29 MAY 2022

The Observer Magazine

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Selling Sunset's Christine Quinn on why she quit the hit show – and how to be a 'boss bitch'

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Danielle Levitt is a film director and photographer based in LA and New York. She works in the worlds of music, art, fashion and celebrity. She always tries to find a personal connection to create a sense of intimacy. This week, she shoots our cover star Christine Quinn (p8).

Dividing his time between London and Cornwall, photographer **Leon Foggitt** has a deep interest in people and what makes them tick. He is fascinated by the various passions and traditions that can be found in all walks of life – and you couldn't have a better example of this than his subject this week, Simon Fairlie, long-time environmentalist, as you can read on p14.

Andrea Busfield is a freelance journalist and author who swapped London life for Afghanistan in 2005, before settling in Cyprus. Over the course of her travels, she has homed six rescue dogs, four horses and a number of feral cats. When she's not writing novels, including her latest, *Untethered*, she spends her time working out how to feed them all (p36).

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Cover image **Danielle Levitt**

COVER: DRESS BY VERSACE; SUNGLASSES BY AKILA; HEELS BY JESSICA RICH COLLECTION; EARRINGS BY NATALIE MILLS; RING BY RAPPAROUND; STYLIST KAT GOSIK; HAIR LAURA RUGETTI USING GHD HOT TOOLS AND FEKKAI HAIR PRODUCTS; MAKEUP GILLY ESTRADA

Gilbert wants a word about the climate crisis.

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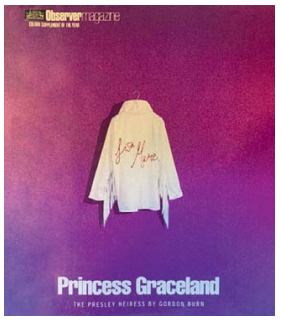

From the archive

A look back at the Observer Magazine's past

The cover story of the *Observer Magazine* of 30 May 1993 was Gordon Burn's long feature on Elvis's legacy – psychological and financial – as Lisa Marie Presley inherited her father's $100m estate at 25 ('Princess Graceland: The Presley Heiress').

For a while it looked as if Colonel Tom Parker's infamous 50% commission on Elvis's earnings was going to mean there would be nothing left to leave his sole heir. But that was until Lisa Marie's mother, Priscilla, decided to open Graceland, their home, to the public.' The house made $20m a year at the time – more than Elvis himself made in any one year.

Pretty much all the details Burn includes are hair-raising: the guns, the drugs, the drink, the paranoia. 'Eventually, Elvis's consumption of drugs seemed as normal to me as watching him eat a pound of bacon with his Spanish omelette,' Priscilla wrote in her memoir.

Lisa Marie was Elvis's 'Princess' – as Burn argued, a term of affection with 'overtones of sentimentality, swagger and proprietorial interest' – and before she was even in school he had given her a present of a Harley-Davidson golf cart inscribed with her name.

Elvis and Priscilla shared custody of their daughter from 1972. 'He'd send his jet, the Lisa Marie, to take her from LA to Utah, so she could play in the snow,' wrote Burn.

'Lisa Marie was so used to seeing people jump at her father's command, that she took years to overcome this habit,' recalled Priscilla.

She was 'born to be tabloid fodder – part of the great celebrity soap-go-round', Burn melancholically noted Graceland's 'climate-controlled tableau of Lisa Marie's nursery things: a Busy Barbie colouring book, a tiny dress, a canopied crib...'

But as Lisa Marie herself insisted in a rare interview given around about the same time: 'I had the best times of my life growing up at Graceland.' ***Chris Hall***

Eva Wiseman

Before and after social media is like living in two different worlds

@evawiseman

My jaw is aching slightly, from clenching through the bits of the Wagatha Christie trial that involved educating the judge in matters of Instagram. Whole days in an oak-panelled room turned on nuance previously reserved for teenagers at bus stops. What it means when someone unfollows you, for your ego, for your social standing, for who you are as a human. Who follows whom and why, the shade when someone messages you and you know they're only pretending to be a mate and on and on, millions of pounds turning to dust as the internet is explained piece by piece, like grandchildren giving a lesson in how to use the new telly remote at Christmas.

It's funny, but it's also shocking, the fact that the next generation lives in a new and different world, with its own language, laws and rules of beauty. And that, for all the mapping of said world, for all the Duolingo lessons in its grammar, dialect and phrasing, those who have not grown up there are destined to forever remain tourists, squinting at the view.

In another oak-panelled room down the road in Westminster, in an inquiry into body image, the Health and Social Care Commons Select Committee was boggling at the power of social media. Eighty per cent of their poll of social media users had told them the way they look was damaging their mental health, and 71% said their body image had led to them enjoying life less. Giving evidence to the committee, their "lived experience witness" Kim Booker, a woman who lives with body dysmorphic disorder, said she used to take magazines to hairdressers, showing them the style she wanted. "Now, you go through Instagram and you take that picture in to [aestheticians] and say, 'I want my face to look like this.'" So familiar had she become with her Instagram face, "When the video flipped off to my natural face, I got a bit of a shock. I hated what I saw, because you get used to the filtered version of yourself."

In response, MP Dr Luke Evans discussed his Body Image bill, introduced in parliament in January, which would require advertisers and influencers to put a logo on images that have been digitally altered. "Would that have stopped you from getting to where you are?" he asked Booker. "It's tricky," she replied. "Although my logical mind can see that the image is altered, subconsciously my brain is seeing an image and trying to replicate it." She was talking about the two worlds, then and now, and how complex and treacherous the journey is from one to the other.

That dissonance struck me again when I read Victoria Beckham's recent claim, "It's an old-fashioned attitude, wanting to be really thin." She was talking about her new line of bodycon dresses which go up to a size 18. "I think women today want to look healthy and curvy. They want to have some boobs and a bum." I have a lot of time for Beckham, a camp, smart and reliably jolly celebrity, but one nonetheless speaking from a place of extreme thinness, who has eaten (according to her husband) only steamed vegetables and grilled fish every day for 25 years. And this "healthy" look she's promoting is just as difficult to achieve as that unfashionable thinness – the Brazilian butt lift, which involves transferring fat from the thighs or belly to the buttocks, is the fastest growing cosmetic surgery procedure in the world. The pursuit of thinness, while chaotic, destabilising and occasionally fatal, was never the problem. The problem was the idea that an ideal body must be pursued at all.

We've spent a lot of time inside over the past couple of years, a lot of time alone – a lot of time alone, inside our bodies. It's only recently that we have returned to a world where we're no longer disembodied faces on a screen, and perhaps it's because of this shocking leap back into the pool, where we once again feel scrutinised, unfiltered and raw, that negative body image is so high. But, however much they might recognise the implications of an Instagram filter, isn't it vaguely torturous seeing how long it takes the people in charge to learn what it actually does? That they might truly understand the "lived experience" of a person online seems unlikely.

While the adults try – and God bless them for that, their large fingers stabbing away at an unsheathed screen – it seems to me that more focus should be on teaching children how to navigate the two worlds they're born into. This means consuming media critically and encouraging conversation about unrealistic ideas of beauty in order to reduce the internalisation of them, and learning how to read an image, and avoiding forensic analysis and judgment of bodies which dash in and out of fashion before a season's through. Then, perhaps, we can be spared the agony of another tired politician having to learn about the ethics of Facetune or how long Instagram stories last. Life is short and both worlds are melting – let these old ladies live. ■

One more thing...

There's a new genre of romcom, where boy meets boy. ***Heartstopper*** on Netflix is gorgeously innocent, the story of an adolescent love affair between two schoolboys, and out in September is ***Bros***, a long overdue major studio comedy with Billy Eichner about queer characters, played by queer actors.

I'm reading ***Don't Forget To Scream*** by Marianne Levy, a book about 'the emotional turmoil that having a child can unleash', which asks 'why motherhood is at once so venerated and so undervalued.'

Last week it was announced that plus-sized model **Yumi Nu** was a cover model for *Sports Illustrated*'s swimsuit issue, which led conservative psychologist Jordan Peterson to tweet, 'Sorry. Not beautiful. And no amount of authoritarian tolerance is going to change that.' Soon after, he left Twitter, citing the 'endless flood of vicious insult'. See ya!

This much I know

Huma Abedin, US political advisor, 45

Interview **TRACY RAMSDEN**
Photograph **CHRIS BUCK**

Travelling is an adventure. As a child, I loved being on planes, trying ice-cream all over the world. My mother tells this story where one summer we were away for months and when we finally got home to Jeddah, I was so excited I jumped on my parents' bed, flew backwards and cut my head on their wooden headboard. I guess I liked coming home, too.

Washington gave me imposter syndrome. Growing up in the Middle East, it was a culture shock. I knew I could do my job and work hard, but I never thought I was the smartest, the prettiest, the "-est" at anything.

Hillary Clinton doesn't give up. I said this to her the other day over lunch – she has such a positive attitude about the world, it's contagious. Even on the worst days, when you feel you can't get out of bed, she gets out of bed.

Friendship is my therapy. I lived in a world where I felt whatever I said would end up in the newspapers, so I was very careful about what I shared, even with close friends. I've let go of those hang-ups now. I struggle with anxiety, but therapy helped me deal with the shock and trauma of what happened in my personal life [Abedin's ex-husband Anthony Weiner went to prison in 2017 for sexting a teenage girl].

Marriage made me feel powerful and free. Those early days were my happiest. I had a hard but fulfilling job that felt like I was contributing to history. I had a partner for the first time, somebody I loved and looked forward to going home to. Everything felt possible. That's why it was so hard to lose it all overnight.

Dating apps are intimidating. I'm trying to stay open, but dating is terrifying, which also makes it exciting. I believe in love – I had it, I know what it felt like, I'd love to have that feeling again.

My mother gave me good genes. She's 80 with hardly any wrinkles. People tell me, "Oh you look young for your age", but some physical things have crept up that I'm just beginning to grapple with. Maybe it's because I'm putting myself out in the dating world again.

There's a reason God created sex. It's that sense of fulfilment and connection, of giving to yourself and to your partner. I didn't explore it enough. I was raised in a world where sex was a taboo subject. I kept myself closed. The first man I was intimate with was Anthony.

I should have had more fun. The number of nights that ended with work, when I'd collapse into bed, then go back to the office to send more emails... A good life is a balanced life. I wish I'd allowed myself to experiment. ■

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‘I’m not here because of luck. I’m here because of hustle’

Christine Quinn is the real estate agent turned Hollywood reality star who stole the show as the villainess on Selling Sunset. She tells Eva Wiseman why she finally quit and why we all need to embrace our inner ‘boss bitch’

Photograph **DANIELLE LEVITT**

Christine Quinn doesn’t just make an entrance, she grows the entrance from seed, harvests it, slow cooks it and then brings it to the table on fire. For example: the opening of season four of *Selling Sunset*, the real estate reality show on which she was cast as the villainess. She arrived at a multimillion dollar LA mansion wearing a sheer black mesh gown beneath a blazer with sharp extended shoulders, heels the height of the Hollywood sign and, instead of a handbag, hanging from a chain, a miniature diamanté chair. A chair! She had white-blonde hair down to her thighs. She looked like an evil Lana Turner. She was nine months pregnant.

Regular viewers had switched on to bathe in the cold glamour of the showiest reality show yet. Part office drama (nobody is here to make friends), part property porn (the value of a house flashes on screen before we enter, along with the commission our heroines will earn), this was the rolling story of the Oppenheim Group, an agency run by a pair of bald, buffed identical twins and staffed by a team of shit-talking Amazonian agents, of which Quinn had the sharpest nails, heels and lines. Over five seasons, while her character transformed from a cheeky Mae West type to sociopathic Cruella de Vil, dashing from one low-stakes cat fight to the next wearing a single Gucci glove, viewers’ obsession with her grew. And then, she was gone.

Her entrance today is, well, modest. She’s Zooming from bed in a Parisian hotel and rather than coiffed icy glamour, she’s giving Goop-ish Gwyneth, with expensive skin and a loose black T-shirt. “I do like glamour, which to me means a continuous expression of freedom – RuPaul says we’re all born naked and the rest is drag. I love to dress up and bring the fashion and bring the humour and the wit, but,” she says, a little chasteningly, “that’s not all of me.” Which is one of the reasons that after season five she quit and, having launched a new real estate company with her tech-entrepreneur husband, is today promoting her first book. “It was a chance to really write my narrative, have my own story be told without editors deciding they wanted to clip me down to just an eye roll.” The title: *How To Be a Boss Bitch.* I read the book on one of those rare hot afternoons when men take their tops off outside Tesco and girls lie sprawled on grass verges with very sweet drinks. Chapter headings range from “It Costs a Lot To Look This Cheap” to “Mind Your Vagina” with the epilogue “Steal the Show”.

“I’ve combined a lot of manifestation tips,” she says, “and we have quizzes, so you find out which archetype you are.” (I got mostly Bs “a creative boss bitch”). “And I intentionally designed it so that you walk into a bookstore and say, ‘OK, that’s a book I want to read. I feel that way. I want to live my unapologetic life,’ even if you have no idea who I am.”

Quinn, now 33, grew up in Texas, with Catholic parents who were so strict she wasn’t allowed to watch TV, which meant her cultural points of reference were films, like *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, that she’d watch at her grandma’s house. She was diagnosed with ADD at 12, and sent to “special” classes, before enrolling in an alternative school. “My classmates were certified geniuses,” she stresses in her book. “These kids were running drug rings at 15.” On her 17th birthday she was arrested when a teacher found weed in her bag, but rather than coming to pick her up, her parents let her sleep in the cells for three nights to teach her a lesson. She left home soon after. In a recent *Vogue* interview she was surprised to hear herself admit that, despite lying on her résumé for years, she only has an 8th grade education. She broke down crying, on her yacht with full staff and three-storey water slide.

“Money, to me, means freedom,” she says. “I grew up in a very restrictive environment. I didn’t even know what sex was until I was 16, I thought you got pregnant from kissing. So I needed freedom in order to survive. And that came from me making my own money and being able to be in control of my life.” She spent some time in a relationship with a sugar daddy, but left when she realised he was tracking her movements, and without her own credit card her power was ebbing. One piece of advice she imparts to readers is: “Spend his money, but make your own.” Another lesson she gives is about manifesting: “If you think it and believe it, it will come to you.” The first thing she manifested, through “journaling, vision boarding and visualisation” was a Louis Vuitton handbag – later it was Hugh Hefner’s big glass house. She discusses her thoughts on life, her American ›

‘If someone’s calling you a bitch, you know you’re doing something right’: Christine Quinn

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'There are moments where me and the girls are laughing, but they don't show that': with the cast of Selling Sunset. Below: with husband Christian Richard

› dream, with such sensible charm that it's hard not to get swept away with the tides of it, into the infinity pool and whatever violent riches lie beyond.

"After season one of *Selling Sunset*, I received an influx of messages. And along with very hateful ones, there was a large portion of people who were like, 'How do you learn that confidence?'" And what did she tell them? "It was something that over the years I accumulated, through people not understanding me. Years of being told no, and that I wasn't good enough. So it came from this fire inside me." This was when she was trying to find work as an actor and model, her biggest break being the first victim in *Shark Night 3D*. "I was getting doors slammed in my face. But I just felt in my bones, 'If I'm getting no, I'm asking the wrong person.' I came from this small town in Texas where, if you say you want to be an actress or model, or even in theatre, you're shunned." What did she want to be? "I just wanted to be myself. I wanted to be entertaining. I wanted to inspire people, I wanted to make people laugh. I wanted to make people feel something." Having moved to LA, she was working in real estate to support her acting ambitions, but when the creator of reality show *The Hills* saw her and the other "hot chicks" working at the Oppenheim Group, Quinn was catapulted to fame. "It was everything I'd been manifesting since I was a little girl."

But, "Fame means responsibility. A responsibility to be open about plastic surgery, diet plans, how you're living your real life. A lot of people want to see this glamorous lifestyle, but it's not always glitzy." She wants them to realise, "I'm not here because I got lucky. I'm here because of hustle. I worked my ass off. But," and she briefly dazzles, "everyone else can do it, too." Her attitude reflects that of one of her idols, Kim Kardashian, who recently urged women to "get your fucking ass up and work," resulting in much scandal. Sometimes, the Quinn hustle sounds vaguely hellish. "I have this innate ability to keep moving. I thrive under chaos and pressure." She's a Libra, she says, head to the side as if that explains everything. "And even if there's a situation that might not be peachy keen, I'm able to just keep going and then kind of reassess later."

Nine months pregnant, she was on the red carpet nominated for an MTV "Best Fight" award, when her waters broke. The birth was traumatic – both she and the baby almost died. "I was back filming a week after an emergency C-section. I was emotionally distraught. On top of being in so much physical pain, I could barely walk. But I was getting pressure from production to come back to work. And if I don't film, I don't get paid."

Soon after season four aired, with that fabulous diamanté chair bag and Quinn's swaggering baby bump, stories circulated that she was faking her pregnancy. That, along with an increased amount of online abuse, and claims of being a bad mother, means she's keen now to dispel those rumours, giving an insight into the absolute nuttiness of filming reality TV. "I don't watch the show because I know what happens in real life. So I didn't understand at first where all these fake pregnancy surrogacy rumours were coming from, but I realised it was because they edited things completely out of order. I shot a scene where I was pregnant, upside down doing yoga, but they showed it after I'd had my baby. Another time they wanted me to be pregnant in a scene, because they needed to go back in time, so they stuffed me with a pillow."

Whole series centred on her falling out with her colleagues, a typical scene featuring Quinn marching into a hushed room in some dangerously iconic outfit where a selection of tanned women list the ways she's lied to them. "There are moments where me and the girls are actually having fun, laughing, but they don't show that. There's a scene where [Quinn's ex-friend] Mary got a promotion. What you saw on screen is not what happened. I went over and gave her a hug. I was like, 'I'm so proud of you,' and for the first time in a long time we understood each other. And that's not what you see. You see an office of people rolling their eyes, then me walking out." They'd shoot for, she thinks, around four hours for a lunch scene, which would then be cut down to 36 seconds. "So I'd encourage people to realise that, you know, even though it's considered an 'unscripted' show, you may not be seeing the full picture." She was told from the beginning that she'd been cast as the villain, "But, you know, I accept a challenge." Fed lines in season one, "I didn't realise I could say no. So that was my first mistake."

'I'm open about plastic surgery, diet plans. People see this glamorous lifestyle, but it's not always glitzy'

Watching *Selling Sunset* is a complicated pursuit. It's no coincidence, perhaps, that it became so popular during the pandemic – it's best watched in bed through the chiffon curtain of Covid, when your capacity to question the money exchanged (at a time when the world outside was struggling to eat) and the grown businesswomen's battles (over ex-boyfriends, or something someone maybe said at a lunch) is compromised by fever or Fomo. The houses all look the same, staged to a bleachy gleam, their pools blue under a white sun, an expensive purgatory. The effect is narcotic and pleasantly anaesthetising.

The season four finale was set at a typically glittering party, where the women wore dresses apparently woven from hair and steel and their inconceivable heels sunk slowly into the grass. Christine made one of her entrances; the women glowered into their slimline cocktails. "The producers threw me into that scene – they told me it's going to be easy, you're just going to talk to [ex-friend] Heather. But it's a group of seven women trying to gang up on me. I was just like, 'I literally just had a baby, he's sick right now, I don't want to be here.' You have to understand the amount of hormones that were in my body on top of postpartum depression." They got their scene.

How has it affected her ideas of reality, I ask. "Well, the producers have six full-time story boarders. And that was back when my husband and I got married," in a $1m "gothic wonderland"-themed spectacle – Christian Richard, her groom, had sold his last business for $65m cash. "It was their job to create narratives. So the women have definitely been amped up and told things that aren't necessarily true, which is why they act the way that they do, but..." she shrugs. "I love reality TV, it's the production company I have the problem with."

How did it affect her mental health? She exhales meditatively. "It's something that I deal with every day. I was powerful and they didn't want that narrative." Instead of showing her leaving to start her own business at the end of season five, viewers saw a scandal involving a real estate bribe. "They wanted the narrative of me being bullied out and doing something wrong." She's angry – which works, when promoting a book about bitches.

"To be a bitch today means to unapologetically speak your mind. To say things that may be unpopular, but you know are right. It's not a negative connotation, it's something that should be embraced and shouted from the rooftops. And if someone's calling you a bitch, you know you're doing something right. Being a bitch goes hand in hand with being extremely hardworking – women get chastised for speaking up. So I really wanted to rewrite that narrative." For a long time, she writes, "I lived in the blank space" of the Christine the show had created. The production company fired her once, for telling the press what was faked, including the property listings producers had fed her, but they apparently rehired her when it was clear she wasn't just carrying a baby, she was carrying the show.

Though it's no shock that reality shows are scripted, it is a surprise to hear, at a time when reality producers have come under fire for playing with their mercurial stars' mental health, how little time she says they gave her complaints. "They really didn't care. They said, 'Read your contract. You waived all rights.' The contract says they have the ability to produce fiction. There's nothing I could do." For all the fun she had and the fame she's found now as Bitch Barbie, the girl boss we all deserve, one who stamps over six nice girls to get to one good sale, "I was part of a bigger machine over which I had no control. We were brainwashed robots," she says, turning her profile towards the light, "and I'm just so happy to be free." ■

How To Be a Boss Bitch by Christine Quinn (Ebury, £16.99). Buy a copy for £14.78 at guardianbookshop.com

PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANTS KENDALL PACK; DAVID ARDILL; JOHN BATCHIN; PRODUCTION ASSISTANT KYLIE GOVINCHUCK; STYLIST KAT GOSIK; STYLING ASSISTANT MAKAYLA PIRGHIBI; STYLING INTERN NICOLE JOHNDROW; HAIR LAURA RUGETTI; ASSISTANT HAIR SIENNA WATSON; USING GHD HOT TOOLS AND FEKKAI HAIR PRODUCTS; MAKEUP GILLY ESTRADA. BLUE TOP BY THE ATTICO (@THE_ATTICO). THIS PAGE: MICHAEL BEZJIAN/WIREIMAGE; MATT WINKELMEYER/MTV MOVIE AND TV AWARDS


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‘People are now so detached from the land’

Simon Fairlie is the most influential – and unusual – eco-activist you might not have heard of. A hippy in the 60s and a pioneer of the road protest movement, he’s now a persuasive advocate of micro-dairy farming. Patrick Barkham heads to Devon to meet him

Photographs **LEON FOGGITT**

‘Accept that eating meat is a sensible part of human nourishment, just make sure that animals have a good time when they are alive’: Simon Fairlie

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Simon Fairlie

This is my dream yard," sighs Simon Fairlie, standing in a small quadrangle of rough stones strewn with hay, surrounded by low redbrick barns, where swallows dip in the summer. With its pair of soulful Jersey cows and folds of Dorset hills beyond, it resembles an idyll of long-lost farming life.

Fairlie, one of the most interesting and influential activists you may never have heard of, has had a long and varied career. But the latest chapter in the multi-storied life of one of the fathers of Britain's environmental movement sees him as a farmer. Which might sound at odds with his background, but Fairlie – true to form – is championing an alternative type of farming, in the shape of the micro-dairy.

The man who was part of the original hippy movement, pioneer of the road protest movement and anti-fossil fuel living, is these days happy tending to livestock. But he farms small, running the dairy for the charitable trust in charge of Monkton Wyld Court, a Victorian pile that hosts yoga retreats, campers and various alternative gatherings. He rears two pigs for meat every six months, fed upon the community's leftover food.

"That's what pigs were bred for – they eat the food that would otherwise be a rat problem," he says. The don't-eat-food-waste regulations are "to protect the factory farms because if they get swine fever, they cull thousands in one go. Diseases are a part of life. Only in factory farming are they catastrophic."

His current pair are called Jim and Bob. Is it difficult to dispatch them to market? "I'm fairly OK with it, but less so with cows. Once you accept that eating meat is a sensible part of human nourishment you're guided by your head rather than your emotions. Your emotions are flexible and a little bit untrustworthy. If you think about what you feel, you're thinking more about yourself than the animal. You just make sure they have a nice time when they are alive."

Dairy has a bad press today, but Fairlie is frustrated by guests who would rather consume soya products shipped around the world than what's made 50 yards down the hill from two well-kept animals. "A large amount of what we eat here is just what we're seeing out of the window," he says. Today's dairy industry is "dreadful," he says. "It's tragic. So many small farms have disappeared and these monstrous farms concentrate far too many nutrients in one place, causing pollution, and even these farms are struggling."

Fairlie is convinced that the micro-dairy model is workable in the modern era, and does not require everyone to live in a commune. Small dairies could be attached to small communities, from prisons to residential homes, reducing carbon emissions, pollution and waste. "When you've got a little closed community you can see more clearly what people's needs are and how much you need to produce."

He is an eloquent critic of consumerism, but also a defender of activities that many environmentally minded folk now decry – from cattle farming to wood stoves. If that sounds a bit retro, he is also an evangelist for local food and a radical advocate for land reform.

His generation came of age during the 1960s and matured with the environmental movement through the 1970s and 80s. His new memoir, *Going to Seed*, brilliantly conveys how the ideas of the counterculture have evolved over the years. With his shock of still-dark hair, neckerchief and stout demeanour, Fairlie looks like an authentic countryman, but he was raised in 1950s suburbia and farmed out to boarding schools by his errant father, Henry, a notable Fleet Street journalist who coined the term "the establishment" and had an affair with Hilary Amis, wife of Kingsley.

'In a small community you can see clearly what people need'

After Simon dropped out of Cambridge university to follow the hippy trail to India, his father wrote a book called *The Spoilt Child of the Western World*, ostensibly about the decadence of America but also, Fairlie felt, taking aim at him and his generation.

While his father was desperate for Fairlie to write, like he did, his son was determined to forge an alternative society. His tribe were then variously known as flower children or freaks; Fairlie prefers the French term "*les marginaux*", but the only word that endures is hippy.

Today's radical young environmentalists "are just like I was, but they don't think of themselves as an alienated generation," says Fairlie. "Greta Thunberg is angry and that's good, but she's not saying, 'We're different from you.' She's just saying, 'We're younger than you and you're not living up to your responsibilities.' We were saying, 'We are a different culture – we are freaks and you are straights.' I'm not saying that was right or wrong."

Bearing in mind his 1970s motto – "a career is a headlong rush towards doom" – Fairlie lived on communes and took casual jobs to avoid a conventional career cul-de-sac. He embraced the protest movement ignited by the Thatcher government's Roads for Prosperity building programme in 1989. The movement mobilised a generation of writers, environmental scientists and campaigners. Fairlie's protests against the M11 extension landed him in Pentonville prison, where his cellmate enthused about a plot of land for sale in Somerset. So began his next adventure: co-founding a fossil fuel-free eco-community called Tinkers Bubble in 1994. Fairlie is rather scathing of his 11 years there, criticising the community's lack of organisation and work ethic. "We were a magnet for nutcases," he writes. "We hippies actually weren't too good at working communally."

Communes may seem an idea whose time has gone, but Fairlie mounts a spirited defence. A decent proportion of the rural communes established 50 years ago still exist today; they may be more stable than the nuclear family, he argues. Monkton Wyld works, he says, because all 20 or so residents have a job. "To live here, you apply for a role like the gardener or maintenance. It's a business." The house hosts "endless yoga retreats", but also weddings, family weekends and parties. "We've had a couple of orgies, even. They were quite interesting. They were very well run."

And so to the micro-dairy he runs for the community: the key to truly sustainable food production, he argues, is its scale. He likes the term "plantationocene" to describe the relentless scaling up and intensification of globalised food production with all its associated problems.

Local food is embodied by his two Jersey cows, Cocoa and Folly. Rather than separating calves from mothers at birth as in conventional dairying, the calves live with their mothers for about three months. Given six acres of grazing, the pair produce 8,000 litres of milk each year – about £11,000-worth of milk, cheese and yoghurt.

'We're fighting a rearguard action against the forces of technological greed. But we can keep a check on these idiots': Simon Fairlie at Monkton Wyld, Devon

Rather like his journalist father, Fairlie has a keen eye for a trend. When he took up scything, importing modern lightweight scythes from Austria and running how-to-scythe courses, he was surprised to see the trend take off. He wonders whether scythes will be his most lasting legacy – but his years of campaigning on land reform have helped many people seeking to live off-grid. He calls for simple tweaks to the planning system to enable young locals to self-build affordable homes on village edges. But spiralling land prices are reducing the possibility of a back-to-the-land movement for all but the very wealthy.

He would like to see a revival of the "county farm" system whereby council-owned farms provide affordable tenancies for motivated but landless young farmers. Instead, councils sell off these assets. The landless English often don't realise how much common land was annexed by private landowners during the enclosures of the Middle Ages. "Breaking up the big estates or making them more accessible is nowhere near the political agenda because the majority of people in England are so detached from the land they don't realise they've been dispossessed," he says.

Some of these big estates may be leading the way on restoring nature, but Fairlie is a rewilding sceptic. "It's potentially a scam. It's a way of pulling in new subsidies for 'public goods' [such as restoring biodiversity or soils], and you're not actually producing any food. I'm not totally against rewilding, but I'm very suspicious of it on good agricultural land. If it's a public good, it should be under public ownership, not be paid for by the public to a landowner for doing sod all."

Fairlie took up writing and editing – for the *Ecologist* and then the *Land* – only after his father died. What would Henry Fairlie have made of his son's life today? "He'd be very glad I started writing. That was what he wanted, but he also had an interest in farming as he got older."

The critical father would probably also agree with his son's conclusions about environmental activism. "When you are young and swept up in a revolutionary moment, it's easy to believe there is everything to win," writes Fairlie. "When you look back, towards the end of a full life, you realise you have just been treading water – fighting a rearguard action for justice and ecological modesty against the forces of corporate greed and technological rapacity, who have wealth and power on their side. But we can keep a check on these idiots, and limit or delay their excesses." ■

Going to Seed: A Countercultural Memoir by Simon Fairlie (Chelsea Green, £14.99) is out now. Buy a copy from guardianbookshop.com at £13.04

The history man

Interview **TOM LAMONT**
Photographs **SARAH CRESSWELLL**

His wicked sense of humour has helped turn Horrible Histories, Ghosts and Sex Education into massive hits. Here, actor and writer Jim Howick reveals how he's always made it up as he went along

Jim Howick is sitting on a bench in Primrose Hill in London, drinking tea from a cardboard cup and minding his own business, when a dad on a bicycle zooms by. Brakes squeal and the dad shouts breathless thank-yous at the bemused actor, before cycling on. This sort of thing has been happening to Howick quite a bit, he says, ever since Covid closed the schools. When parents were struggling to find ways to entertain their kids at home, the BBC's *Horrible Histories* was much in rotation on iPlayer. "Essentially, we became child care," says Howick, who was a part of the original *Horrible Histories* cast from 2009 to 2014. Some of his sketch performances (as King John, as Napoleon) are up there with the show's most beloved. Howick admits he revisits them himself from time to time, to be reminded with what gleeful absurdity he spent his late 20s, dressed in wigs, false noses and stuck-on Napoleonic sideburns.

He is 43 now, an actor and screenwriter in steady employ, 10 years married to a costume supervisor called Lauren and the owner of two schnauzers that the couple refer to as their children. He is a lifelong *Star Wars* fan, once describing himself as more Ewok than Skywalker in appearance. (Howick, richly bearded, is 5ft 5in.) Although he grew up on the south coast, in Bognor Regis, he has been a season-ticket holder at Spurs ever since he graduated from a London drama school in 2000. Howick's humour is flavoured by the "ah well" befuddlement one associates with that deeply frustrating football club. As he reflects on an interesting career to date, Howick tells a story about his only job in a Hollywood movie, 2004's *Hellboy*. He contracted hypothermia on set – too long under a rain machine – and ended up in hospital, on a drip.

Still in self-deprecation mode, he tells another story against himself, pointing out that he's never acted for an audience as big as the one he had at age 21. He was in a Burger King ad that played during the final of *Pop Idol* in 2002: "14 million people!" he marvels, "and I was wearing a giant foam Stetson hat, trying to sell something called a Big Texan Burger. We had a premiere round my mum and dad's house. I think it was barbecue sauce – maybe jalapeños? – that made the burger Texan."

He's doing himself down a good deal with these actorly anecdotes. If Howick's is not quite a household name, he certainly has a household face – as evidenced by the dad who screeched to a halt on his bike. Howick is one of those roving everywhere-people of contemporary British comedy, spending years in *Peep Show* as David Mitchell's romantic nemesis Gerard, later playing a teacher of horny teenagers in that taboo-smashing Netflix comedy *Sex Education*. Currently, he can be seen as a father-of-two in the BBC comedy *Here We Go*. Since 2019, Howick has been a part of another triumphant sitcom, *Ghosts*.

The latter wasn't only an acting job for him, rather a labour of love, a show he co-created with castmates once met and befriended on *Horrible Histories*. For Howick and his collaborators, *Ghosts* has been one of those dreamy success projects, a show that found an appreciative audience right away, soon running to four series, then enjoying a lucrative franchising-out to America, where it's become one of the most watched comedies on network TV. This *Star Wars* lifer had the experience of waking up one day this January to see that Mark ›

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'We often think about what we tried to get away with in those early days': (from left) Jim Howick in Sex Education; Horrible Histories; Ghosts; and with Katherine Parkinson in Here We Go

› Hamill – Luke Skywalker himself – had tweeted about his love for Ghosts. The British version, too!

"We got together in a room with laptops," Howick remembers of the show's conception. "We had mountains of ideas because we'd all spent our youths riffing together in dungeons or the woods or wherever we happened to be filming *Horrible*. We were constantly trying to make each other laugh back then." He starts to add an unguarded thought, stops himself, then (to hell with it) speaks anyway. "We often reminisce, now, about what we tried to get away with in those early days," Howick shrugs. They were young. They'd mess about, he says. Try to push boundaries. "Sneak sex noises into sketches…"

Howick holds up his hands. He doesn't want to alarm parents. Anything untoward would have been caught and censored in some edit room, years ago. "But somewhere out there," he says, "*Horrible Histories* has an X-rated cut."

It fascinates him, he says, this line between what a mainstream comedy can and cannot get away with. As he summarises *Ghosts*, "the 'sit' in the 'com' is that we have these nine ghosts stuck in a house". The ghost-characters are all styled and to an extent characterised by the circumstances in which they perished. Howick, for instance, plays a scoutmaster with an arrow stuck through his neck. His co-star and co-creator Simon Farnaby plays a Tory politician who only ever appears in his pants. (He died during an orgy.) "But in our original pitch," says Howick, "we wanted him to be wearing full S&M. Studded leather pants. We were talking about him having a ball gag in his mouth."

Yeah, they had to row back from that idea. *Ghosts* broadcasts at dinnertime on BBC One. But through his work on *Sex Education*, which started in 2019, Howick got a clearer idea of what's possible when there are minimal creative constraints on funny people. He's quick to point out he was only ever an actor-for-hire on that show, having nothing whatsoever to do with scripts. But in a way, he says, he's prouder of *Sex Education* than anything else on his CV. Every week, some tangled subject to do with sex or sexual health, untangled. Howick wishes there was something like it on TV when he was young.

"I don't know if it was the same with you, but where I went to school, in Bognor in the 1980s and 90s, sex education had a shoved-in feeling. Sex ed was the home economics teacher saying, 'When the man and woman get aroused they interconnect with their organs.' It was scientific. Emotionless." Howick recalls one lesson when the teacher brought out a large plastic phallus to demonstrate condom use. The other pupils immediately nicknamed this the Monolith; and at that point any possible sexual education went out the window, lost to sniggering. "When I read the scripts for *Sex Education*, I learned loads. About problems. Hopes. Issues. All of it was dealt with so deftly, never flinching."

In their own scripts for *Ghosts*, Howick and his collaborators attempted something similar, in this case, trying to write without flinching about death. "It's certainly provided me with a starker view of mortality," he says. "I don't think any of us realised the depth of the subject matter we'd taken on until we got to episode three." In this one, Howick's ghost-character, Pat, has to prepare for the annual graveside visit of his still living family. In a scene much quoted online since it broadcast, an older ghost reminds Pat that one day his relatives will die, too. Howick summarises: "You pass. People mourn. Then they pass. And all of a sudden there's nothing. That idea of layered death, that void! It's terrifying, isn't it?"

He shudders. "To be honest, when we started writing the show, we were a little concerned about being too maudlin, prompting existential crises, giving younger viewers nightmares. I was worried we were not so much dipping a toe into the taboo subject of death as dive bombing right into it. But we decided that we should try to be candid. Open. Who knows? If we can be more candid in our discussion of death, maybe we'll all lead happier lives?"

'My biggest audience? A Burger King advert I did when I was 21…'

Taboos interest Howick, and for an interesting reason. He first met his wife Lauren in a place he calls Sitcom Land, "Teddington Studios, where so many TV comedies are filmed". They were both employed on a reboot of *Reggie Perrin* at the time, Howick acting, Lauren in the costume department. They married in London in 2012, "McCartney-style," he recalls, "at Marylebone Town Hall. The do afterwards was at the Globe. A red bus affair!" The couple recently celebrated their 10-year wedding anniversary with a trip to Lake Como.

Sitting on our bench in the park, I ask Howick what lessons he has learned over a decade of marriage. He answers frankly. "What do you learn? You learn about grownup stuff. You either have kids or you don't. My wife and I struggled, actually. So we got dogs instead. The dogs are essentially our children." Howick continues, still speaking matter-of-factly. "Kids were going to be important to us. We tried for a long time. When we realised we couldn't have them, it was almost a relief, because by then we'd gotten to the point where we could imagine a life without them. And, actually, not a bad life, not bad at all. So. Yeah. That's been a massive part of our emotional landscape. That's one of the things I've learned about."

We sit on the bench a moment, doing what we can with takeaway teas that long ago went cold. I ask Howick, is he OK for me to write about all this in a newspaper? He says he'll double-check with Lauren (later confirming, there's no reluctance there). He says he would like it to be written about, in fact, because the subject of people's childlessness can be such a strained one, such a taboo one. "Everyone who's important to me knows already. But I'm happy to be candid with you, because I think it would be good for people to know, it isn't this depressing thing, worthy of pity. It isn't sad. It doesn't define us."

Howick tells a story about the week he and Lauren got final word from their doctor. He was writing series two of *Ghosts* with the gang from *Horrible Histories*. "Simon, Matt [Baynton], Larry [Rickard], they'd all just had kids. There were seminal moments happening for them – and for me, because I was sharing in those moments. Their kids' first steps. Their Christmas nativity plays at school. I wanted to keep on sharing in that. I didn't want any of them to feel strange or reluctant talking about that stuff with me." Howick explained to his friends: it hurt a bit, finding out that he and Lauren couldn't have children, but avoidance of the whole subject of children would hurt more.

"Now it's no longer an emotional thing," he says, "it's just a fact of our lives. Our time is our own. A life without children is a roomier one. We have nieces and nephews. We have our dogs. We really enjoy our work." His "ah well" sense of humour kicks in again as he adds that he can afford all the expensive Dungeons & Dragons-like toys that were out of reach when he was a child. "Oh, I went to town in the last lockdown, spent a lot of money on the paints, the brushes, the figurines for a game called Hero Quest. As a kid I used to use tea leaves to represent grass on the bases [of the little men]. This time I bought gravel. Real gravel! Games Workshop didn't know what had hit them."

His latest sitcom, *Here We Go*, makes funny and intelligent use of the way people's expectations for their lives rarely pan out. Howick plays Paul Jessop, part of an ensemble that also includes Katherine Parkinson as his wife, Alison Steadman as his mum and Tom Basden as his brother-in-law. In scripts written by Basden, there are frequent time jumps, this jagged chronology teasing laughter and poignancy from the way families make plans for themselves that are constantly undermined. Howick calls it, "Having goals, and those goals going to shit."

It's a subject he knows something about. You might get an early break in a Hollywood blockbuster, only to come away with hypothermia. You might envisage a life with children and end up slightly relieved to get one with schnauzers. Howick says: "I've spent a lot of my life perpetually looking up. Recently, I've been trying to remind myself to take stock, look left and right instead. Like that guy who rode past us on the bike…" He gestures away along the asphalt path, in the direction of the vanished dad. "A spontaneous expression of approval. In 2022! How cool was that?" ■

The full series of Here We Go is now on BBC iPlayer

STYLING HOPE LAWRIE; PHOTOGRAPHER'S ASSISTANT SOFI ADAMS; WORK EXPERIENCE ELEANOR SHOREY; GROOMING CHAD MAXWELL AT ONE REPRESENTS USING BENNY HANCOCK; SUNSET ORANGE KNIT JW ANDERSON AT MATCHESFASHION.COM. THIS PAGE: REX/SHUTTERSTOCK; BBC; ROBBIE GRAY/BBC

Food & drink
Nigel Slater

@NigelSlater

Mango season calls for sweet treats and crunchy salads

Photographs **JONATHAN LOVEKIN**

There is a wide dish on the kitchen counter, home to a succession of seasonal fruits that need ushering towards ripeness. Figs whose skin will tear should one brush against another; apricots with rust-coloured freckles and, in late summer, plums that will bruise and weep if piled hugger-mugger in a punnet. It is here I ripen avocados and paw paws and look after fat-bottomed pears until they reach their brief moment of perfection. During May and June, the bowl is a safe harbour for mangoes – small, smooth and heavy with juice, their skin as yellow as custard, their flesh as bright and cheerful as a bunch of marigolds. As they become ready, and against all the rules, I chill them in the fridge. A cold mango dripping with juice is an early summer treat beyond measure. Round or oval and as tender as a bruise, few fruits are as pleasing to the touch. They feel like a bar of soap worn smooth, and the smell hangs on the warm summer air in the kitchen. A few come in fancy dress, festooned with tinsel the colour of Quality Street wrappings, which I leave in place. When the fruits are ripe, they might offer us a teasing bead of nectar.

I eat them as they come, their flat stones sucked naked of its sweet flesh. I will make a purée of them, too, to stir into whipped cream or yoghurt, or slice them into matchsticks and toss with crisp carrots and a hot dressing of lime juice, mint leaves and flecks of dried chilli.

Mango and carrot salad

Serves 4

For the salad:
cucumber 100g
carrots 175g
pepper 1, small yellow or orange
radishes 100g
sugar snap peas 50g
mango 1, medium
rice noodles 75g
cherry tomatoes 12

For the dressing:
tomatoes 175g, red, medium
olive oil 50ml
lime juice 1½ tbsp
garlic 1 small clove
salt ½ tsp
red chilli 1, small
dried oregano 1 tsp
sugar a pinch
crispy chilli in oil 3 tsp, Lao Gan Ma brand

To finish:
limes juice of 2
coriander leaves a handful
mint leaves a handful

Fill a large bowl with cold water and ice.

Make the salad: peel the cucumber, then slice in half lengthways. Scrape out the seeds. Cut the flesh into thick matchsticks. Drop into the iced water. Scrub the carrots, then cut them into matchsticks and add to the cucumber. Halve the pepper, pull out the seeds and slice into thin strips. Trim the radishes, slice thinly, then add with the pepper to the iced water. Now thinly shred the sugar snap peas and add to the water.

Peel the mango, slice into thin strips. Place them in a large bowl. Put the noodles in a bowl, then pour over boiling water and set aside for 10 minutes. Halve the tomatoes and add to the mango.

Make the dressing: cut the tomatoes in half and place in an electric blender. Add the olive oil and lime juice. Peel the garlic and add to the blender, then add the salt, red chilli (seeded) and the dried oregano and sugar. Blend to a thick dressing.

Stir in the Lao Gan Ma. Drain the vegetables and shake dry, then drain the noodles and add all to the mango and tomatoes. Pour in the dressing and toss everything together. To finish: put the lime juice in a bowl. Chop the coriander and mint and stir in with a little sea salt. Spoon a little over the top of each bowl. ›

Summer special: mango and carrot salad with chilli tomato dressing. Facing page: mango yoghurt fool with sesame snaps

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A fridge-cold mango dripping with juice is an early summer treat beyond measure

Mango yoghurt fool

Serves 4

mangoes 3, ripe
limes 2 or 3
thick yoghurt 250ml

Peel the mangoes with a small, sharp knife. Slice the flesh and put it in the bowl of a food processor. Finely grate one of the limes. Roll the limes on the work surface, pressing down firmly with your hand – you will be able to extract more juice. Halve the limes and squeeze the juice into a small bowl (you need at least 4 tbsp of juice.) Add the grated lime zest to the mango and juice. Process to a purée, but take care not to overwork the mixture, which will send it gluey.

Tip the yoghurt into a bowl and stir until smooth, then add most of the purée and stir gently. The idea is to have ribbons of mango flowing through the yoghurt, rather than mixing it all in at once. Serve with the remaining purée and a little zest and the sesame snaps below.

Sesame rum snaps

Makes approximately 12

golden caster sugar 60g
golden syrup 60g
butter 60g
dark rum 1 tsp (or brandy)
plain flour 50g
ground ginger ½ tsp
sesame seeds 2 tsp

Preheat the oven to 170C/gas mark 3. Line a baking sheet with parchment. Warm the sugar, syrup and butter in a pan. As soon as the butter and sugar have melted, remove the pan from the heat and stir in the rum, flour and ginger. Scatter in the sesame seeds. Place mounds of the mixture, about 2 heaped tsp in size, on to the baking sheet, leaving plenty of space between them. They will spread in the oven. Bake for about 7-8 minutes, until they are a rich golden brown. Remove from the oven and leave to cool for a couple of minutes, then carefully remove with a palette knife. Place on a wire cooling rack and leave to set. I like to give them a little more character by twisting them as you put them on the rack. Serve with the fool. ■

Nigel's midweek dinner

Grilled chicken, curry sauce

Photograph
JONATHAN LOVEKIN

The recipe

A chicken supper inspired by a classic Japanese curry.

Make the sauce: roughly chop 2 **spring onions** and put them in the bowl of a food processor. Peel 40g of **ginger** and 3 cloves of **garlic**, then add to the onions.

Peel and roughly chop 250g of **carrots**, then add them to the other ingredients together with 350g of **tomatoes**.

Pour in 3 tbsp of runny **honey** together with 3 tbsp of **light soy sauce**. Add 2 tbsp of **garam masala** and 2 of **mild curry powder**.

Halve and seed 1 small **red chilli** and add that, too. Process to a thick paste, then transfer to a wide, shallow saucepan. Place over a low to moderate heat and simmer for 12 minutes, then pour in 400ml of **chicken stock** and bring to the boil. Lower the heat and continue simmering for 20 minutes, stirring from time to time to prevent the sauce from sticking. Stir in a handful of chopped **coriander**.

Oil and lightly season 4 boned and flattened **chicken legs**, then grill on both sides until the skin is golden. Check that they are fully cooked by piercing with a skewer – the juices should be golden rather than pink. Serve with the sauce and some **bread** for mopping up. *Enough for 2*

● There is plenty of sauce here. If you have some left over, keep in the fridge for another day.
● The sauce works well for grilled aubergine, too. ■

Food & drink
Jay Rayner

@jayrayner1

Simple food expertly cooked at Toklas will put you on a high – and that's before you even get to the chips

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The Alice B Toklas Cook Book, first published in 1954, includes among its many recipes the instructions for making a hashish fudge. The confectionary, Toklas says, is easy to prepare, but she warns that it may encourage hysterical laughter and grandiose thoughts "on many simultaneous planes".

When the London restaurant that carries her name first opened late last year, the owners, who are also the founders of *Frieze* magazine and art fairs, said they were very much inspired by Toklas, writer and partner of Gertrude Stein. Together, Stein and Toklas staged many intricate dinner parties in Paris attended by some of the greatest artists of the early 20th century. However, the restaurant's owners said, the new venture would not be using any of the recipes from the book. So that's no hashish fudge then.

No worries. Because instead, Toklas has their chips, which are more than capable of inspiring an awful lot of grandiose thoughts on many planes at once. Such as: "Blimey they're good" and "Why are they so good?" and "How do they make them so good?" Halfway through the main course, shortly before ordering that second portion, I bowled up to the semi-open kitchen and badgered the chefs mid-service for answers. I'm sure they were thrilled to see me.

It turns out they use a version of Heston Blumenthal's triple-cook method. The potatoes are cut into thin chips (as against the chunky shape favoured by Blumenthal), then steamed for 20 minutes (rather than boiled). They are chilled, fried at 140C, chilled again, then finished at a higher heat. The result really is the Platonic ideal of the chip: golden, creviced, soft inside, but crunchy. Oh so crunchy. And salty. And unlike some, they never seem to murder appetite. They cost £5 for a heaped bowlful. I challenge you upon eating them, to begrudge that price.

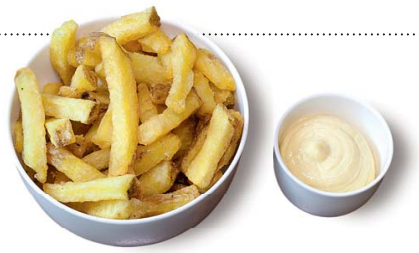
"Serves fabulous chips" risks sounding like the proverbial damning with faint praise. It is nothing of the sort. Given its art world origins, you would be forgiven for fearing that Toklas might be some conceptual reimagining of the very notion of the restaurant. True, it does manage to be achingly cool. It is tucked away down a quiet side street running down to the north embankment of the Thames, by Waterloo Bridge, and occupies a brutalist building that apparently was once a car park. Witness the use of carefully moulded concrete. It could be a sibling to the National Theatre. I say that admiringly. Now it is a broad utilitarian space of parquet flooring, with flourishes of modern art, alongside curving banquettes in shades of teal. It has about it the air of a well-heeled modernist canteen.

Pieces of grilled chicken were served off the bone and came with a mess of chickpeas, fennel and a dollop of salsa rossa

Artful endeavour: (from left) chicken with chickpeas; head chef is Yohei Furuhash; chips; asparagus; brill with tomatoes; trout crudo with cucumber; and almond tart

The menu, however, is simply a set of great ingredients, presented to the very best of their advantage, much like those chips. No wheels are reinvented. No envelopes are pushed. There is no concept at all, beyond, "Do you fancy something to eat?" You are just fed very well. I went twice. The first time was a quick lunch with a friend: asparagus, roast chicken, some of those chips, pistachio ice-cream and lemon sorbet. As I was leaving, the manager pulled me aside and told me that their new head chef had only started that day. Could I bear that in mind if I was planning to write something? I told him he needn't have said a word. I wouldn't have noticed. For the record that new head chef is Yohei Furuhashi, who has time at the River Café and Petersham Nurseries on his CV. This fits with the virtuous simplicity of the food.

Photographs **SOPHIA EVANS**



I returned a few days later, this time for dinner. I even booked under a pseudonym and everything. They didn't seem surprised to see me again. We had generous ribbons of cured trout, the colour of orange sherbet, interleaved with thin slices of pickled cucumber, dotted with capers and dressed with an olive oil so pungent it was almost nose-tickling. There was more asparagus, served warm with a wedge of butter mixed up with the salty hit of grated bottarga. Toklas also has a very fine bakery in the same building, from which came their densely crusted sourdough, so that none of that bottarga butter went to waste.

Pieces of grilled chicken were served off the bone, with the sort of crisp, dark and dense skin that suggests a bird that had a bit of a life before ending up here. With it came a mess of chickpeas, roasted fennel and a dollop of salsa rossa, that butch condiment of puréed sundried tomatoes and bell peppers. A perfectly grilled tranche of brill came with verdant tangles of monk's beard and fat cherry tomatoes roasted until bursting from their skins. With this, as I might have said, we had a bowl of their chips. Or two.

Nerdily, we discussed which individual chip was our favourite. I put forward the view that a perfect bowl needed to be a combination of the long robust fat ones and the small broken ones, and those that are merely crisp-like shards. It may have been around this point that, reasonably lubricated by a few glasses of a Fattoria San Lorenzo from the Italian Marches, I decided that interrogating the kitchen on their chip method was a good idea. I thank them for their forbearance. While standing at the pass, I also learned that this is a kitchen with a fine collection of cookbooks on a high shelf. I find that reassuring in any kitchen.

The first time, we finished our lunch with those ices: the soft, creamy tones of pistachio; the eye-widening zip and flare of lemon. The second time, it was a dark mousse-like chocolate cake the colour of night, with crème fraîche, and a deep-filled almond tart, with a syrupy mess of kumquats. Then have mint tea served in exquisitely refined Japanese ceramics. It would be great if I could now say that eating here is cheap as chips, but as those fabulous chips aren't exactly cheap, we know the rest of it isn't going to be either. Still, it's not extortionate and it is very good. Plus, unlike Alice's fudge, it's entirely legal. ■

Wines of the week

Take the heat out of the day with one of these chillable reds.
By David Williams

@Daveydaibach

Taste the Difference Discovery Collection Mencía, Valdeorras
Spain 2019
£11, Sainsbury's

What makes for a good summer wine? Lightness is a precondition, but that doesn't necessarily mean lightness of alcohol. The modern wave of pale and interesting garnacha coming out of Spain, and (as grenache) South Africa, France and the US, often nudges 14.5% abv, but you'd never know Commando G La Bruja de Rozas 2020 (£24.20, thesourcingtable.com) from the Gredos Mountains was that strong. It somehow still feels light and summery with its graceful supple feel, gently nippy tannins and the red berries and fragrant herbs that it calls to mind. All of which is more appealing after a short stay in the fridge, as indeed is another, very different Spanish red: Sainsbury's new crunchy, dark-berry-vibrant, Galician mencía.

Le Vendangeoir St-Nicolas-de-Bourgueil, Loire
France 2020
£11.99, Virgin Wines

Crunchy is one of those fashionable wine-tasting terms, so what does it mean? It's to do with the texture of the wine, the way it seems to burst in the mouth in the same way as a borderline-unripe blackcurrant does. It usually refers to wines that have had very little in the way of oak in the winemaking process, that come from a northern or cooler climate and have higher acidity and snap, and there's usually a slight air of stemmy greenness to proceedings. Crunchy red wines are well suited to summer: they're intrinsically thirst-quenching and again, very much at their best when served chilled. Wines made from cabernet franc in the Loire are the quintessential examples, with the graphite, raspberry and blackcurrant raciness of Le Vendangeoir a lovely, good-value example.

Domaine Grégoire Hoppenot Fleurie Origines, Beaujolais
France 2020
£12.95, The Wine Society

Another fine source of chillable, crunchy, sappy red wines for cooling off on summer evenings is the Beaujolais region. Those from the Fleurie appellation have a kind of floral prettiness coincidentally suggested by the name: the slinky, succulent Fleurie Origines from rising-star winemaker Grégoire Hoppenot has that violet-like dimension. In northern Italy, the lagrein grape brings a refreshingly bitter note in a summer red, such as Cavit Bottega Vinai Lagrein, Trentino 2019 (£12.50, vinneuf.co.uk), while Sicily's summer staple is the strawberry-scented frappato variety, as found in Waitrose Loved & Found, Sicily 2021 (£7.99). New Zealand has fine reds for serving cool: the silky-fruity style of pinot noir from Marlborough is exemplified by Villa Maria Cellar Selection 2020 (from £17, majestic.co.uk).

Notes on chocolate

Caramelised whites prove to be unexpectedly tempting, *finds Annalisa Barbieri*

I'm starting to think I have a bit of a problem with caramelised whites. Following on from last week's white chocolate testing, this week I happened upon **Asda**'s Extra Special Blonde Chocolate, £2/150g, which I really expected to have a fleeting relationship with. But I did not. For one, the pieces are wonderfully thick — one of my first columns as Chocolate Correspondent was talking about how I do love a chunky bar. Each piece of this is like a mini bar in its own right; the issue is that one piece isn't quite enough, and two is a bit too much. Anyway, the chocolate is really good, by virtue of the fact it's made by a really good chocolate maker, but I can't tell you who or else...

Also this week, I had **Sur Chocolates'** new Truffles Imaginmate, £14.90/165g. Sur Chocolates make wonderful alfajores (think of them as Argentinian Wagon Wheels) and if you do go for an alfajores, they are all wonderful, but my favourite will always be the original, the delicious Alfajor Negro 70%, £3.85.

But these new truffles are filled with dulce de leche and gin, coated in white chocolate (sorry I really didn't expect *more* white chocolate) and rolled in yerba mate (a plant that can also be made into a tea). They're a bittersweet truffle with a real kick (the gin!), which took me by spluttering, throat-warming surprise. Something different if your palate needs a jolt. You can also get them wrapped in a gorgeous cotton handkerchief for an extra £5.

The edit
Summer totes

Colourful casual bags to fling over your shoulder with all you need for a sunny day out

Fashion editor **HELEN SEAMONS**

Blue £89, Epperson Mountaineering (endclothing.com)

Editor's choice

Craft £68, anthropologie.com

Flowers
£9, monki.com

Retro
£55, fiorucci.com

Leopard
£195, ganni.com

Hot pinks
£22.99, zara.com

Candy stripe £140, Isabel Marant (mytheresa.com)

Blow the budget

Woven paper £495, anyahindmarch.com

Patch, £40, DWF X Coca-Cola (danielwfletcher.com)

Pineapple rent from £74, Marni (hurrcollective.com)

Animal
£40, monsoon.co.uk

Denim £100, APC (matchesfashion.com)

Woven
£280, jwanderson.com

Silver £395, Issey Miyake (selfridges.com)

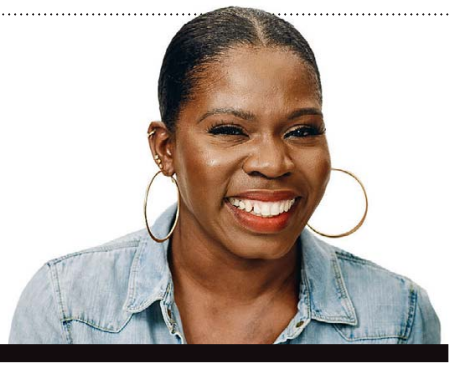
Crochet £49.99, mango.com

Bag for change £26, wearthlondon.com

Ethical choice

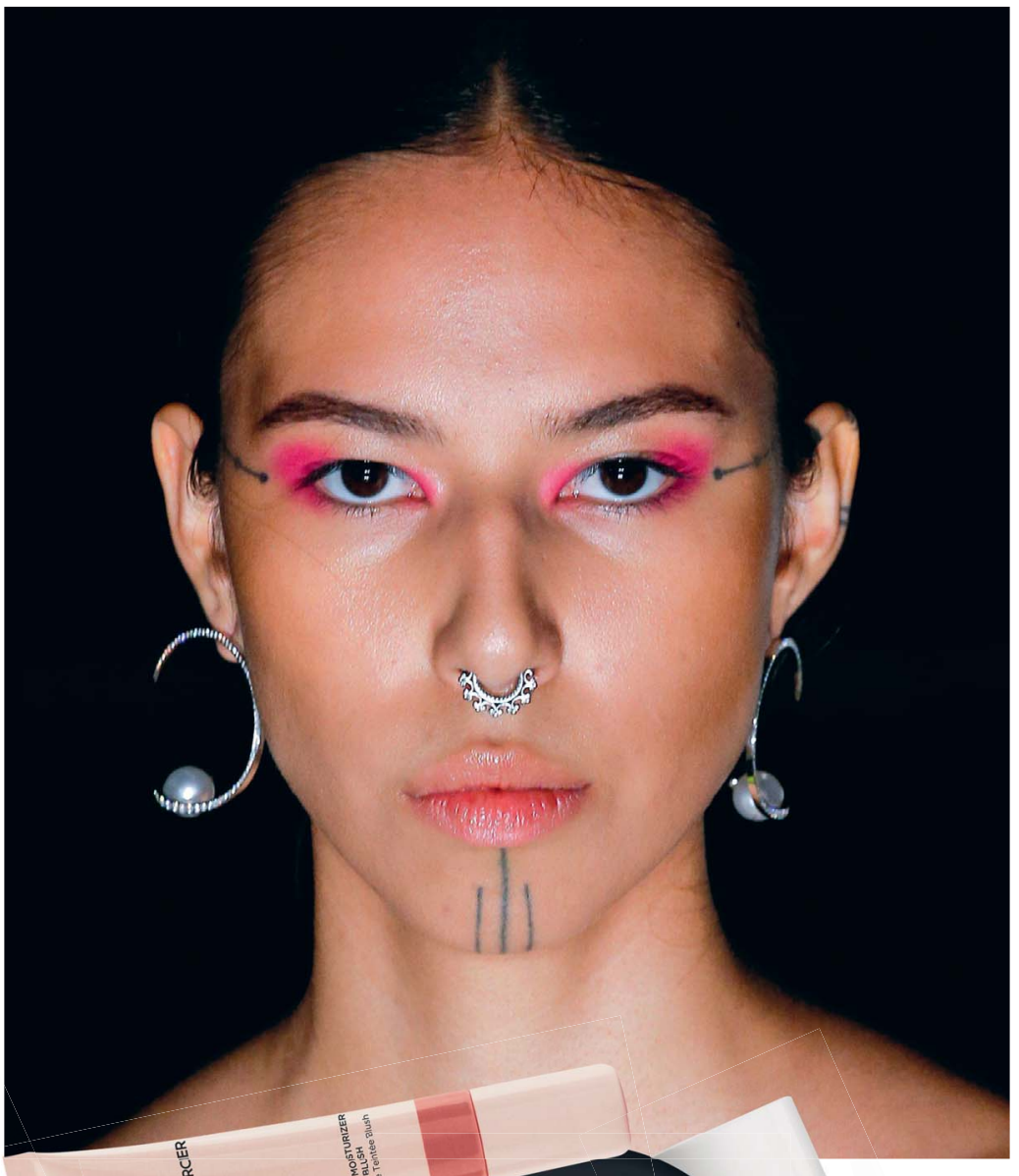
Recycled £3.99, onlineshop.oxfam.org.uk

Beauty
Funmi Fetto



@FunmiFetto

How to give pink makeup an edgier look



Pink is generally associated with a traditional (archaic?) concept of femininity. This eye look, however, seen on the Native American model Quannah Chasinghorse at Prabal Gurung's SS22 show, is anything but orthodox. While it can be achieved using eye, lip or even cheek colours, the key is in the application. Apply colour only at the inner and outer corners of the eyes. Leave the centre bare and finish off by adding a variation of pink to the lips. If you've always blanched at the "girlieness" of pink makeup, say hello to its edgier counterpart.

1. Benefit Wanderful Blush £27.50, benefitcosmetics.com **2. Laura Mercier Tinted Moisturiser Blush** £25, johnlewis.com **3. Gucci Westman Bonne Brow Defining Pencil** £35, cultbeauty.co.uk **4. Mineral Baked Eye Shadow In Pink** £22, lmakiage.com **5. Hermès Beauty Hermesistible Infused Care Lip Oil** £44, hermes.com

On my radar

Three investment scents to capture the summer

Capital gains
Inspired by Gabrielle Chanel's love of Paris, this sparkling summer scent is an amalgamation of damascena rose , pink peppercorn and citrus with a patchouli base. ***Paris–Paris Les Eaux de Chanel, £114, chanel.com***

Head for the sunshine
Seeking the sun without moving? This mandarin, bergamot and sandalwood concoction will take you to warmer climes whatever the weather. ***Maison Francis Kurkdjian Aqua Vitae Cologne Forte, £165, harrods.com***

Different strokes
This fragrance launch marks Off White's foray into the beauty world. Developed by the late Virgil Abloh, it is, as expected, anything but conventional. ***Off–White Paper Work Solution Eau De Parfum, £135, farfetch.com***

IPA US / ALAMY

I can't do without...

A no-nonsense cleanser that punches above its weight

Medik8 Surface Radiance Cleanse
£14.40
lookfantastic.com

I haven't done the maths, but I would say the largest category of product I cover is cleansers. That is because cleansers are so fundamental to our skincare routines. There are entire skincare categories one could forgo. I love an essence and think they do extraordinary things to your skin, but do you absolutely need it? No. A cleanser? Non-negotiable. A decent cleanser will get rid of dirt and makeup, it won't strip your skin, it will enable your moisturisers to work better and give you brighter and healthier looking skin. Ideally you do need more than one cleanser: skin isn't stagnant; it is a living breathing organ, so you have to respond accordingly. If your skin feels clogged up you may want to use a non-stripping foam or gel cleanser along with a mask. If your skin feels dry or dehydrated it will benefit from an oily cleanse. There are not many cleansers that do it all. But some come close, like this one from Medik8, which is a brilliant no-nonsense cosmeceutical brand (essentially medical graded, but you can buy it sans prescription). It is a powerful, really impressive gel cleanser that is excellent at getting rid of makeup, doesn't strip the skin and includes exfoliating acids. It's great for mature skins as well as breakout-prone skin, all of which are left cleaner, brighter, softer and smoother. And your products go on like a dream. If your current cleanser isn't delivering, here's one to try.

‘Food is the centre of life’

Charlie Bigham has transformed convenience food, from the ingredients to the packaging. Rosie Mullender finds out how it all began

For a man at the head of a food empire whose annual sales topped £153m during the pandemic, Charlie Bigham is surprisingly laid-back – and quick to laugh. But one thing he does take very seriously is his food.

"We're a kitchen, not a factory, and we don't make ready meals – we make food," he tells me, kindly but firmly, when I arrive at his north-west London HQ to chat to him about where his business began. "When I started out, I wanted to make proper food with proper ingredients, made in a kitchen by people who care – not 'operatives'. That's where we started, and that's where we still are today."

It's true that at Charlie Bigham's, the sights that are familiar in most food factories – vast vats reached by ladders, and thick pipes designed to pump food from place to place – are noticeably absent. Instead, chicken is browned by hand on cooking plates, and oversized pots and pans bubble with delicious-smelling dishes.

Lifting the lid of a saucepan, I'm treated to the fragrant aroma of a creamy mushroom sauce being prepared for a batch of chicken and mushroom pies, while another part of the kitchen is filled with the scent of warm caramel as rows of sticky toffee puddings are tucked into their wooden boxes.

"To control quality, you need to cook in small batches, so we're set up to be more like a big catering kitchen than a factory," says Bigham, in between greeting staff. "We don't want a pot bigger than you can stir, or pour ingredients into by hand. So we'll cook perhaps a hundred portions of a dish at a time, and make it 10 times a day, rather than making one huge batch in industrial-sized vessels – because that's where you start to see compromises." It's a philosophy that was central to his planning when the company expanded five years ago, building a kitchen in a disused quarry near Wells, in Somerset, where some of his bestselling dishes are now made.

Bigham was still in his 20s when he first had his vision for a food business with a difference, after leaving his job as a management consultant to spend nine months travelling through Europe, the Middle East and India in a campervan with his girlfriend (now wife) Claire.

"I've always loved cooking, shopping, eating and chatting over food," he says. "It's something we all do, and it's at the centre of life. Growing up, my mum was a pretty good cook, and we always had our meals together around the table. When I left my job, I started thinking about what I could do next, based on the things I love. Then, as I travelled, it triggered the idea for my business. For most people around the world, a convenient meal is a bunch of fresh ingredients tossed into a hot pan on the side of the road – and that appeals to me, because it's authentic, fresh and delicious.

"But for a lot of people in the UK, a convenient meal was something in a plastic container, which you put in a microwave – there was no soul to it. There was nothing out there for people like me, who love food and enjoy cooking, but might occasionally want a night off – something delicious that you'd be happy to sit down to savour and chat over with a glass of wine. So that's where the inspiration came from."

Starting at home in his kitchen, with the help of a chef called Spike – "Chefs always have great names" – Bigham developed his first dishes, going door to door selling his meal kits to high-end food stores such as Partridges and Harrods.

"Unfortunately, the kits weren't very successful," Bigham laughs. "So instead of trying to persuade people to try zesty Caribbean lamb, we drifted towards making dishes that were already in people's repertoires. We thought: 'How about we just make the best fish pie, with great ingredients, without cutting any corners?' We knew if we did it properly, we could produce something more delicious than anyone else's."

Twenty five years after that flash of inspiration, Charlie Bigham's fish pie is still his number one selling dish – and he's still not willing to cut any corners. He develops close relationships with all his suppliers, meets with his chefs twice a week to help hone new and existing dishes, and regularly takes meals home to enjoy.

Clockwise from main picture: Charlie Bigham likes to be hands on; taste testing one of his own meals; in his VW van, on the journey where it all began; the kitchen built in a Somerset quarry

'We're a kitchen, not a factory, and we don't make ready meals – we make food'

"One of our values is that we bring real care and attention to everything we do, and I probably eat our food twice a week – it would be a shame if I didn't," he says. "It's one thing sitting in the kitchen tasting dishes, but that's not the same as eating our food as it's sold. The way we approach things is that there's not one thing that's 100% different to how somebody else might do it – instead, we've got 100 things that are 1% different, which really adds up."

These differences include the company's work with the community and local charities, and a commitment to encouraging staff to stay with the business long term. But one of the most impactful is Charlie Bigham's packaging. Most of it has been made from wood and cardboard for the last 15 years – a move that was well ahead of its time and which, Bigham says, has since prevented the use of 130m plastic trays.

"If you're in food, you're very aware of the environment – you're meeting farmers and producers, and you're close to nature. We thought there must be a better way than packing things in plastic, so we developed wooden containers made from poplar. It's a fast-growing crop, sourced relatively locally in France, and for every tree we cut down, six more get planted. It was an expensive decision, but definitely the right thing to do."

Before I head home, laden down with free meals – that, incidentally, are so delicious and fresh-tasting, that they make me question why I bother cooking from scratch at all – I ask Bigham how he feels about how far he's come since he cooked his first dishes in his home kitchen.

"I feel proud of what the team has achieved over the last 25 years, but it's also really exciting looking forward to the next decade or so at how much more we can do," he grins. "We like to say we don't cut corners – we're just excited about what's around the next one."

PROPER FOOD, PROPER INGREDIENTS

Even the best home cooks like the occasional night off, and that's where Charlie Bigham's dishes come into their own. With everything from steak pies to paella and salmon en croute, it has never been easier to feed hungry mouths well

PHOTOGRAPHY: EMLI BENDIXEN

On the bright side

Add a playful and vibrant edge to any room with this season's clashing colours

Edited by **BEMI SHAW**

Velvet fringed cushion £28, oliverbonas.com

Sowden kettle £100, Hay (selfridges.com)

Clay coffee cups £16 each, caravane.co.uk

Junit lamp £250, schneidstudio.com

Porcelain salad bowl £345, summerillandbishop.com

Table runners £85 each, kitristudio.com

Bamboo floor lamp £269, pooky.com

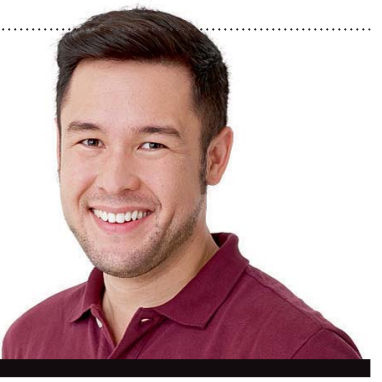
Cosimo coupe glasses £210 for two, Campbell-Rey (matches fashion.com)

Pitcher £225, Sophie Lou Jacobsen (la-gent.com)

Cutlery £359 for 24-piece set, Cutipol (amara.com)

Dinner candles and holders £55, johnlewis.com

Gardens
James Wong



@Botanygeek

Hybrid vigour gives brighter, tougher bulbs

Best of both worlds: a cross of a nerine with an amaryllis (left) creates better colour and longer-lasting flowers in an amarine (above)

Watching the last of the spring-flowering bulbs just start to slip away is always a moment slightly tinged with sadness for me. Yet, as with most things in gardening, their departure is also a reminder of the ideal time to get planting the next wave of bulbs, so you can keep the party going until the late autumn. And the best thing is that, in recent years, there have been a whole new group of varieties made available thanks to clever breeding, which have given us even more to play with: the amarines.

There's a curious phenomenon in biology called "hybrid vigour", where the offspring from the crossing of two different species are often larger, faster-growing and more resistant than either of their parents. This is particularly the case when the marriage is between two comparatively distantly related plants, belonging not just to different species, but totally different genera. So when I read that ingenious plant breeders had managed to cross the two autumn bulbs nerine and amaryllis to create a previously impossible intergeneric hybrid called "amarine" I knew we were likely on to a good thing.

The shocking pink fireworks of nerine lilies had long been popular. However, commercial growers always found their lack of uniformity frustrating for, rather than popping up in unison to be harvested in one go, they tended to bloom more steadily over a few weeks. The idea of trying to cross these with more uniform-flowering amaryllis for more synchronised blooming might not sound hugely beneficial to gardeners as it would technically mean a shorter season of colour.

Yet this cross came with some pretty brilliant and unexpected consequences. Hybrid vigour meant that despite their more neatly defined flowering window, individual flowers also last much longer, meaning the benefit of their more dazzling single flush of blooms is potentiated by the fact they endure so much more.

Inheriting a larger bloom size and taller stature than typical nerines from amaryllis makes the show even more dramatic while their nerine genetics make them more cold-hardy than the sometimes finicky amaryllis, being able to survive at least -10C. Not bad considering these exotic flowers hail from sunny southern Africa. The best bit is that these aren't just a single cross, but are now available in a range of colours, from the huge, fluorescent pink 'Belladiva Anastasia', to the ghostly white 'Belladiva Emanuelle' with delicate pink tinges to the petals' edges. The one thing they will demand, however, is a really bright spot bathed in full sun all summer or they will simply refuse to bloom. The ideal location is a gravel garden or in patio pots where they will get the excellent drainage and high light levels they love. They will pay you back with years of joy in the darkest autumn days – proving that in gardening there is always something bright to look forward to. ■

Plot 29

An early start at the plot gives time to plan, and soak up the moment.
By Allan Jenkins

@allanjenkins21

Early summer, mid May, 7am. I am here to water the seed beds, to make rainbows with the hose. I am joined by a spotted woodpecker. There's a pair nesting nearby. A parakeet streaks past at head height. A perfect plot morning.

I am here a lot at this time, sowing, building structures for the climbing plants. There are three for Jane Scotter's sweet peas, wintered in her greenhouse, sprung free here on hazel sticks with Howard's willow wrapping.

Another open tent is planted with peas, a mix of Basque tear and Franchi Italian. The big bean structure is sown with a flat cream French and a classic bunching green.

The new soil is laid out in neat rows, the first sown with our saved seed: orache, Hopi amaranth, tagetes ildkongen. There are two long strips of white-stemmed Swiss and rainbow chard. Shorter runs have Italian chicories: red Treviso, speckled Castelfranco, green puntarelle.

I have bought Jekka's herb chicory seed, too, mainly for the flowers, but have yet to find room among the dill and chervil. The end of the bed is sown with trailing nasturtium, there is calendula scattered through.

Reach for the sky: a frame on the allotment ready for climbers, like sweet peas

I have sneaked in a few sunflowers, hidden from Howard. There may be a small patch of Mexican corn, some blue, some red. We've rapidly run out of space.

I lie awake fretting about how the babies will be. Small, helpless against slugs and snails. There is nothing much to do except keep a wary eye out, offer them encouragement and seaweed feed. My next task is to collect nettles for a fertiliser tea.

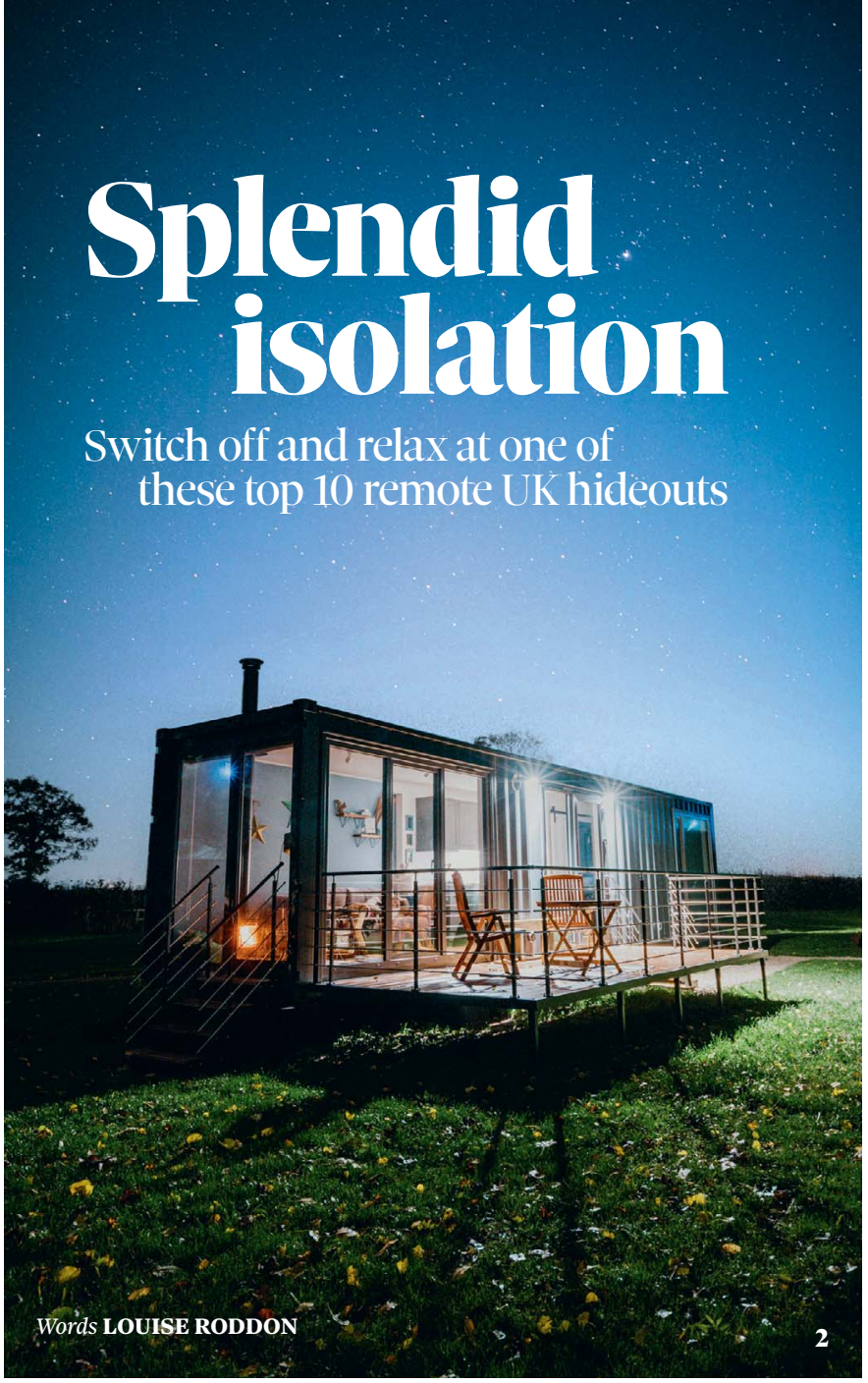
Mostly, I am here to stand in the early sun, scan for signs of life, listen to the birds, talk to the feral cats. Wonder where the fox is. Commune, if you will. To be here now.

Allan Jenkins's Plot 29 (4th Estate, £9.99) is out now. Order it for £8.49 from guardianbookshop.com

ALAMY; MASHABUBA; ALLAN JENKINS

Splendid isolation

Switch off and relax at one of these top 10 remote UK hideouts



Words **LOUISE RODDON**

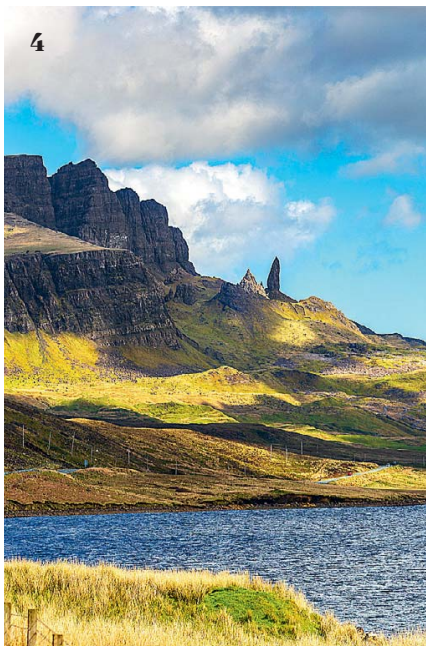
1 ***Waterfall Cabin, Cambrian Mountains, Wales***
Set in an enchanting forest on a privately owned Cambrian estate, Waterfall Cabin has no wifi, no distractions, not even a postcode – and yet this off-grid gem is far from spartan. Beautifully furnished with slouchy sofas and tartan throws, it has a log fire to keep you toasty and a kitchen kitted out with gleaming copper pans. Spend your downtime absorbing the silence, then explore the estate's gorges, follies and secret gardens. By evening, the alfresco hot tub is an ideal spot for stargazing. On a clear night, you'll witness the Milky Way at its best. *Sleeping two, Waterfall Cabin costs from £150 a night, kiphideaways.com*

1

2 ***The Box BNB, North Yorkshire***
This tranquil retreat on the outskirts of the North York Moors started life as a shipping container, though today it's a chic contemporary space with floor-to-ceiling windows and a raised deck area for alfresco dining. Above all, it's the views that make the Box so special – an enormous bedroom window will reward you with pretty sunrises and star-studded night skies. *From £140 a night, minimum two-night booking, coolstays.com*

3 ***Silent Retreat, Sharpham, Devon***
So you regularly meditate, yet you still feel stressed, you need an escape but complete solitude sounds a step too far – if that rings true, a communal silent retreat could be the answer. Set near the River Dart, Grade I-listed Sharpham House is the glorious base for this five-night retreat – and though silence may seem challenging, you'll have time to master the practice. Morning "sharing" workshops with fellow retreatants mix with mindfulness sessions and silent walks through the estate's bosky grounds – and with bedrooms ranging from cosy to grand, alongside delicious vegetarian cuisine, you'll return home fully recharged.
Sharpham House offers a range of residential courses, including solo retreats. The Silent Retreat costs from £545pp full-board, sharphamtrust.org

4 ***Crofter's House, Isle of Skye***
Solitude is easily found on the Isle of Skye and Crofter's House is far enough from other houses to ensure a peaceful stay. Just two minutes from the Sound of Raasay, the cottage has dreamy views of the sea in one direction, then Ben Tianavaig from the rear – an easy climb promising fantastic panoramas. Inside a pared-back Scandi vibe mixes with seashell-toned panelled walls, a wood burner and simple furnishings. On a fine day, grab the binoculars and keep a lookout for otters, seals and eagles. *Crofter's House, from £95 a night, minimum three nights, sleeps two, furtherafield.com*



4

5 ***Sessile Oak Farm, Northern Ireland***
Perfect for a camper van adventure, Sessile Oak Farm is a remote spot with spectacular views over Curraghbruck hills. This idyllic setting is handled by Wild With Consent – a new company that tracks down legal off-grid locations across the UK (currently, it's illegal to park anywhere overnight other than a campsite), so as to share the wild without damaging it. Solitude here is guaranteed. *Stays at Sessile Oak Farm are from £45 per night. Barbecues, dogs and firepits allowed, wildwithconsent.com*

6 ***Tiny House, Dorset***
Let the fabulous views of rolling hills work their magic at this off-grid Dorset retreat. Tiny House is a tranquil and eco-friendly base, nearby is the village of Plush, and the house itself sits in a wildflower meadow. More ultra-modern cabin on wheels than traditional cottage, Tiny House has a flow-through layout, a dinky bathroom and a well-equipped kitchen. *Sleeping two, Tiny House costs from £270 a night, minimum two-night booking, shufflelife.com*

7 ***Blackbird narrow boat, Devon***
This luxurious repurposed narrow boat is perfect for a few days of serenity in North Devon. There's also a dinky riverbank bathhouse with a free-standing slipper bath and uninterrupted lake views. Spend time training the boat's binoculars on kestrels and buzzards. *Sleeping two, Blackbird has three, four or seven-night stays from £400, tregullandandco.co.uk*

8 ***Walney Island Lighthouse, Cumbria***
Gaze out to sea from this one-bedroomed lighthouse on Walney Island Nature Reserve, a shingle island at the southern tip of Cumbria. Depending on the season, you can witness breeding eider ducks and oyster catchers, chiff-chaffs and waders. South Walney is also the only grey seal colony in Cumbria, so your lighthouse home is ideal for uninterrupted viewing.
Walney Island Lighthouse Hide, from £400-£810 per week, depending on season, sleeps two, oneoffplaces.co.uk

9 ***Rockhouse Retreat, Worcestershire***
Nourish the soul in stunning surroundings in this quiet corner of the unspoilt Habberley Valley Nature Reserve. Caves, with their inbuilt temperature regulator, are highly eco-friendly, and Rockhouse Retreat has been used for over 800 years. This sandstone oasis even appeared on *Grand Designs*, and with underfloor heating, it's very far from being a primitive dwelling.
From £231 a night, therockhouseretreat.co.uk

10

10 ***Peace and quiet on Eigg, Hebrides***
Small it may be, but Eigg's residents are a forward-thinking bunch. In 1997 they acquired their island in a community buyout, then later established the world's first electricity grid powered by wind, sun and waves. Mix in wild moorland, two golden beaches, a thriving artists' colony and countless eagles, and you'll quickly realise Eigg is truly special. With no wifi, this is a place to switch off and feed the soul – and when there are no artists in residence, you can stay in one of three cosy bothies complete with outdoor showers. *Seven-night stays at Eigg's bothies, from £550, eiggtime.com* ■

ALAMY; ELLIS O'CONNOR BOTHY PROJECT

Thanks to sharing my life with three horses, four dogs and seven stray cats, I am truly content

Words **ANDREA BUSFIELD**

'I never felt that wonderful calm that comes with being content until I gave my time to animals': Andrea Busfield with her horse, Lucky

I like people. I really do. In fact, some of my best friends are people. However, most of my best friends are animals and if I had to choose between spending time with people or animals, I'd choose animals. I simply find them easier, and quite often nicer, to be around.

Although I was late coming to the party in terms of pets, thanks to a career that afforded me neither the time nor the freedom to keep them, I have since made up for it and now count four dogs and three horses among my most loyal companions, as well as seven stray cats that have graciously chosen me to feed them.

As a result, over the past 16 years, my home has been rough-housed by a pack of assorted rescue dogs that have peed on, ripped up and digested much of my furniture. The horses have gifted me a couple of broken fingers and left me teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, and the cats, well, they don't even pretend to show gratitude. And yet, I can't remember being more content.

I say content because I was happy in my previous life with humans. At times, ecstatically happy. But I never felt that wonderful calm that comes with being content, not until I gave my time to animals.

It may come as no surprise, given my life of dust and dog hair, that I have lived alone for the past 10 years. Even so, not once have I felt lonely. Animals have also made me unexpectedly healthy. I stopped binge-drinking when I got my horses because I couldn't ride with a hangover. I do gym stuff and ballet in order to become a better equestrian. I stopped smoking when it crossed my mind that I might die before my pets. And I adopted a plant-based diet because I didn't want to eat the very things that had given my life purpose. My ability to self-regulate also escalated sharply and, according to Sarah Urwin, a counsellor specialising in animal-assisted therapy, that's one of the key takeaways from being around dogs and horses, and it's all to do with the autonomic nervous system.

In short, people need to be able to self-regulate, to understand and manage strong emotions such as frustration, excitement, anger and embarrassment. If we are lucky, we are helped in this endeavour via co-regulation, whereby our autonomic nervous system sensitively interacts with another's in a way that facilitates greater emotional balance and physical health. For some of us, that comes easier with animals.

"If we can't attach to our fellow humans easily, and don't find them helpful for regulation, but we can turn to an animal, and the animal helps us to self-regulate through co-regulation, what's not to like?" asks Urwin.

While some might contend that self-regulation comes with maturity, I have seen plenty of adults act irrationally, and sometimes with unnecessary violence, when frustrated. I, too, have been known to scream in fits of rage, but not so much these days.

In the great scheme of things, nothing is more important to me than security, health and happiness. The rest are merely "things", the baubles of life. In this respect, the horses especially have broadened my horizons – it's not always about me.

"Relationships with animals teach us outward focus," explains Urwin. "This is because animals live in the here and now, and help us to do the same, which is why it's more comfortable to be with them. Buddhists say, living in the moment is where you'll find contentment."

As well as transforming me into a zen master of self-regulation, which might also be the result of spending more time away from people, I find myself wrapped in a blanket of familiarity in the company of animals, something that might be explained by a primordial need – along with not owning a telly.

Animals live in the here and now and help us do the same

In the 1980s, the American biologist Edward O Wilson in his work *Biophilia* proposed that the tendency of humans to affiliate with nature and other life forms has, in part, a genetic basis. He found evidence for this from studies of biophobia (the fear of nature). When humans were constantly vulnerable to predators, fear was a fundamental connection with nature that enabled survival and, as a result, humans needed to maintain a close relationship with their environment. It is thought that our increased dependence on technology has weakened that drive to connect with nature, leading to less appreciation of the diversity of life forms.

"Part of the attraction of being around animals is biological," agrees Urwin. "We're kind of pre-programmed for it, biologically. It's in our DNA: an affinity for and an innate need to attend to."

While heeding the call of our ancestors might be one reason for gravitating towards animals, there is another theme in many of my conversations with like-minded souls – people simply get on our nerves. One of my friends – because I do have them – unashamedly admits she is Team Animal, citing a growing intolerance of "bollocks" that she partly blames on the menopause.

Another friend recently told me that when her husband refused to have sex unless she got rid of her seven cats, she knew her marriage was over. "When he

tried to shag my friend, we kind of worked through it," she laughed. She was only half-joking.

Similarly as I get older, I find myself less willing to navigate the vagaries, politics and mood swings of people I'm not close to. I find people tiresome.

As another friend told me, "Animals don't disappoint you in the way people do. There's no judgment, no hidden agenda, no sense of expectation. They give you unconditional loyalty; friendship in its most pure form."

There is perhaps no greater illustration of the non-judgmental quality of animal companionship than in programmes established to rehabilitate prisoners. In the US, the Tails programme, which stands for Teaching Animals and Inmates Life Skills, focuses on pairing at-risk dogs with institutionalised men. A similar programme rolled out in UK prisons last summer saw prison officers take their own dogs to work in a bid to defuse tensions and help inmates during the pandemic when visits were temporarily suspended.

There's no judgment, no hidden agenda, no sense of expectation

"Animals can't lie," says Urwin. "So, in terms of getting feedback, what people get from animals is genuine. They get unconditional positive regard from animals. They get congruence from animals and they get empathy.

"It's quite a big deal, this idea of acceptance, especially among vulnerable groups who aren't accepted easily by mainstream society or who have suffered individual trauma and therefore have learned not to trust people.

"Animals don't project through verbal communication. They don't try and interpret what you're saying. They take on board what's actually happening. So, again, there's a load of reasons psychologically, why someone might trust an animal in a way that they perhaps might not trust a human being," she says.

There are physiological benefits, too. Countless studies have shown that being in the presence of animals can lower blood pressure and heart rates, resulting in far less cortisol and adrenaline in our systems, but modern research has also discovered a link with oxytocin levels.

"Oxytocin is the bonding attachment chemical, and that goes up when we attach to animals," explains Urwin. "At the same time, serotonin and dopamine levels have also been shown to increase, which are the feel-good chemicals. And the most recent research centres around prolactin and phenylalanine, an anti-inflammatory.

"There is also the electromagnetic field. So, my standing heart rate is between 50 and 60, while my horses have an average standing heart rate of 38 beats per minute; much lower than mine. So, the minute I come into their field, it is quite likely that their presence, if we are all calm, will bring my heart rate down.

"Some people have that same kind of magic about them and, in a way, it is magic, but there are things happening in the body that make that magic happen."

As I get older, and accept that my life is unlikely to swerve back to the conventional path of marriage and 2.4 children, I have come to understand that the secret of happiness is contentment, and whether it's wrapped up in biology, psychology, chemistry or magic, the reason is down to animals. I owe them much and I only hope they have found a similar contentment with me. ■

Untethered by Andrea Busfield is published by Armida Books at £15

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Séamas O'Reilly

Our six-week-old baby has settled into a routine of sorts, but we are both now in a state of high alert

@shockproofbeats

My baby daughter is awake, so that's something. This is, you see, what parents and their kind friends refer to as being 'alert', the faint praise that forms the bedrock of every newborn parent's suffering id. 'She's so alert,' we say, for want of anything else. She has many admirable qualities. She's extremely cute, certainly, and well... I'm sure other things will occur to me as I go on, leave it with me.

Her sleeping patterns are broadly reliable (which is a blessing), but require us to be holding her at all times (which is not). This means my wife goes to bed at 10pm and the baby sleeps on me, while I watch schlocky movies and spoon light snacks into my face, with one hand, without moving for a few hours. Over the past six weeks, I've come to enjoy this time we have together; me lying stock still on the couch, her quietly purring on my chest, motionless save for the brief flinches caused by me wiping away crumbs which have fallen from my mouth and on to the top of her head. This lasts until about 2am, when she stirs and I bring her up for a change, hand her to her mum for a feed, and collapse into bed, only to wake up at six with the toddler and start the process again.

Having a very small baby is, I'm afraid, not very exciting. Actually doing it can be frustrating, euphoric, brain-melting or life-affirming. However, describing the process involved in keeping a small baby alive is irredeemably dull. In this way, it's a lot like writing. I've long since realised that when my wife or my friends ask me how 'the writing' is going, I'm required by law to say 'really well, thanks' because even the most gifted writer on earth lacks the requisite communicative nous to translate any part of the writing process into anecdotal usefulness. Any time I've tried, I've received the pained, glazed expression I recognise from the times I've made it myself, when stuck beside a stranger on the bus intent on telling me about the operation they've just had on their leg. 'Wow,' my friends say, kindly, 'so, you cut the end paragraph entirely and moved the middle to the beginning, fascinating.' I usually stop when they start fiddling in their handbags to keep themselves awake, in case they're scrambling to find a cyanide pill.

Even the baby seems bored. Inch by inch, her wakeful moments are increasing but, since she can't yet smile or laugh, her implacable expression takes on a note of grave disdain. It is wrong, in polite society, to admit how off-putting this is, so instead we laud her for it. Never mind that she watches us with the listless contempt of a distempered empress; she's watching us, and that's enough.

We're watching her, too. Looking for some flicker of joy, some quiver of the mouth, the beginnings of a smile and the validation we crave. Nothing yet, but we're lying in wait. Poised, ready and more alert than we've ever been.

Ask Philippa

Just before we started fertility treatment, my partner left me

@Philippa_Perry

The question I'm in my mid-30s and was in a relationship for 10 years with someone I love very deeply and thought I'd grow old with. We recently started to have medically assisted IUI with donor sperm (we're lesbians) and then my partner left me two days before our first insemination. I found out she'd been having an affair with a mutual friend. She came back for a while, and we had a lot of love and intimacy, yet she then left again.

I'd been going to our clinic for three weeks, and I feel so sad and as though I can't let go of what I thought was going to be our baby. It also doesn't feel as if there's any language for this as fertility treatment for lesbians is not really in society "speak", so I'm struggling to even name what's happened to me.

I also understand that affairs are symptomatic of wider problems and I want to own my part in the breakdown – our communication had entirely broken down as my partner now says she really didn't want our baby. I realise now that my partner had been slowly withdrawing over the two years of planning (we chose names, schools, places to live, saved money, talked about how and when we'd have our second child) and while, at the beginning, I tried to talk to her, she stonewalled me so much that in the end I just got angry.

How the hell do I process and accept all of this, and how am I meant to move on and be OK? I can't get beyond feeling as though I am a failure and have hugely malfunctioned, which isn't rational, I know but I feel so floored. I'm also not sure if I ought to pursue motherhood solo. Would I be enough for my child? It feels very punishing. And so lonely.

Philippa's answer I'm so glad you wrote in. You need listening to. It seems that your partner loved you, but her body was telling her that she didn't want children. You loved each other, but wanted different things. You want a child so much that you didn't want to interpret her withdrawal as a sign that she didn't. You are right: affairs are so often about problems in a person's primary relationship. Her affair sounds like she wanted to escape not necessarily you, but parenthood.

Of course you are devastated. You've lost her and you've lost the dream of parenting with her. It seems you were right for each other in so many ways, except that your dreams for your future were different. She found it hard to tell you, maybe she found it hard to tell herself – well, she's told you now. She may be phobic of conflict, which would make it hard for her to bring up difficult subjects. You have a lot of insight into what happened and why, but this doesn't stop the pain you are going through right now, which sounds as if it is exacerbated by shame.

You know cognitively that you have nothing to be ashamed of. This isn't a failure, it is something that happened to you, but that doesn't stop the feelings. It's like a bereavement. You are experiencing loss. When a person leaves us through divorce or death it can feel that we also lose the part of us we were when we were together. That gaping gap in us can feel like a raw wound. You're thinking, this hurts so much, how can I ever recover? The shock will feel less raw over time. You will grow around it, there's no speeding that process up, but in a year or two's time in relationship with your friends, your work, your interests, the wound will heal.

Her affair sounds like she wanted to escape not you but parenthood

You feel punished, you are suffering with excruciating feelings of shame, but that doesn't mean you've done anything wrong. You haven't. It sounds like your ex-partner didn't know until insemination was imminent that this was definitely not what she wanted, so you cannot be expected to be able to guess what she herself didn't yet know.

If possible, take some compassionate leave from work, stay with the people who know and love you best, maybe your parents or a sibling. Allow them to look after you and maybe have people to stay for a while when you return home so you are not alone until you are ready.

And the other person that has left you is that baby you dreamt of, the baby and the person they would have developed into. How do you move on?

You are enough for your child solo. You will need the support of friends and family, but you are enough. Research shows us that the happiest families are not necessarily the two-parent ones, and children thrive with one, especially with a supportive community. It's socio-economical factors that make a difference more than how many parents a child has. ■

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

Sunday with...

Róisín Murphy on Italian roasts and Wonder Woman

Sunday breakfast? I don't partake in breakfast much. The kids have porridge on a school day, but help themselves to rubbish cereal at the weekend. I play tunes, annoying the kids, because we don't have the same taste in music.

Sundays growing up? I grew up in Arklow in County Wicklow, in a house with no central heating. We'd have two fireplaces going on a Sunday, which made things more homely. I remember watching *Wonder Woman* with Lynda Carter. I'd be in heaven with a yoghurt and a biscuit.

Sunday lunch? My fella [music producer Sebastiano Properzi] is Italian, so we eat quite posh – veal Milanese, scallopini, pork roast. He's a good cook, bless him. He's good at a couple of things, if you know what I mean.

Sunday worship? My father was vehemently atheist and my mother couldn't give a God's curse, although I still went to a Catholic school. The headteacher's wife – Mrs Garvy – would come in every Monday and say: 'Children, did you go to mass yesterday?' I'd put my hand up and she'd say: 'Róisín Murphy, did you really go to mass yesterday?' and I'd get into trouble even though it was my parents' fault.

Sunday afternoon? I live in Ibiza, so I'll go for a walk, but I dance when I'm walking. I'm like a mad woman, dancing to my playlists. I love skipping down hills.

Sunday wind down? I loved *The North Water* on the BBC, about a whale fishing expedition back in the day. Colin Farrell is brilliant in it.

Sunday evening? We'll probably just pile into bed at 9.30 or 10 and read. At the moment I'm reading *Why Germans Do It Better* by John Kampfner. It's a very interesting historical study.

Look forward to or dread Mondays? I have no feeling about Mondays. It's the same as every other day. You can have a good Monday or you can have a bad one.

Rich Pelley

Róisín Murphy plays Forwards Festival, Bristol, 3–4 September (forwardsbristol.co.uk)

SHUTTERSTOCK; ALAMY

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