up in the sessions. "No, that's not my experience," says Menzies. "A lot of the things I've taken to those rooms and worked on in those rooms have been my life and my personal life. My work life has been a pretty consistent and stable part of my life. It's often been more relational and family stuff.

"Some actors talk about losing themselves in roles," he goes on. "That's not something I've ever really struggled with. I've often been drawn to quite dark work, but I find it quite cathartic. I really enjoy taking things that might, in other bits of my life, feel burdensome or problematic... taking that lead and transforming it into gold."

There's a reason Menzies saves ›

'I've often been drawn to quite dark work, but I find it very cathartic'



Royal flush: (from top) in The Crown; in Outlander; in This Way Up with Aisling Bea; with Julia Louis-Dreyfus in You Hurt My Feelings; with Olivia Colman and Helena Bonham Carter

ALAMY; DAVE BENETT/WIREIMAGE

‘Therapy has been a real lifeline for me. It’s helped me navigate my life’

› discussion of his private life for his therapist and not, say, journalists from national newspapers. He never talks about a partner, nor is photographed with anyone at events. Menzies drops only crumbs about his life away from acting. He enjoys drinking wine, going to the theatre and riding his bicycle round the city. He spent ages renovating his flat, a Victorian terraced maisonette, and during the process he moved in with Helena Bonham Carter, his co-star on *The Crown*. Now he’s started fixing up the garden, growing salad leaves and tomatoes that he hopes won’t die when he goes off filming.

“I’m broadly speaking pretty publicity shy,” he says. “I like to have a private life. Celebrity can have a quite a substantial effect on what it is to watch that person. And that’s no fault of the person. But it’s just a part of the conversation. So the less that’s in the way, the more interesting.”

In *You Hurt My Feelings*, Don looks in the mirror and dislikes what he sees. How does Menzies feel? “God, that’s a really intimate question,” he says, blowing out his cheeks. “Depends. Sometimes I feel OK. And then other times I don’t like what I see. But there’s absolutely nothing to be done about it, is there really? Well, I mean, except plastic surgery, as the film suggests, I guess there’s that route.”

Menzies hasn’t gone there yet? “I haven’t,” he smiles, “and thus far, no intention.”

Considering that one of his recent stand-out performances portrayed a man on the verge of a midlife crisis – Menzies is pretty well the same age as Philip was when he watched the moon landings – the actor feels Zen about what the next few years hold. First off, there’s spending the summer with Brad Pitt. The film, which may be called *Apex*, follows Sonny Hayes (Pitt), an F1 driver who retired from the sport in the 1990s after a crash; Menzies plays an investor in the racing team who brings him back from the wilderness. They are shooting at five actual grands prix: they started at Silverstone for the British GP earlier this month, then Hungary, Monza in Italy, Abu Dhabi and Las Vegas. “So it’s a little bit guerrilla,” says Menzies.

He does, though, concede he’s more of a Wimbledon guy or ideally the French Open (“It’s so gladiatorial!”) than an F1 nut. “I don’t know a huge amount about it,” he admits, “so yeah, I’ve been binge watching *Drive to Survive* [the Netflix documentary] , trying to work out what’s going on.”

At the pub, Menzies rises to leave and then decides he’s going to stay and do some “head scratching”. It’s a very Menzies way to spend an afternoon, but at least his patient, thoughtful approach is paying off. “Acting has treated me well,” he says, after we decide that I’m going to leave, not him. “To be honest, I’m not sure I’m good for much else, so it’s lucky that this has worked out.” ■

You Hurt My Feelings is streaming on Prime Video from 25 July

Mellow yellow: sweatshirt by Folk (mrporter.com); trousers by Sefr (matches fashion.com); and trainers by vegastore.com. Shot at the Dorchester’s Vesper Bar

GROOMING BY MARIA COMPARETTO AT THE ONLY AGENCY USING TYPOLOGY; STYLIST DIGI OPERATOR NICK GRAHAM; STYLIST’S ASSISTANT CARISSA HARROD

'I love the rawness of life in the country. It speaks to those who are willing to listen': Kiran Sidhu

‘What’s a girl like me doing in a Welsh valley?’

Kiran Sidhu always thought of herself as a Londoner. But after her mum died, she moved to rural Wales in search of a new way of life. There she learned that feeling lost was the first step to finding herself

Photograph **FRANCESCA JONES**

It’s the time of year when the ewes are being separated from the lambs, when their cries and the guttural noise from their mothers can be heard across the valley, a natural amphitheatre for the soundtrack of their separation. Country sounds have become familiar to me; I swapped the city for the country four years ago. But this particular one, the separation of the lambs from their mothers, resonates more than any other. It is the sound of displacement. A sound that, one day, will belong to us all. I lost my 62-year-old mother to cancer in 2014; I’ve been drifting ever since.

The idea of being “found” holds so much importance. It seems our entire lives are dedicated to finding spaces we can nestle into until, ultimately, we find ourselves. A milieu that is familiar, a cave that reverberates our very own sound. Perhaps this is the natural way in life, to gravitate to the things we recognise: who wants to stand alone when there is safety in numbers? But I have discovered something. Standing alone and being lost is a place where many things can be found. Not enough is said about stumbling around in the dark.

Moving from London to rural Wales was a strange decision for someone who feels they belong in the city, London, a place where a person can feel as if they’re at the centre of the world. Walk down the street and you’ll hear a plethora of voices with varied accents. I’d often engage with those voices, in the conversations that weren’t meant for me: one can live vicariously in the city. But my life had changed rather dramatically, so I left what was once familiar.

Rural Wales couldn’t be further away from my hometown. My new abode: small, quiet, provincial and white. The lack of international cuisine made me think this was an unfriendly coded message that extended to me: not interested in the foreign. And yet, I had never seen myself as foreign. I’m British.

I wondered what a brown city girl like me was doing wandering around the Welsh valleys, the only Indian in the village. If someone saw me, would they think I was lost? In a way, I was. Bereavement, and all that goes with it – my family imploded when my mum died – made me feel I was no longer part of a family, as if I had lost my identity. So I navigated my way in a new directionless Welsh land, in its dark woods and forests.

I couldn’t help but acknowledge the difference in culture, landscape and skin colour: there was no one like me. I would be lying if I said I didn’t miss the diversity of London. In the city, I was one of many. Here I stood alone, a solitary figure, a ghost wandering the land. But this difference that so starkly set me apart allowed me to discover the “other” within me. Very few times in life do we find the other within ourselves. It allows us to hover around, drone-like, examining the contours of our very being. And in all this self-examining, I learned something: one can get stuck in one’s own identity. Brown. Female. Cosmopolitan. Likes cities.

I thought I needed a plethora of things, specific requirements that needed to be met in order for me to be me. And all these aspects that I identified with, viewing them as the essential furnishings of my being, worked like human scaffolding, keeping me together and giving me shape. We put a lot of emphasis on our identity and knowing ourselves, our likes and dislikes. For instance, I thought I always needed cafés to write in, art galleries and noisy bars full of interesting people. But I have realised that these assumptions can work against us. We become rigid, less free-flowing, stuck in the details of ourselves. There’s something freeing about placing ourselves in the unfamiliar, where we think we don’t belong, about casting aside the people we think we are. There’s freedom within it – it allows us to roam.

I wasn’t perturbed by the lack of diversity in the countryside. My lostness willed me to befriend it. My lack of identity, along with the human scaffolding I’d created around me, opened me up to life in a new way. I became an apprentice to the life skills of every person that I met. This led me to a discovery: there is diversity in the countryside, a diversity that, strangely, was lacking in my London life.

I thought my world would get smaller, but the opposite has happened

In the city, people who are alike stick together. In the countryside people are stuck together, whether they’re alike or not. Cities can be cliquey; having an abundance of people to choose from stops us from discovering those we think orbit different worlds. Instead we are drawn only to those with similar backgrounds and experiences. Here, I am friends with the people I simply share a valley with. I always thought I had an eclectic group of friends until I moved to Wales. I now socialise with people who share very few commonalities with me, if any. I am friends with a sound healer who mostly wears the colour purple; Tess, a gardener, who once rowed from Wales to Ireland; and a woman in her 70s whose life is filled with a *joie de vivre* that I’ve never felt so profoundly.

All these people have a wealth of life experience, but none that matches my own. The interest we have in each other comes from acknowledging our differences of age, race, sex and cultural environment. It’s not something that divides us. What binds us together, like an invisible thread, is the valley that we all live in. Friendships don’t have to stem from having a great affinity with each other, but can develop from a mutual curiosity, admiration and respect for one another. This quirky friendship group that I now lean on has highlighted something to me: how much we miss in life by sticking to what we already know. It’s a great misconception to think that because someone is so different from you, they’ll have nothing to teach you. Precisely because they are so different from you, they have everything to teach you: life can begin anew.

When I moved away from the cacophony of the city and slipped into the quietude of the countryside, I assumed that the piechart of my life would have fewer segments. I expected my world to become smaller. But I find the opposite has happened and my world has got bigger. My life is no longer dictated by train timetables. I mark time differently now. I notice that it’s time for the lambs to be born and for the cuckoo to arrive from Africa.

Work status is less important here. “What do you do?” is a city question. Instead, I know what people like to do and what they’re good at. I know Donna can upholster an old chair and can cook a better curry than me. We all exchange skills and know-how. Most people aren’t lucky enough to be in jobs that reflect who they are, so it’s a pointless question to ask if you want to get to know someone. Perhaps it would be better to ask someone about their passions.

I often get asked if I’d return to the city and whether the countryside is now home. If I’ve learned anything from life and from witnessing how a new season can be so transformative to a landscape, it’s that life is mercurial. It changes, and we change with it. What was once well-known can become foreign. We are never the people we once were. To say this is now my forever home would be to potentially stop future chapters in my life, to end an evolution. So, I say, it’s home for now. What I do know is that so much is said about being found, when there’s so much more to be said about being lost. How else would we tread unchartered terrain?

Have I found myself in Wales among the farm animals and people who don’t look like me? These days I care very little about being “found”. I have learned to embrace my lostness. The inevitable byproduct of any adventure is for us to change. These are transformative times. I haven’t found myself – but neither am I the black sheep. What I have found is that just because something’s different from you, it doesn’t mean it will always be estranged from you. I have come to love the rawness of life out in the country. It speaks to those who are willing to listen to it. And this, I have found, transcends race.

I feel like I am in a place of privilege living here as a person of colour. I am now someone looking out instead of in. There’s a hidden diversity in the countryside that you will only discover from living within it. ■

I Can Hear the Cuckoo: Life in the Wilds of Wales by Kiran Sidhu is published by Gaia at £16.99, or for £14.95 at guardianbookshop.com. Follow her on Twitter @KiranSidhu41

Food & drink
Nigel Slater

@NigelSlater

Fragrant herb-flecked rice and a gloriously fruity sundae

Photographs **JONATHAN LOVEKIN**

At the kitchen counter, chopping. The herbs' fragrance comes in waves. Verdant, fresh, invigorating. First there's parsley – mild, somehow the cool wake-up-call of mint. Now, dill, grass-green and watery.

All the herbs are in fat bunches, so my rice salad will be more herb than grain, in the ratio of a classic tabbouleh. I am tossing the rice with broad beans, too, while the fresh ones are still around, and tiny green peas.

Add this to the pan of warm and buttery rice, sending up occasional puffs of steam, like smoke from a tipi, rattling its lid with clouds of cardamom, clove, cinnamon and black pepper. There will be pistachios, too, rough, like gravel and perhaps a scattering of dried rose petals for no other reason than to bring yet another fragrant note.

The rice is to be served warm, together with a plate of aubergines, which have been sliced lengthwise, seasoned with dried thyme and smoked garlic and grilled, or lamb cutlets, a decision for later. There will be dessert of shimmering sundaes, made at the table with apricot-coloured melon, cherries and vanilla ice-cream.

There is a sweet ruby-coloured sauce already chilling in a bowl of ice: a tart purée of redcurrants and raspberries that is the very essence of summer. And yes, I made too much, purely so we can have some for breakfast.

Summer vegetable and herb rice

This is at its best when the rice is still warm and the herbs freshly chopped. Use edamame instead of the broad beans if the fancy takes you. *Serves 4*

For the rice:
butter 25g
basmati rice 150g
salt ½ tsp
cloves 4
black peppercorns 6
cinnamon stick ½
green cardamom pods 8

For the herbs and greens:
broad beans or edamame 400g, shelled weight
peas 300g, podded weight
spring onions 4
courgettes 2, medium
garlic 2 cloves
olive oil 2 tbsp
parsley leaves 20g
mint sprigs 15g
coriander leaves and stems 10g
dill 15g
pistachios 50g, shelled
dried rose petals a few pinches (optional)

Put the rice in a deep bowl, cover with warm water and swish the rice around with your fingers until the water is milky. Empty it off, then repeat with more water, once, maybe twice more, until it is almost clear.

Melt the butter in a medium-sized, deep pan over a moderate heat. Add the salt, cloves, peppercorns and cinnamon stick. Crack open the cardamom pods, but leave the seeds intact, then add to the pan. When the spices are warm and fragrant, drain the rice and stir into the spices until the rice is glossy with the butter. Cover with water to come a couple of centimetres above the rice, then bring to the boil. Cover tightly with a lid, lower the heat, and simmer for 10 minutes. Turn off the heat, but don't remove the lid.

Put a pan of water on to boil, salt lightly, then, when it comes to the boil, add the broad beans or edamame and the peas. Cook for 3 or 4 minutes until tender, drain and set aside. Meanwhile, finely chop the spring onions and roughly dice the courgettes. Peel and chop the garlic.

When the peas and beans are drained, dry the pan, return it to the heat and pour in the olive oil. Add the spring onions, ›

Freshen up: summer vegetable and herb rice and, facing page, peach, raspberry and redcurrant sundae

Classified

A ruby-coloured sauce is already chilling in a bowl of ice: a purée that is the very essence of summer

› courgette and garlic and cook for 5 or 6 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the cut sides are gold, then remove from the heat. While the courgettes cook, roughly chop the pistachios.

Finely chop the parsley, mint leaves and coriander. Mix the herbs, pistachios, spring onion and courgettes, beans and peas together. If you wish, scatter in a few dried rose petals.

Peach, raspberry and redcurrant sundae

The raspberry and redcurrant sauce is thickened with blackcurrant jam, but you could use apricot jam or redcurrant jelly. The sauce thickens slightly on cooling. Sweeten it once cooled with a little icing sugar if you wish. *Serves 4*

For the sauce:
redcurrants 125g
raspberries 125g
blackcurrant jam 2 tbsp
water 4 tbsp
caster sugar 2 tbsp

The fruit:
ripe cantaloupe melon 750g, with skin on
vanilla ice-cream 4 scoops
cherries 12
raspberries 16
peaches 2

To finish:
redcurrants a few sprigs

Make the sauce: remove the redcurrants from their stalks and put the fruit in a small pan. Add the raspberries, jam, water and sugar and bring almost to the boil. As soon as the sugar has dissolved, transfer to a blender and process to a purée.

Chill the sauce in the fridge for an hour, or by transferring it to a bowl over ice.

Remove the seeds from the melon, then scoop the flesh into balls with an ice-cream scoop or a spoon. Divide between 4 sundae glasses. Add a scoop of ice-cream to each glass. Stone the cherries, then add them, with the raspberries to the sauce. Halve the peaches, discard the stones, slice each half into 4 and add to the sauce.

Spoon the sauce and fruit over the ice-cream and melon. Add sprigs of redcurrants if you wish. Eat immediately. ■

Nigel's midweek dinner

Black-eyed bean and tomato quesadillas

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

To make the filling chop 3 **spring onions**, then cook them in a little **oil** in a shallow pan until soft. Drain and roughly chop the **grilled red peppers** from a 350g bottle, then add them to the pan. When the peppers are warm, peel 3 cloves of **garlic** and crush them to a paste, then stir into the peppers.

Roughly chop a 400g can of **tomatoes** and stir them into the peppers and leave to simmer for 10-15 minutes, with the occasional stir, until they have softened into a rough sauce. Drain a 400g can of **black-eyed** or **haricot beans** and add them to the onions and peppers.

Roughly chop a good handful of both **basil** and **coriander leaves** (you will need 2 heaped tbsp of each) and stir them into the sauce with both salt and black pepper.

Make a quick salsa by chopping together a medium-sized **avocado**, 250g of **cherry tomatoes** and 100g of **cucumber**. Finely chop and add a couple of small **hot chillies**. Season with the juice of a **lime** and 2 tbsp of finely chopped **chives**.

Place a large **tortilla** on a nonstick frying pan, then spread the bean and tomato filling over. Scatter 100g of finely grated **manchego**, or other semi-hard cheese, over the top and place a second tortilla on top.

Cook over a low to medium heat, pressing the tortilla down from time to time, until the base is crisp and golden. Turn the tortilla over and cook the other side. *Enough for 2*

● Use corn tortillas if you can. The result will be crisp, though the wheat flour versions are fine if that is all you can get.
● I think it is a mistake to make the filling too thick. Apart from anything else, stuffing them too thickly makes them difficult to eat.
● In our house we always bring out a tub of soured cream to go with them. ■

Food & drink
Jay Rayner

Critic of the year @jayrayner1

A railway arch close to the Thames is home to terrific oysters and a smart take on great seafood

Sharkbait & Swim
Arch 11, 4 Deptford Market Yard, London SE8 4BX (email info@sharkbaitandswim.com for bookings)
Small and large plates **£4.50–£22**
Wine **from £26 a bottle**

Oyster lovers travel hopefully. It's not that we think we'll always be the ones to dodge the "bad" oyster. We don't fret about the bad oyster at all. That's a paranoia for oyster agnostics, for the ones who think they ought to like them, but will quietly admit they are suspicious of the proposition. Our hope is that we'll encounter not just the good oyster, but the better oyster and perhaps even the very best, for not all oysters are made equal. Some deliver that invigorating hit of saline and briskness, but lack body. Others are more substantial, but a touch one-note.

And then there are oysters like those served to me at Sharkbait & Swim, a restless, mildly eccentric seafood restaurant in the Deptford Market Yard development by Deptford overground station in southeast London. They are rocks, of course, for there is currently no R in the month and the natives are out of season. That doesn't make them second-class citizens. These rocks are plump and pert. Along with the slap of brine and roaring surf comes a profound creaminess and sea urchin funk. My reference point for these is the superb pearly specimens I have eaten at the Acme Oyster House in New Orleans, where men with forearms like hams keep them coming across the bar all night, with only Tabasco for company. That is high praise indeed.

Here they cost £2.80 each, or £15 for six, a good price for anywhere within the M25, and most places outside it for that matter. They arrive with a plastic aerosol of whisky, which we are invited to spritz over the top, followed by a squeeze of lemon. I am not sure about the whisky thing; it feels like an affectation – until I try it and begin to wonder whether a dab behind the ears wouldn't go amiss, too. It would surely attract all the right people. The oyster is lent the airiest touch of sweetness, which is then saved from itself by the squirt of lemon.

For £3.20 each you can also have them haute couture-dressed: with the citrus burst of, say, ponzu, ginger and coriander, or the seafood-enhancing Thai fish sauce-wonder that is nam jim jaew. These oysters are more than capable of holding their own and, indeed, being helped along by these big flavours. It's a serious opener. After dinner, as dusk falls, chef owner Steve McClarty tells us the oysters are Colchesters, which adds a sweet historical resonance. In the 19th century, at the height of London's dizzying oyster cult, barges full of them would steam down from Colchester, turn right at Southend and go up the Thames estuary to deliver their cargo to an eager city. Our slightly rickety chairs out here on the cobbled yard are only a few hundred metres from the Thames. It is the kind of historical resonance, the whispers and echoes of the past, that old cities are so good at.

These rocks are plump and pert. Along with the slap of brine and roaring surf comes a profound creaminess and sea urchin funk

Underneath the arches: (from left) rock oysters; the dining room; chilli whitebait with garlic aioli; ox cheek and miso croquettes; sea bream and chips; and grilled mackerel

Sharkbait & Swim occupies a red-brick railway arch amid a clutch of restaurants, including an izakaya and a jerk place. There's an open kitchen in the arch that, in winter, can seat around 20 at high-top tables, as long as diners don't mind a bit of armpit and elbow intimacy. As a result, they depend on summer, when seating outside means they can double their covers. Certainly, the current menu is tailored to the warmer season. The list of small plates, mostly priced at between £10 and £12, feels very now. Fat cubes of trout ceviche arrive in a dazzling piece of blue glazed ceramic, swimming in a chilled, heady broth of yuzu and soy. For texture, there are big puffed grains of rice, like larvae. There are lightly bitter deep purple leaves and a scattering of peppery spice.

Big, oily fillets of mackerel have been grilled until the skin is blackened and blistered. There is a sweet tomato

and butter sauce and the bosky green of herb oil. Deep-fried whitebait, and sizeable specimens at that, have a chilli-boosted golden crumb of such rough heft, you can hear them rub against each other when you shake the plate. There is a pot of soft-peaked garlic aioli on the side, to lubricate everything. The most expensive dish, at £22, is a whole sea bream, lightly battered and deep fried, so it's starting to curl in on itself, then pelted with what seems to be togarashi spice. This corner of southeast London has a fine collection of very good Vietnamese restaurants, where whole fish treated like this is a part of the deal. They don't, however, generally come with a pile of chips underneath. Ah, hello carbs my old friend. We could do with a bit of that right now. We pull at the fish with our grease-slicked fingers, as if we're excavating.

The special tonight is ox cheek and miso croquettes, with a softly warming jalapeño jam. They look terrific: round, sturdy and golden. They also win on big meaty and umami flavours. But something has gone a little awry with the bechamel. When I cut in, the filling flows out across the plate like the plumbing has failed. I give thanks that I didn't just pick one up with my fingers and bite in, or I'd probably be combing oxtail goo out of my beard to this day. I'm aware this is not an image anybody needs. There is no sweet offering save a mercifully short "dessert booze" list, including limoncello, the Toilet Duck of the booze world, and various milk and dark chocolate liqueurs, which might seem like a good idea at the time and really aren't. The wine list is perfunctory, but they'll mix you a sticky cocktail. Service, by just one person juggling tables, is on point.

Deptford right now is feeling the hot, steamy flush of new money. Older businesses remain, but you're also never far away from a bar eager to sell you a natural wine smelling of arse or a coffee that's a classy tribute to carbonic maceration. Some might now be moved to sing the gloomy ballad of gentrification. Before you hit the chorus, let alone the second verse, know this. Steve McClarty has worked as a chef for Google and alongside Jason Atherton on television. But when he was 17, he was homeless. He kept himself going in hostels by watching YouTube cooking videos, then cooking for his fellow residents. Eventually, he enrolled himself in catering college. Which brought him here. If you begrudge him this delightful small restaurant, perhaps you're really not quite as enlightened as you think you are. ■

Wines of the week

The International Wine Challenge's pick of bottles from Tesco – and other winners. *By David Williams*

Tesco Finest Puemo Carmenère
Chile 2020
£8, Tesco

Tesco isn't one of those companies that people tend to love. For most of us, most of the time, it's simply there, a place we use almost without thinking. But when it does arouse strong feelings, they tend to be negative: as the UK's largest supermarket chain it is inevitably the focus for critiques of the efficiency, equitability and environmental sustainability of the UK's food system. But it's also had a justified reputation for ruthlessness. Over the years, the company's wine range has tended to fit right in with this tale of meh and occasional woe. More recently, however, it's emerged as one of the more interesting and reliable of the big retailers, with wines such as this excellent, smoothly textured, subtly herbal Chilean red.

@Daveydaibach

Tesco Finest Western Australian Sauvignon Semillon
Australia, 2022
£8, Tesco

Earlier this month, Tesco earned a rare double at the International Wine Challenge, where it was awarded both Supermarket of the Year and Own-Label Range of the Year. Does that mean I'd prefer to do my wine shopping in Tesco rather than places with bigger vinous reputations, such as Waitrose and Marks & Spencer? Not necessarily. I find the peaks at both rivals a little more exciting. But the prize does reflect the number of good value wines, notably those in the Finest brand. Among my favourites: a pair of racy whites from Western Australian producer Howard Park: the Sauvignon Semillon and Tingleup Riesling 2022 (£10); and two textbook Riojas from Baron de Ley: the richly fruited Tesco Finest Rioja Blanco 2022 and the mellow Tesco Finest Rioja Reserva (both £9).

Tesco Finest English Sparkling
England, NV
£21, Tesco

Another Tesco highlight is the incisive English fizz made for the Finest range by Kent producer Balfour Winery, which also happens to make the delightful berry-scented Irresistible Eight Acres Sparkling Rosé NV (£19.50) for another supermarket favoured with an award by the IWC, The Co-op. That award, the Unsung Multiple Specialist of the Year, is a nod to their commitment to selling Fairtrade wines. Other retailers singled out included Unsung Independent Specialist of the Year, Novel Wines (a great place to seek out unusual wines), Naked Wines (Wine Club of the Year), The Wine Society (Online Retailer of the Year), Lea & Sandeman (French Specialist of the Year), Vineyards of Sherborne (Single Site Retailer of the Year) and Cambridge Wine Merchants (Small Multiple Retailer of the Year).

Notes on chocolate

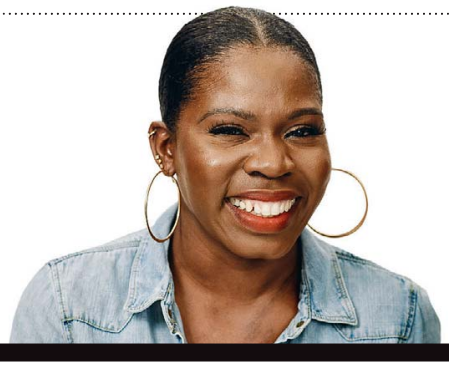
Bars to savour if summer rain ruins plans. *By Annalisa Barbieri*

As I write, the heat has turned to chill and I've had to find my socks again. One of the things I envy in US romcoms set in certain climes, is the ability to leave outdoor furniture cushions outside with absolute certainty that they won't get rained on – and being able to plan outdoor gatherings without contingent measures for rain.

So I made a rather delicious chocolate cake using ground almonds, dates and chocolate using **Willie's** 70% Chef's Drops, £29.50/1kg, with its notes of 'raisins and plums', which went well with cream and strawberries and afternoon films. I rewatched *Silence of the Lambs* with my eldest and shouted myself hoarse for Clarice to call for back up and not go down to the cellar.

This week was also about discovering a brand I've been meaning to for ages: **Green Door** from Bath in Somerset. They do make the chocolate – just a few bars – behind a green door, but this is coincidental. The packaging is gorgeous and eco. The two bars I tasted (72% from Madagascar and a 55% dark milk from Colombia, £6.50/70g) I would describe as 'lively'. This isn't chocolate to shovel into your mouth with no thought (as if any of you would do this). Each bar gives the impression of being meticulously thought about and laboured over: craft chocolate in all senses (as such stocks come and go). The milk was particularly satisfying with an initial bright bite that gave way to a deep milk powder finish. I loved the 68% Salted Pistachio, £6/55g, a punchy little treat to savour, as I watched the rain fall on to my washing, giving it a final rinse.

Beauty
Funmi Fetto



@FunmiFetto

A good shape is the key rule for eyebrows

I don't believe in rules, but when it comes to brows, rules are not such a bad thing. First, shape is everything: whether you choose to thread or wax, they should follow the line of your brow bone. A half moon suits no one. Second, don't pluck. If in doubt just leave them alone to do what they do and seal with a decent brow gel. Finally, always remember, jet-black brows are never a good look. ■

1. BBB Brow and Eye Mask £10 (for pack of 3), bbb-london.com **2. Makeup by Mario Master Hold Brow Gel** £23, sephora.co.uk **3. Glossier Brow Boy** £18, glossier.com **4. Chanel Dual Ended Brow Brush** £34, chanel.com **5. Milk Make Up Kush Brow Lamination Gel** £22, spacenk.com

On my radar

Nourishing skin care to make you glow and shine

Rise and shine
Looking for a highlighter that gives you a glow while real skin shines through? This brightening and sheer complexion enhancer will not disappoint. ***Westman Atelier Super Loaded Liquid Highlight, £53, westman-atelier.com***

Cheeky number
The pigment-rich blushes by beauty writer Ateh Jewel are vegan, cruelty-free and include jojoba and squalane – all of which leaves you with a super-hydrating hit of colour. ***Ateh Jewel Blushers, £25, ateh jewel beauty.com***

Milk and honey
Celebrity beauty is rarely of interest to me, but Hailey Bieber's milky essence delivers such intense nourishment to the skin, you can't help but pay attention. ***Rhode Glazing Milk, £29, rhodeskin.com***

I can't do without...

A floral cologne that transports you to Rio's beaches

Granado Epoque Tropical
£110 liberty london.com

In the beauty industry, when we think about cool pharmacy brands we immediately think 'French' (sorry Boots). French pharmacies have earned a reputation as the place to discover lots of fabulous homegrown brands. These little-known products do amazing things to your skin and you'd be hard pushed to find many outside France. But the country is not the only place with fancy pharmacies and beauty delights worth spending money on. I was in Brazil earlier this year and ventured into Granado – a chain of apothecaries that has been in the country since 1870 and was the official pharmacy of the Brazilian Royal family. It is a paean to beauty and a treasured part of Brazilian heritage. You can get shampoos, fragrances, body care, lip care and candles. And it smells, feels and looks glorious. It was a lesson in elevating the everyday and I had to get myself an extra bag to bring back my haul. The bad news is that most of the products are not available here in the UK – for now. The good news is that the fragrance line – from eau de colognes to eau de parfums – is at Liberty. If you are looking for something unexpected for summer, Epoque Tropical, which I can't get enough of, is a wonderful woody but fresh cologne that immediately transports you to the tropical landscape of Rio.

MATTEO VALLE/SPOTLIGHT

Shore things

Vibrant colours, natural pearls and shells for beach-ready jewellery. Just add sun, sea and sand

Edited by **ROZ DONOGHUE**

Pearl anklet £40, ohso delicates.com

Gold shell ring £49, daisyjewellery.com

Gold fish earrings £70, bimbay lola.com

Lilac ring £68, mejuri.com

Eye necklace £65, talischains.co.uk

Gold drop earrings £148, wander lustlife.co.uk

Charm necklace £165, Ian Charms (selfridges.com)

Pearl and bead earrings £55, ottoman hands.com

Resin bangle £30, anthropologie.com

Shell earrings £92.50, tadaand toy.com

Nazar necklace £210, Crystal Haze (matches fashion.com)

Pearl and shell necklace £120, byalona.com

Beaded hoops £29, mintvelvet.co.uk

Letting in the light

Colour and pattern vie for attention in the cheerful Finnish home of an artist

Words **NELL CARD** *Photographs* **KRISTA KELTANEN**

Looking forward: Laura Annala in her studio. She became an artist after brain cancer led to a career change. Left: the multi-coloured living room and black kitchen

Ten years ago, when Laura Annala was house-hunting in her hometown of Lapua, southwest Finland, there was one property that kept resurfacing. "It was a detached, yellow-brick bungalow built in the 1980s," Annala recalls. "It had low ceilings so it wasn't very bright inside and the rooms were either painted brown or covered in flowery wallpaper. It was really uninspiring." For two months, she scrolled past the listing until one day her father decided to get on his bicycle and take a closer look.

He found the house was surrounded by a mature garden, thick with flowers and trees. The location was also ideal – it was opposite the local school and Annala and her husband, Jussi, were hoping soon to start a family. It was also "really cheap", which meant they would have enough money left over to renovate the tired interiors. At the time, Annala, a hair stylist, was starting her own business. She had spent the previous decade living in Helsinki, Tampere and the Netherlands, where she had met Jussi. Now, she was hoping to open her own salon in Lapua. A budget-friendly, three-bedroom bungalow started to make sense.

"We signed the contract and two days later Jussi got seconded for three months 800 miles away in the north of Finland," Annala says. Luckily, her father – who she describes as "an all-over handyman" – helped with the renovation. They dismantled a wall of cabinets that separated the kitchen from the living room, peeled off reams of wallpaper and replaced the bathroom tiles. Laminate floors were laid throughout. The walls and ceilings were painted either white or black.

Initially, the clean, monochrome scheme suited them. The couple went on to have a boy, Frans, and Annala continued to make a success of her new salon. Then, at the age of 32, when Frans was just a toddler, Annala was diagnosed with brain cancer. Her surgery and subsequent treatment left her with brain damage and chronic migraines.

"I couldn't do hairdressing any more," she explains. "I had to give up my career, my salon – everything. Of course it's been heavy," she says. "But I'm not too sad, because I started to paint."

Drawing was something Annala had always done, but she didn't have the confidence to pursue art as a career. "I just didn't have the courage to try," she reflects. Gradually, as Annala recovered from surgery and learned to live with her condition, she rediscovered her "long-lost calling" ›

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Going green: (from left) powder blue walls and a shelving unit in the sitting room; the counter in the kitchen is made of recycled plastic; the bedroom with an art quilt; and Annala's artwork in the living room and hallway

› and found it to be "the best therapy". Her moving, multi-coloured canvases began to fill their monochrome home.

Soon, Annala's sister asked her to design a small range of fabrics for the family's textile company. Annala's Colour Me Happy collection launched last year and includes blankets, curtains, cushions and fabrics in clashing, acidic colours from tangerine and turquoise to sky blue and lipstick pink. These, too, found their way into Annala's bungalow. "I realised that my art and my textiles are both made of strong colours, but at home the black wall surfaces started to haunt me," she says. "About a year ago, I decided to paint everything again. Now it makes much more sense."

In the living room, the main wall went from black to powder blue. A vintage bookcase by the Finnish company, Lundia, rests against it. "Growing up, we had a similar piece in my parents' house, so it feels like we've always had it." The couple's existing sofa was recovered in one of Annala's own geometric fabrics and paired with a matching armchair. Where there is white wall space, Annala has hung one of her most recent works – a vibrant dreamscape of tumbling fruit, flowers and mythical beasts.

Many of the smaller pieces of furniture and accessories have come from Annala's grandmother, "an artist and really stylish lady" who now lives in a care home. The ornate coffee table and kitchen chandelier were both hers, as was the gilt mirror in the main bedroom. "The inspiration for our bedroom was the actor Salma Hayek," says Annala. "I wanted it to be hot and spicy and warm!" On the bed is one of her own designs – a quilted blanket that blares: "Life is lemonade."

In the kitchen, Annala has replaced the wooden countertop with a bottle-green surface made from recycled plastics. "It has completely transformed the look of the kitchen," says Annala. The splashback was also replaced with blingy tiles. The rest of the kitchen is original 1980s, albeit with a lick of black paint.

'I realised that my art and my textiles are both made of strong colours, but at home the black wall surfaces started to haunt me'

Annala now has a large studio in the centre of Lapua, but she has also created space for her practice at home. This corner of the house is warmed by a brick fireplace complete with Iron Maiden poster – a treasured gift from a friend in the Netherlands. The walls have been hung with paint-splattered wallpaper to hide any of the mess she might be making.

The hallway is home to two of Annala's most precious pieces: a red and pink canvas painted at the time of her illness, and a work that depicts three jellyfish-like creatures. "It's one of my first works," she explains. "I sold it to a friend years ago, but when the opportunity arose for me to buy it back, I didn't hesitate. I feel that the three figures represent our family."

In its new guise, Annala's joyful, art-filled home is a magnet for Frans's friends, who pile in after school to stare at the walls. "They come over and say, 'Wow! Your mum is really an artist!' For Frans, now seven, it's normal. He has only ever known me as a painter. But for me, I can't really believe that I'm at this point. I'm still amazed." ■

lauraannala.com

The Wight stuff

Queen Victoria's summer retreat, the Isle of Wight is a haven for visitors in search of simple seaside delights

Words **GENEVIEVE FOX**

Perfectly placed: Ventnor on the south side of the island has glorious views straight out to sea

If picturesque cycling, coastal walks and simple seaside pleasures float your boat, make the Isle of Wight your first port of call. Home to Queen Victoria's summer retreat, Osborne House, the island has 20 beaches and a series of unspoilt coves. A network of cycle and walking trails covers 17 miles of coastline and countryside. Famous for the Cowes sailing regatta in July and August, the 147-square-mile island also offers every water sport going, from kayak surfing and windsurfing to paddle-boarding and parasailing.

We explored by bike, our wheels borrowed from Foresters Hall, an impeccable, 14-bedroom Grade II-listed boutique hotel. Situated on a cobbled street in Cowes old town, Foresters is a five-minute walk from the Red Jet terminal – the journey to East Cowes from Southampton Quay takes 28 minutes.

The bike rack sits in the hotel courtyard, which leads past the lovely dining terrace to a small herb garden. Beyond, a white picket fence surrounds a small salt-water swimming pool, abutted by the Garden Suites building. A 3D mural by Joe Hill of 3D Joe and Max overlooks the pool, a swimmer looking as though he has just dived off the painted balcony.

Keen swimmers might like Room 11, which is next to the pool in the Garden Suite. For sea views and a bit of cinematic stardust, go for Room 12. Hotel owners Sara Curran and Peter Sussman, originally from Dublin and Toronto respectively, call it the Judi Dench suite. The star stayed in it during the filming of *Victoria & Abdul*, which was filmed at Osborne House.

On our second day, after a fortifying Foresters breakfast of Eggs Arnold Bennett, we took the four-mile wooded Cowes-to-Newport cycling trail that runs parallel to the River Medina. At Newport, we headed south to Carisbrooke Castle, where King Charles I was imprisoned, one escape attempt foiled when he got his head stuck in the window bars.

Carisbrooke is also the starting point for the Tennyson Trail, which ends up at the Needles on the island's most westerly point. We cycled the very short distance to the charming village of Shorwell for a veggie roast lunch at the Crown Inn instead. This route is more hilly than some might like – unless you are a cycling fiend, in which case you'd probably be on the Chalk Ridge Extreme anyway, a 50-mile route of steep gradients and cliff-top trails of which the Tennyson Trail is a part.

We had earned our pre-dinner cocktails, taken in the luxe Foresters bar, a striking blue room showcasing the couple's art collection – including a portrait of a woman in a colourful robe, a signature motif of American artist Jim Dine. There's also an Annie Leibovitz portrait in the ladies' loo and paintings by

Alex Katz, one of Peter's favourite artists, throughout the hotel.

First-time hoteliers Sara and Peter met working in film and TV. They opened Foresters Hall in 2022. "Our desire was to have this place not just as a hotel but as a place of culture – and for conversations about art," says Peter. "We want to share our love of art and design with whoever comes through our doors."

The adjacent library is stocked with the couple's books on art and wine, continuing the hotel's arts club aesthetic. The Brasserie by Smoking Lobster, the hotel's Mediterranean-influenced restaurant, serves not only very good fish dishes, but, unusually, really good wine by the glass, supplied locally by Wine Therapy.

There was more fresh fish on offer at Steephill Cove, a gem of an old fishing cove a 20-minute walk from Ventnor, a Victorian resort with vintage beach huts on the south side of the island.

The Crab Shed in Steephill Cove was serving fresh crab pasties and the Beach Shack next door fresh crab sandwiches. If we'd come with swimming kit, we'd have taken a sea kayak out, supplied by Cove Kayaks. As it was, we sat in the sunshine, watching a Labrador swimming in the sea, and felt the joy of simple seaside pleasures. ■

Foresters Hall (forestershall.com). Double rooms from £295 a night B&B

Plain sailing: (clockwise from above) Cowes, home of the famous regatta; Osborne House, Queen Victoria's summer retreat; 3D artwork at the pool at Foresters Hall

JASON SWAIN/GETTY IMAGES; ALAMY; GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

Sunshine and reign

Three places to stay in Victorian seaside resorts

Selina, Brighton
Hove was once the demure cousin to snazzy Brighton; a stay at Selina Brighton, a trendy hostel-cum-hotel in Hove itself, gives you the best of both vibes. Selina, which combines stylish, multipriced accommodation and co-working spaces, works a funky aesthetic with this hip Hove outpost, a stone's throw from the skeletal West Pier. *Rooms from £53 a night, selina.com*

Grand Hotel, Tynemouth
Tynemouth's golden Longsands Beach is beloved of surfers, sandcastle-makers and sun worshippers. Overlooked by Tynemouth Priory and Castle, there's an aquarium, crazy golf and a breakwater pier. But no Victorian seaside resort is worth its salt without a Grand Hotel;

Tynemouth's is suitably old-school elegant, with views of the beach from 14 of the 47 bedrooms. *Rooms from £90 a night B&B, grandhotelynemouth.co.uk*

The Sail Loft, Southwold
It's about a mile's walk along Southwold beach to the Sail Loft, a former sail-making warehouse. Set on the Blyth estuary, with several fresh fish shacks with tables nearby, this restaurant-with-rooms is a tranquil

haven compared to the bustle of Southwold itself, with its fabulous pier, pubs and pebble beach. *Rooms from £180 a night B&B, sailloftsouthwold.co.uk*

Photograph **GARETH IWAN JONES**

I travelled across America to discover my mother's secrets – and instead found that I have my own

Words **MARISA BATE**

'I came across a version of my mother I'd never seen before': Marisa Bate with her mum, Jacqui, in her garden

When my mum handed me the notebook, I was excited. It was from a trip she'd taken in the 1970s, visiting her aunt in Omaha, Nebraska. I had just done the exact same trip – a flight to New York City, then a Greyhound bus across the Midwest. I had made this trip to research the ebb and flow of women's rights over a generation, but also to understand my mother better, and to tell the story of both in a book. This, therefore, was primary source gold: her private thoughts of that moment in time, perfectly preserved from nearly half a century ago.

Or at least some of them were. Because when I took the thin yellow pad in my hands, the faded paper covered in her unmistakable scrawl, I began to notice something. Pages had been removed. Some had parts missing, neatly cut off, as if folded along the line of a ruler and defiantly torn away. It had been redacted by my mother, like a document of national security, and forced into the light by a freedom of information request, by me, her daughter.

Mining for details of my mother's life, and finding myself on a Greyhound bus crossing Middle America recreating her trip, all started with a tiny square Polaroid. When I was growing up, an old wooden school desk sat in the corner of our living room filled to the brim with family photographs, some in paper packets, others loose. It was like a memory lucky dip. I'd root around and pull something out – a birthday, a first day at school, a hot afternoon in the garden. I was looking for evidence of my father, proof he'd been there before he left when I was a baby. But in searching for him, I came across a version of my mother I'd never seen before.

It's 1974, she's 22 and standing on the shores of Lake Michigan, wearing denim hotpants, a brown, cropped halter neck, and a smile as dazzling as the waters behind her. The mother I had watched as a child was an exhausted single parent, battling a demanding job, a three-hour round commute, and a particularly unpredictable Citroën 2CV. The young woman in the picture radiated hope and possibility, illuminated by the potential of everything that might happen, everything she might be.

I wanted to learn who this young woman was and how she became the mother I knew and loved so fiercely. The timing was not insignificant, either: our trips bookend abortion rights in America. My mum made her journey the year after Roe v Wade, the constitutional right to abortion, came into law. I travelled on the eve of the repeal of Roe, almost 50 years later. The hope that saturated the Polaroid undoubtedly filled the air of the moment she was in – something terrifyingly absent as I began my journey into an America still feeling the shockwaves of a Trump administration.

Seven states, six weeks, 1,300 miles and innumerable highways lined with corn fields later, I came to realise that all the clues to the young woman I was looking for had been in front of me all along. My mum's spirit for adventure, the one that led her to Nebraska, took us on night trains through the Alps and long drives down to the south of France as children. Her determination to see a world far bigger than her own was there when she'd leave work, collect my brother and I from our home in Surrey and drive us into Brixton to attend meetings (as part of her job) between the community and police, ensuring we understood life far outside our Home Counties bubble. Her hopeful belief in all that could be was there when she pleaded with my brother and I to follow our passions at university. Life hadn't transformed her into someone else as I'd mistakenly assumed – everything in that Polaroid had stayed with her. And she had been trying to pass it on to us.

Pages of her notebook had been removed, defiantly torn away

Yet if my trip reaffirmed what I already knew of my mother, a journey of discovery still took place – one of self-discovery. Because I hadn't realised that by asking "Who are you?" as a daughter to a mother, I was actually asking, "Who are you, and therefore, who am I?"

The trip became an exercise in understanding all that I could be, as much as it was an understanding of all my mum was. Taking a bus halfway across America, stopping off in big Midwestern cities and interviewing women about their work to protect their freedoms, revealed a side of myself I wasn't always convinced was there. It was a version of me I thought only existed in late-night conversations where I'd whisper ambitions after a few glasses of wine dared me to.

"You're braver than you realise," my partner told me as we had said goodbye at Heathrow. As the weeks rolled by, I started to believe him. I took all the hope and possibility of the young woman in the photo and used it to catapult myself into a string of life-affirming experiences: visiting a blues bar in Chicago and talking to the band until 1am; meeting old timers in dive bars in Indianapolis; speaking to young girls at a pro-abortion rally in St Louis; sitting on the porch of a 70-something who performed illegal abortions in the days before Roe. It was not lost on me that the most exciting thing I'd ever

done, and the most ambitious and rigorous journalistic project I have ever undertaken, was because of my mum. In the pursuit of her, I finally found the courage to chase my own dreams.

A few months after I got home, I discovered I was pregnant. It was around this time she showed me the faded notebook from her trip, and the state secrets withheld from me. At first I was taken aback and mildly offended. What was she hiding? But in time, as the days of motherhood turned into weeks, and then months, I began to understand the redacted notebook in a new way.

I began to realise there are some stories I won't want my son to know, partly because they serve no purpose or are too embarrassing or shameful but, more importantly, because they are mine. In the baptism of fire that was looking after a newborn, I watched my sense of self disappear – sandcastle walls crumbling at the relentless tide of giving everything I am and have to keep a baby alive. In order to fortify ourselves, of course we must keep things only for us. Of course our children can't know all of us. Of course there is more to my mother than her motherhood, as there is more to me than mine, and I started to wonder if my journey into my mother's past felt something closer to trespassing.

To fortify ourselves, of course we must keep things only for us

And so in time I came to see the notebook not as the absence of something, but the fulfilment. As much as I realised a braver and bolder version of myself because of my mother, when she handed me the notebook I understood, perhaps for the first time, the limitations of the stories we can know about ourselves if we're looking for them through the lens of our parents. And this, unexpectedly, completed my trip. Her independence from me proved she is much more than just my mother, that her life is far bigger than my understanding of it. I was, at last, recognising her beyond her relationship to me. Did this mean I'd finally grown up?

My journey across the Midwest only took me so far in terms of what it could tell me about the woman in the Polaroid, but because of that young woman I went out in the world and had the adventure of a lifetime. And I came home convinced adventures were, after all, for me, too. Now, as a mother, I wish that same belief for my son. I want him to know he comes from women who believe the world is big and needs to be explored, that journeys for one on Greyhound buses are good for the soul, that unusual paths are the ones worth taking, and great and important stories are worth chasing and telling. I hope I can pass down courage the way my mum did, by showing, not telling. And I hope I live my life in such a way that it encourages him to live his – full of ambition and curiosity. Just as my mum has done for me.

Our parents might be mirrors to stare at compulsively, searching for explanation and understanding, or ones we avoid because they are too painful. But we need to remember those mirrors are distorted, incomplete. Our parents will, and can, only tell us so much about who we are, however hard we look. On the journey, and now on the wild ride of motherhood, I realise it's up to me to figure out the rest. Because I will never see the unredacted version of that notebook, and nor should I. ■

Wild Hope by Marisa Bate is published by HQ at £16

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Séamas O'Reilly

Painting over the cartoons in a migrant centre for children is a new low, even for this government

@shockproofbeats

I'm angry and I don't know where to put it. I've made the mistake of reading something before bed, which has left me so enraged, I can't sit still. I kiss my son's forehead as he sleeps, which helps a little, but angry I remain. I will share this anger with you.

Unless you count my years-long stand against the hellish libertarian dystopia that is *Paw Patrol*, I don't bring politics into this column if I can help it and generally bore people with my reactions to current events elsewhere. Parenting does, of course, have many political dimensions, not least since so many people become more politically active upon becoming parents. Sometimes this effect seems slightly myopic, like with those audience members on *Question Time* who preface the most self-serving statement you've ever heard with: 'Speaking as a parent'.

Were I to measure such a thing, my own political engagement has probably lessened a tiny bit since having kids. Most of this is down to logistics as I am, basically, exhausted all the time, and lack the bandwidth I once allocated to getting into fights on Twitter, or researching the vagaries of political theory.

Even if none of that were the case, this column is short and has a tone of its own – a space where the humdrum horrors of the world needn't intrude, not just yet.

And then I read about the Home Office scrubbing cartoons from the wall of a migrant children's intake centre in Dover, and another in Kent the same week. I think of the children who find themselves there, ranging in age from babies to teenagers, many unaccompanied by parents who, we can presume, did not make it.

I look at my own children, sleeping in warm beds, and think of what I'd do to protect and keep them safe, had life placed me in more desperate straits. Had I not, by sheer accident of birth, landed in a place which, for all its ills, was not a constant, destabilising threat to our lives. A place so safe I can moan about my own nonexistent family strife for a living.

I imagine, for the microsecond I can stand it, having to bet everything on reaching such a place through treacherous waters, hoping against hope that, even if I didn't make it, the people on those shores would treat those children, my whole world, with dignity and love.

Then I imagine, for the millisecond I can stand it, witnessing those children's unfathomable despair and deciding, with a miser's calculus, to deny them even the smallest crumb of human comfort. And my eyes sting from anger. From a hatred so pure it scares me, towards such needless, deliberate cruelty. And I realise I do not ever want to be so exhausted, or merely content in my own life, that the thought of such a thing does not leave me trembling with rage and willing to break the pattern of this column to say so.

Sunday with...

The actor Blake Harrison on kids and croissants

Up early? Very. Most of the time there's a UFC card [martial arts fight] in the early hours of Sunday morning, so I'll watch that before the family wake up.

Big fan? I do the MMA fan podcast, so I need to keep up to date. I train a bit. I look good hitting the pads and bag, but as soon as someone throws a shot back at me, I flail around not knowing what I'm doing.

Sunday breakfast? I'll throw some croissants into the oven. If there's still some UFC to go, I try to appease the family with pastries.

Morning activities? The kids go swimming, then there's no set plan. Their social calendars are busier than mine. There's usually a party we have to get to in the afternoon. The worst parties are the ones where you're expected to stay and watch.

Sunday lunch? In the winter, we usually try to do a roast. In the summer, I crack out the barbecue.

How are your barbecue skills? Very limited. I still use the cheat sheet that came with the barbecue. As long as we're eating the food afterwards, we're happy.

Sunday TV? At the moment, I'm semi-forcing the kids to watch the Marvel movies. They're not overly bothered, but I love them because they remind me of being a kid.

Sundays growing up? My dad would play football in the morning. We'd all go to the social club where the adults would have a few drinks and play bingo and the kids would be on the arcade machines or out in the garden. Then home for football, *The Simpsons*, and a WWE-style playfight.

Dread Mondays? Slightly, because I don't like having to get up early for the school run. I don't mind getting up early if it's something I want to do. But when it's for the kids, it's a harder pill to swallow. ***Rich Pelley***

World on Fire series two continues on Sunday nights on BBC One

Ask Philippa

My daughter is often in tears and says she always feels sad

@Philippa_Perry

The dilemma My daughter, 20, tells me she feels sad "all the time". It's been going on since she started secondary school, although she was a troublesome toddler and we had really terrible twos that went on for a few years. She always comes to me and not her lovely, sensitive, understanding dad for these talks. She's doing well in her first year of uni and is popular. We have a comfortable, affluent lifestyle, as well as an emotionally warm home. Indeed, so comfortable is our lifestyle, she often feels she is very "privileged" and has no reason to feel sad and this only contributes to her low mood by adding guilt. She's been asking for antidepressants for years and during this time I've known many of my friends with girls the same age agreeing to prescription drugs. However, my father, who works with people coming off antidepressants, convinced us this isn't a good idea. It is hard to "just listen". I've done so much listening and hugging and it's not working. The latest crisis is again coming after a long period of her seeming happy and fulfilled. I feel frustrated that I can't help. Maybe antidepressants are the solution. However, I'm also beginning to wonder if she isn't just a sensitive, melancholic person who needs to come to terms with feeling periods of sadness, find things that make her happy and muddle through.

Philippa's answer You are doing well to tell her not to admonish herself for being sad just because she is financially secure. She already has one thing to cry about, and if she doesn't feel entitled to cry about it, that would give her two. If she wanted to, she could ask her GP about SSRIs and, at her age, wouldn't need your permission, so I believe that she does want something from you, but what?

As she comes to you and not her sensitive dad, it makes me suspicious that the problem may be rooted in your relationship together. I wonder if it's to do with that period you call the "terrible twos". How I hate that expression! This is a time when children are discovering their agency, their potency; they do need boundaries to keep them safe and their parents sane, but within those boundaries they need freedom to be themselves and experiment. It is the terrific twos. They need their feelings, which would seem unreasonable to any adult, to be validated. This usually means empathising with a tantrum because it is impossible to fly to the moon or some such. When we are doing a hundred things at once and have more than one child, it's hard to honour all their needs for validation and autonomy and we may, while we admonish them for their experiments or frustration, somehow, without meaning to, give them the impression they are "terrible". And this might stick. You can talk about this with her. She won't consciously remember it all, but her body might.

Therapy might help her, but I think it'd really help you, too

You could suggest how you may at the time have inadvertently given her the impression then that she was terrible. Why I think there may be something in this is because she is coming to you with her tears and not her sympathetic dad. Talk to her about this and tell her she wasn't and isn't bad and she is never too much. (I get the feeling with her drowning you now with her tears she could be again unconsciously testing you to see if she is "too much".)

Don't think of doing that as something that should "work". Don't think of your relating together as interventions with outcomes. I think that might be the hurdle she is unconsciously trying to make you overcome. Therapy might help your daughter, but I think it would really help you. A relationship with a therapist would hold and contain a psychological space for you, making it easier for you to do that for your daughter.

Her sadness peaks may have something to do with her hormones, so she should visit her GP anyway.

I like your idea of becoming comfortable with being sad. "Hello darkness my old friend," sang Simon & Garfunkel. Sadness is a part of life. It is good, though, if you can pin it on some sort of story as to how she is sad. The story that might fit could be what happened in your relationship when she was aged between two and five, or it might be that she was overwhelmed by secondary school. She was there for a third of her life.

Suggested reading: *The Book You Wish Your Parents Had Read*, which I think if both of you read and discussed together would help your relationship, and another one of my books, *How to Stay Sane*, which is good for learning how to *observe* your feelings rather than *being* your feelings; this helps you get some distance from them if they begin to feel too much.

Love her with her tears. We all want to be acceptable and accepted, whatever we are feeling. You sound like a lovely mother. You can do this. ■

Write to us: *If you have a question, send an email to askphilippa@observer.co.uk. To have your say on this week's column, go to observer.co.uk/ask-philippa*

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